

LOVE ^A THAT'S REAL

Fiancée for
Summer
Series



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A LOVE THAT'S REAL

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CHAPTER ONE

Kaye “Taylor” Rollins studied herself in the ornate mirror in the executive washroom. The look in the eyes staring back at her might reflect a steady determination, but her hands trembled, betraying the storm raging inside her. She pressed her lips together, willing them—and herself—to hold firm.

The polished sink gleamed beneath her white-knuckled grip as waves of panic rolled through her, tightening around her chest like a steel band. Her skin prickled with cold, as though fear itself had burrowed beneath it.

This couldn’t be happening, not like this.

She took a shaky breath, desperate to quiet the nausea clawing at her throat. There had to be a mistake. Nicholas Lanagan III—the name carried weight, a reputation for fairness. Surely, if she could just talk to him, he would see reason.

Dear God, what am I going to do?

The whispered prayer settled in her soul, quiet but insistent. Strength. That’s what she needed now. Not tears. Not panic.

Taylor released her grip on the sink, feeling foolish for the sheer desperation tightening her muscles. She straightened, smoothing her hands over her skirt, but the paper in her grasp remained a stark reminder—her life had just changed forever.

“Effective immediately, your position has been eliminated...”

The words burned as she read them again, but defiance sparked in their wake. Rollins blood ran through her veins, and Rollins didn’t crumble.

With a resolve she didn’t entirely feel, she crumpled the slip in her fist and strode out of the washroom, heels clicking against the marble floor with purpose. The elevator loomed ahead, its polished doors reflecting the image of a woman standing on the edge of an abyss—but she wasn’t about to fall.

No, she would fight.

Nicholas Lanagan III was about to find out exactly who he was dealing with.



Nick checked his watch for the third time as he waited for the brass elevator doors to open. *An hour late.* He clenched his jaw. The Chamber of Commerce breakfast meetings were supposed to be beneficial, a strategic move to keep Lanagan Associates in the good graces of Cedar Ridge’s business elite. But when meetings ran over—*again*—it threw his entire schedule into disarray.

His time was money, and today, he’d just wasted both.

The elevator slid open, and Nick strode out, his long legs eating up the polished marble floor as he made his way toward his office. Miss Dietrich, his admin, sat behind her oversized cherry-wood desk, the picture of efficiency.

She pushed the hold button on her phone and raised her steely-eyed gaze. She didn’t waste her time, or his, commenting on his lateness.

“Mr. Lanagan, Mr. Waters is holding on your line. He says it’s important.” Her poised fingernail hovered over the transfer button. “Do you want to take the call?”

Nick exhaled sharply. *Henry Waters. Again.* The man had been a thorn in his side for months, but Nick needed his company to finalize the biggest deal of his career. He couldn’t afford to alienate him.

“Put him through,” Nick muttered, pushing open his office door, grateful the man didn’t have his cell number.

The moment the door clicked shut behind him, he yanked off his suit jacket, tossed it over the chair, and dropped into the smooth leather seat behind his desk.

“Henry,” he said into the receiver, forcing patience into his tone. “What’s up?”

The man’s excitement practically crackled through the line. “I know we’re meeting this afternoon, but I’ve got good news and couldn’t wait.”

Nick pinched the bridge of his nose. “Good news?”

“Claire’s coming home!”

Nick stiffened. His fingers went slack around the receiver.

“I’ve been waiting for her to come to her senses,” Henry barreled on. “When she broke up with you and left town—”

“Henry,” Nick interrupted, sharper than intended. “That was six months ago.”

“Exactly.” Henry didn’t miss a beat. “No time at all. You two can pick up right where you left off.”

A slow, cold dread curled around Nick’s spine. *This could be a problem. A big one.*

Henry’s voice lowered conspiratorially. “You and Claire were great together. I knew she’d come back to you sooner or later.”

Nick barely heard him. His mind was already racing, calculating the potential damage. If Henry was under the impression that Claire and Nick were some tragic love story waiting for a reunion... this could tank everything.

Henry had been surprisingly sympathetic when Claire had left town. That sympathy had played to Nick’s advantage in the bidding war for Waters Inc. And now, with the acquisition set to be finalized in two months, Henry was expecting a heartwarming reunion?

Not happening.

Thankfully the ability to respond under pressure had always been Nick’s strength. He ad-libbed, loosely covering the receiver with one hand and talking to the picture of his father on the wall as if the man had suddenly walked in.

“Can it wait? I’m on the phone.” Nick forced an irritated sigh. “Henry, I’m sorry to cut this short, but something’s come up. We’re still meeting at three?”

Henry hesitated. “Yeah, of course. We’ll have a long talk then.”

Nick ended the call and set the receiver down carefully. Too carefully.

Claire.

Just her name stirred up an avalanche of irritation. She had been a complication from the start, a distraction in a carefully constructed plan. Their so-called relationship had barely been more than a handful of public outings, but the moment Henry caught wind of it, he’d been seen as a future son-in-law.

And now she was back.

His jaw tightened. What had he done to deserve this? As if the day wasn’t bad enough, now he had to figure out how to neutralize this disaster before it gained momentum.

The door cracked open. Miss Dietrich entered, a steaming cup of coffee in her hands.

“It’s very hot,” she warned as she placed it on his desk.

“Good,” Nick muttered and took a reckless gulp.

The burn seared his throat, but he welcomed the pain. At least it distracted him from the bigger firestorm brewing in his life.

Miss Dietrich arched a disapproving brow. “Anything else, sir?”

“Not now,” he said, rubbing his temple. “I’ll buzz if I need you.”

She nodded once and disappeared, closing the door behind her. Nick stared at the rich, dark liquid swirling in his mug, his thoughts twisting just as wildly.

If only he could get rid of Claire with so little effort. Say a few select words and she’d be history. Out of his life for good this time. If only it could be that easy.

He plopped the cup down. The freshly ground Colombian coffee sloshed over the rim and spilled onto the hand-rubbed cherry-wood desktop.

Wiping it up, he stifled a curse.

Claire! One word said it all. Raking back a strand of hair that dared fall across his forehead, he railed against the injustice.

What had he done to deserve this?

Even as he asked, he knew the answer. He’d made the mistake of escorting the attractive brunette to a few social functions. Dating the daughter of a potential business partner was risky under the best of circumstances, but when that woman was Henry Waters’ little princess the potential for disaster increased tenfold.

When Claire unexpectedly accepted a job at a prestigious public relations firm in Washington, D.C., no one had been more thrilled than he’d been.

An added plus was that Henry had been incredibly sympathetic when his daughter had taken off without a second thought. In retrospect, Nick couldn’t help but wonder if that had given him an advantage in the bidding war for Henry’s company.

If Henry thought Claire’s return was some kind of divine sign for their happily-ever-after, he might pull out of the merger if Nick turned her down too harshly.

That wasn’t an option. If the man took his business elsewhere, Lanagan Associates would be forced into major restructuring. Today’s layoffs would be nothing compared to the massive cuts he’d be forced to make.

He needed a solution. A way to make Henry believe he was unavailable—permanently. He raked a hand through his hair and exhaled sharply. He needed to be engaged.

The idea settled in his mind like a puzzle piece falling into place.

A temporary fiancée.

He could find someone. Someone to play the part just long enough to ease Henry's concerns, just long enough for those contracts to be signed.

The office door flew open and slammed shut. Erik North, his closest friend and chief legal counsel, was now splayed against it, looking more like a spy on the run than a corporate attorney in Armani.

"Quick, bolt the door," Erik said, his voice low and urgent. "Your watchdog is ready to bite."

Nick sighed, rubbing his temple. "Watchdog?"

"That drill sergeant you call an admin," Erik whispered theatrically and pretended to wipe sweat from his brow. "I wasn't on your appointment calendar. That's a crime in her book."

"She's just doing her job," Nick muttered, gesturing to the chair across from him. "Since you're here, sit down. My morning's already shot."

"I'm glad to see you, too." Erik made himself comfortable, propping his expensive loafers on the glass table. "So, what's got you looking like someone ran over your dog?"

Nick leaned back in his chair. "Claire Waters. She's coming back."

Erik whistled low. "The Catwoman returns."

Nick's lips twitched. Erik had never liked Claire, and the nickname had stuck.

"She's coming back, and Henry thinks we're still a thing," Nick said flatly.

"What's the problem?" Erik raised a brow. "Tell her you're not interested."

Nick let out a humorless laugh. "It's not that simple. Henry's expecting some glorious reunion with us living happily ever after. If I reject her, he'll take it as a personal insult."

Erik stifled a laugh. "He obviously doesn't know you're already committed."

"Committed? What are you talking about?" Nick frowned. "I'm not engaged."

"Okay. Maybe the company is more like a mistress. It gets all your attention, your devotion." Erik placed one hand on his chest and topped it with the other. "Just tell Claire there's no room in your heart for anyone else."

"Cut it out, Erik. This is serious. There's no way I'm going to let Claire's return ruin everything."

"Maybe she doesn't want you, either. Have you thought about that?"

Nick shook his head, wishing that were true. "I didn't get that impression."

"Okay, then..." Erik paused for a moment. "What's the worst that could happen? She comes. She hits on you. You turn her down."

"And the merger negotiations fall apart." Nick pressed his fingertips to his temples.

"Okay, then string her along. Whisper a few sweet nothings in her ear. Just enough to keep her happy until those papers are signed."

"It's tempting." Nick knew it would be the easiest solution, one with the least amount of risk. Still, something held him back. "I can't do that, even to Claire. Besides, I might get stuck with her forever."

Erik visibly shuddered. "A life with that woman would be a fate worse than death."

"I agree wholeheartedly." Nick laughed. "That's why I came up with a plan."

Erik stroked his chin. "What is this plan?"

Nick hesitated, then said, "I tell Henry I'm engaged."

Erik sat up, his grin wide. "Oh, this is good."

Nick shot him a warning look. "It's not good. It's necessary."

"Right, right." Erik waved him off. "You realize Henry will insist on meeting your fiancée."

Nick sighed. "I'll say she doesn't live here."

"Henry might buy it, but Claire? Not on your life."

Nick thought for a moment. "Then I'll find someone in Cedar Ridge to play the part."

His friend collapsed against the smooth leather, his mouth twisting in a wry grin. "It has potential. The only problem is you haven't even been seeing anyone lately."

"Henry doesn't know that."

"And a fiancée usually expects marriage as a follow-up."

"This one won't. I'll make that very clear."

"Who will you get to play this part?"

Nick shook his head. "I haven't gotten that far."

"How about that blonde you brought to the Christmas party?"

"Aimee?" Nick shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Why not?" Erik quirked an eyebrow, and a mischievous grin danced on his lips. "She was really hot."

"Keep in mind the reason we broke up."

“Because you were more interested in work than her.”

The promptness of his friend’s response brought back Nick’s smile. “Not that reason.”

“All right, so she was more interested in your money than you.” Erik’s eyes gleamed. “In this situation, she’d be perfect.”

“Probably. She’s out, anyway. I heard she’s getting married next month. For real.”

“You really think you’ll be able to come up with a fiancée on such short notice?”

Nick met Erik’s questioning gaze with determination. “I don’t have much choice. I’ll find someone if I have to take the next female that walks through that door.”

Their gaze shifted to the door and—as if on cue—it opened.

Miss Dietrich stood at the threshold, a tight expression on her face. “Sir, I told her you were in conference.”

A young woman stepped into the room, ignoring the warning. *Obviously pretty. Obviously furious.*

Chestnut curls tumbled over stiffened shoulders, and green eyes—piercing, furious, and unrelenting—locked onto his. A tailored jacket in a deep sable hue emphasized her slim waist, her full lips tight with restrained anger.

“Mr. Lanagan, I apologize for interrupting,” she said, her voice controlled but simmering with barely contained emotion. “But I must speak with you. It’s urgent.”

Miss Dietrich arched a brow. “Would you like me to call security, sir?”

Nick glanced at Erik, who gave him a subtle thumbs-up.

“No, Miss Dietrich.” Nick leaned back, intrigued. “I’m interested to hear what Ms.--”

“Rollins,” she finished.

“What Ms. Rollins has to say.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Very well, sir.” His secretary shot Taylor a narrowed glance. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“Please, have a seat.” Nick gestured to the chair in front of his desk.

Taylor stepped forward, chin lifted, eyes burning with determination.

Undisguised interest glimmered behind Erik’s gold spectacles.

Nick jerked his head toward the doorway. “Erik. We’ll continue our discussion later.”

Appearing more amused than disturbed over his abrupt dismissal, Erik stood. As he walked toward the door, he flashed Nick a knowing grin. He grasped the doorknob and turned, tipping his head toward the woman. “Ms. Rollins, a pleasure. And, Nick, good luck.”

Nick ignored the comment and directed his attention to his visitor. “Normally I don’t meet with anyone without an appointment.”

A small muscle jumped at the corner of her jaw, but her voice was soft and controlled. “I realize that, however, this is very important. I need you to explain what this is about.”

A pink slip sailed across the sleek surface of his desk, skidding to a halt in front of him.

Nick exhaled slowly, reaching for the crumpled notice. He unfolded the slip and scanned the printed words, suppressing a groan. This was exactly why he’d told Human Resources to wait until the end of the day.

He laid it down deliberately and lifted his gaze to the woman sitting across from him.

“This is why you’re here.”

“Yes.” Her green eyes gleamed with barely restrained fury.

Nick adjusted his cuffs, straightened the knot of his tie, and took a measured breath. “Well, Kay—”

A flicker of irritation crossed her face before she quickly smoothed it away. “I prefer to be called Taylor. Assuming, of course, that you want to be on a first-name basis, Nick.”

“This form says Kay,” he pointed out.

“Kaye is my given name. I’ve always gone by Taylor.” Her jaw tightened slightly, betraying the emotion she was working so hard to suppress. “And if you’re going to fire someone, I’d suggest spelling their name correctly. It’s K-A-Y-E, not K-A-Y.”

His lips quirked despite himself. Definitely fiery.

“Well, Taylor,” he said smoothly, leaning back in his chair, “we have a volatile marketplace out there. I’m sure you’re aware that certain measures have to be taken for a company to remain competitive.”

Her gaze raked over him, sharp and unwavering. “Don’t patronize me, *Nick*. I’m not a naive little girl. I know what the marketplace is like. That’s exactly why I vetted this job carefully before I ever considered taking it.”

“If you’ll let me explain—”

“I’m not finished.”

Her voice had a slight tremor, but she caught it, steeling herself with a lift of her chin.

“I gave up a good position to move back to Cedar Ridge. For what? So I could be dismissed after only three weeks?” Her voice softened slightly, but the strain was unmistakable. “I have bills to pay. A lot of bills.”

Nick stilled.

Bills.

The single word flattened any growing sympathy. He had no patience for people who lived beyond their means. He studied her more closely, his keen business instincts kicking in. Was she careless? Reckless with money?

“If you knew this position was scheduled to be eliminated,” she said, her voice quieter but no less biting. “Why even fill it?”

Nick frowned. “We hired you only three weeks ago?”

She nodded stiffly.

Nick inhaled slowly, pushing back the flicker of frustration. “I apologize for the mix-up.”

He made a mental note to talk to Human Resources. They been instructed to only fill essential positions. “Unfortunately, I

don't have another job for you. After this downsizing, we'll be in a hiring freeze until at least the end of summer."

Her face paled. She took a ragged breath, her fingers tightening around the edge of her jacket.

Despite himself, something inside him shifted.

He didn't know her circumstances. Didn't know if she had children to provide for, a family relying on her paycheck. He forced himself to remember that not everyone had the privilege of a financial safety net.

"Unless..."

Taylor straightened, her posture rigid. "I'm willing to consider almost anything. I'm very versatile."

Nick blinked.

He hadn't meant to give her false hope.

And yet... the thought forming in his mind was reckless. Insane.

He studied her again, his mind racing ahead of his logic. Could this actually work?

"No," he said finally, shaking his head. "On second thought, I don't think it would be a good idea."

Her lips parted. "Listen, I really need the money. I told you, I'll consider almost anything."

A flush of color rose to her cheeks, a delicate dusty-pink hue that only heightened her intensity. She was beautiful. Not in a carefully made-up, high-maintenance way. In a way that was raw, real, and entirely uncalculated.

Nick leaned back, exhaling sharply. He must have lost his mind to even consider what he was about to say.

"At least let me interview," she pushed, her voice softer now, edged with something close to desperation. "Give me that chance."

Nick tapped his pen against the desk, his heartbeat ticking at the same rhythm. The last shred of common sense in his brain told him to send her out, to let it go.

Instead, he plunged recklessly ahead.

"Let's start with you telling me a little bit about yourself," he said. "That'll help me determine if you'd be right for this... ah, assignment."

A mixture of relief and gratitude flickered across her face.

She took a deep breath, then flashed him a small but genuine smile. Something about it caught him off guard.

"I graduated from Swarthmore with a degree in computer engineering," she said. "I worked for ComTECH Industries in Denver for the past three years."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "With those credentials, I wouldn't think you'd have any problem finding another job."

"Probably not," she admitted. "If I moved back to Denver. But I can't do that."

"I take it your husband isn't willing to move?"

She blinked, then gave a short laugh. "I'm not married."

Nick tilted his head. "So, what's the problem?"

"I'm an only child. My mother died when I was fifteen. My father was killed in a car accident last year." She hesitated, clasping her hands together as if steadying herself. "My grandparents are getting older, and I'm their only family now. I want—I need—to be close to them."

Nick studied her more closely. There was a quiet strength to her. A resilience. She wasn't asking for a handout. She was fighting for a place to stand.

He nodded slightly. "What about evenings? Would you be free if the job required it? Or do you have to care for them?"

Taylor let out a soft, full-throated laugh.

It was unexpected.

And for some reason, it sent warmth through his chest.

"Heavens, no," she said. "They're independent. My grandfather had a mild heart attack last year, but he recovered. I just don't want to be two hours away if something happens again."

Nick's gaze lingered on her, turning thoughtful.

This could work.

Slowly, carefully, he leaned forward.

"Well, Taylor..." He let the weight of the moment settle. "I think I may have a job for you."

She gasped softly, her hands tightening on the arms of her chair. "You mean—you've already decided? The job is mine?"

"It is." His voice dipped slightly. "That is, of course, assuming you want it."

Hope flickered in her eyes. "Of course I do. Tell me about it. What position would I fill?"

Nick held her gaze, his pulse quickening.

Was he really about to do this?

"The position is..." His voice slowed, tasting the words before he said them, ... "my fiancée."



"What did you say?"

Taylor's breath hitched as she stared at Nick, certain she'd misheard him.

Nick repeated himself slowly, his deep voice steady, as if measured words would increase her comprehension. "I'm offering you a job. You'd be my fiancée. Just for the summer."

Her heart stuttered. For a brief, fleeting moment, she allowed herself to imagine it—to picture what it would be like to stand beside this man, to have his arm around her waist, his blue eyes focused only on her. With his classically handsome features, the dark waves of his hair, and the kind of self-assured confidence that made men like him untouchable, Nick Lanagan epitomized every woman's dream man.

But that was just it—he was a dream. And what he was proposing was utterly insane.

"Shall we talk salary then?" A satisfied smile played across his lips as he picked up his pen, as if this was a business deal like any other.

"No," she blurted, her voice stiff and unnatural even to her own ears. Her hesitation must have given him the impression she was actually considering his outrageous offer. She wasn't.

"Mr. Lanagan—"

Nick leaned back, eyes twinkling with amusement. "First names, Taylor. No one will believe we're engaged if you're calling me 'Mr. Lanagan.'"

Irritation surged through her at the easy confidence in his smile.

"Mr. Lanagan, if this is some kind of sick joke, I'm not laughing."

"Wait a minute." His blue eyes flashed with challenge. "You're the one who said you needed money."

"Yes, but I believe I also said I wanted a job."

"That's what I'm offering." His gaze locked onto hers, unwavering. "A job for the summer. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"As your paid honey."

"As my fiancée."

Taylor let out a slow breath, gathering her thoughts. "Why me? You must have dozens of women who would love to play house with you."

Something flickered across his face—a shadow, a tightening of his jaw—but it was gone before she could name it.

"Absolutely," he said, voice crisp. "But they might expect more from me than a salary. A paycheck is all I'm prepared to provide."

A paycheck. To play the part of a devoted fiancée.

Her gaze sharpened as she studied him, as if he were a complicated formula she couldn't quite solve. "Why would a man in your position need to hire a fiancée? And what exactly would you expect her to... provide?"

Nick's brows lifted. "Provide?"

She folded her arms. "Don't give me that innocent look. You know exactly what I'm asking. Is sex part of the deal?"

For the first time since she entered his office, Nick Lanagan looked startled. Then—he laughed. A deep, rich, unrestrained laugh that sent a pulse of warmth through the air.

"No," he said, still grinning, his voice a low baritone that somehow sent a shiver down her spine. He rose from his chair, leaned forward, and locked eyes with her. "All I'd ask is the pleasure of your company. Maybe a few public kisses. A little hand holding. Nothing more."

Taylor swallowed, feeling slightly unsteady.

"This is ridiculous," she muttered. "I came here looking for a job. A real job."

"At least consider my offer."

She hesitated, her pride warring with curiosity. She should have already walked out the door. But the sheer audacity of his proposal rooted her in place.

Nick noticed. His gaze flickered with something knowing, something calculated.

She shook her head and stood, forcing herself to regain control. "I know I told you I was desperate. And I am. But even desperate has its limits."

Nick reclined, watching her as though he had all the time in the world. "Aren't you being a bit hasty? We haven't even discussed how much this arrangement would be worth to me."

"No amount of money—"

"Fifty thousand dollars a month."

The words hit her like a thunderclap.

Her breath caught in her throat. She reached for the back of the chair, gripping it to steady herself.

That kind of money... That kind of money could change everything.

It could wipe out her mounting debt. It could buy her time. It could ensure she didn't have to leave Cedar Ridge and abandon the only family she had left.

A deep, rich fragrance of expensive cologne surrounded her. She looked up, and Nick was suddenly there, standing just

inches away. His presence was too large, too powerful, his sheer nearness sending her pulse into chaos.

Flecks of hazel swirled in his piercing blue eyes.

A shiver ran down her spine.

“This is very important to me,” he said, his voice low and smooth. Dangerous. “Just think about it.”

She opened her mouth to tell him that time wouldn’t change anything, that her answer would still be no—but words failed her.

Nick’s presence, his intensity, stole them right from her lips.

“I don’t—”

“I agree.” His voice dropped to a coaxing murmur. “Now is not the time to decide.”

His hand found the small of her back, firm yet effortless as he guided her toward the door. The warmth of his touch sent an unexpected tremor through her.

“I’ll pick you up at six,” he said smoothly. “We’ll have dinner. I guarantee I’ll put all your fears to rest.”

He obviously didn’t realize there was nothing to discuss.

Her mind was made up.

“What would dinner hurt?”

She could feel herself weakening, and as if sensing the shift, he pressed on. “We’ll just talk. Then, if you still decide it’s not for you...”

“It’s not,” she said, but her voice wasn’t as firm as she wanted it to be.

Nick simply smiled. That slow, infuriatingly confident smile.

“Give me a chance to change your mind.”

And just like that, she was in the hallway. The door closed softly behind her, leaving her standing there, her pulse pounding in her ears.

Taylor steadied herself against the doorjamb, wondering if she’d just lost her mind.

Nick’s proposal made no sense.

But then... neither did her reaction.

Because for one brief, dangerous moment—when his gaze had locked onto hers, when he’d stood so close she could barely breathe—she had been seriously tempted to say yes.

CHAPTER THREE

Nick inhaled the rich aroma of Starbucks's finest blend, the dark brew steaming hot. Unlike many of the younger administrative assistants, Miss Dietrich considered keeping him well supplied with coffee part of her job.

The woman was definitely an anachronism. A woman who insisted on being called Miss Dietrich instead of the more informal Margaret or the more modern Ms. A woman who steadfastly refused to call him by his first name. She was a topnotch admin. And she made a terrific cup of coffee.

Nick grabbed the half-empty carafe and upended it over his mug. "What do you think of Ms. Rollins?"

Erik removed his glasses, his normally boisterous demeanor strangely subdued. He flipped the frames from one hand to the other. "She's pretty. Well-educated. Intelligent. I don't think you'll have any trouble convincing people she's your fiancée."

"But..." Nick's eyes narrowed, and he forced the rising irritation down.

If Erik had reservations, Nick needed to hear them. The trouble was, he'd already made his decision.

Eyeglasses in place, Erik crossed his arms behind his head. "One thing bothers me. She must be desperate for cash to even consider your offer. The question is why?"

Nick snorted. "Probably overextended on her credit cards. That suit she had on certainly didn't come off the rack. My mother was the same way."

Despite Taylor Rollins's reluctance, she'd end up agreeing to his offer. He'd seen the flash of raw hunger when he'd mentioned the fifty thousand dollars.

Erik regarded him with a speculative gaze, and Nick fought to keep his expression impassive. The man knew him all too well. They'd been friends since their freshman year in college. "The reason doesn't matter, anyway. This is strictly a business proposition."

Nick's gaze dared him to disagree.

"You seriously want me to believe you looked at those green eyes, those gorgeous legs and those—"

"That's right." Nick snapped.

If Erik heard the harshness in Nick's tone, he ignored it. "Still, you didn't need to ask her to dinner. You could have worked out the details right in your office."

Nick shook his head. "She's a little hesitant. Dinner will provide the right atmosphere. I'll be charming and the money will do the rest. Remember—as of today—she's out of work."

"Which brings up another concern." Erik's gaze grew thoughtful. "If she's as desperate for cash as you say, it may have been a huge mistake offering her this, ah, opportunity. Especially since she'd just been fired."

Nick rubbed his suddenly tense neck. "What do you mean?"

"I'm talking sexual harassment. We may have left ourselves wide open for litigation."

"Sexual harassment?"

"It would be easy for a jury to misconstrue your actions."

Nick sank into the thick leather of his desk chair and raked his fingers through his hair. Here he'd foolishly believed the day couldn't get any worse. "A lawsuit? That's all I need."

He cursed his own impulsiveness, knowing he had no one to blame but himself. Nick punched the intercom. "Miss Dietrich, get me Harvey Rust in Human Resources."

Five minutes later, Taylor's file lay open on his desk. Her impressive résumé overflowed with the type of experience and credentials Lanagan Associates sorely needed.

"It doesn't make sense why we let her go."

Erik read the application and résumé over his shoulder.

Nick looked up at his friend's sharp intake of air.

"Uh-oh. That's a problem."

Nick frowned and glanced at the records. "What's the matter?"

Erik's finger pointed to the name of Taylor's emergency contact. William Rollins, grandfather. "Who is he?"

Eric's expression reflected his surprise. "I can't believe you don't recognize the name."

"I didn't grow up here, remember? Unlike you, I don't know everybody and his dog."

"That name should be familiar, even to you. 'Don't mess with Bill Rollins'?"

A fierce tightness gripped Nick's chest. "The judge who retired last year?"

Erik nodded. "Thirty years on the bench. From what I understand he's still practicing law, but on a limited basis."

"I remember now. Didn't he have a heart attack or something?"

"That's right. It happened after his son was killed in that big accident on the freeway. His son was Senator Robert Rollins.

Don't even try to tell me you don't remember him. His death made the wire services from coast to coast." Erik took off his glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. "This couldn't get much worse."

"You don't think—"

Erik's nod confirmed his fears. "I think we may have just delivered Judge Rollins a case he can't resist. And one he can't lose."



Taylor took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. Ever since she left the office, her mind had been as tangled and chaotic as her wind-whipped hair. One moment she was headed home, the top of her convertible down, her favorite song blaring full blast. The next, she stood on her grandparents' steps, her knuckle poised against the six-panel door.

What had propelled her to her Nana and Grandpa Bill's clapboard colonial rather than her own modern town house? She hesitated, tempted to slip away while she still had time, when the door abruptly opened.

Her grandmother, nearly out the door before she saw Taylor, halted mid-step and grabbed the door frame to steady her balance. "Honey, you startled me. I thought you were at work."

"I got off early." Though her insides quivered like a mass of gelatin, Taylor was amazed at how calm she sounded. "If you're busy—"

"Nonsense, my dear. I'm delighted to see you." She wrapped her arm firmly about Taylor's shoulders and gave the younger woman no choice but to be led into the foyer. "I'm just going to run out and get the mail. Your grandpa's expecting an important letter. Lunch will be on the table in a few minutes. Of course, you'll join us?"

Taylor couldn't help but smile. From the time she could walk, Nana had been consistent in her approach to life's problems. It didn't matter what the question or the concern, a little slice of one of her gourmet creations would make it better. It's a wonder they didn't all weigh three hundred pounds! Thankfully, her family seemed to be blessed with a high metabolism.

She surveyed her grandmother's trim form out of the corner of her eye. At five feet six inches, Nana never weighed more than one hundred and twenty-five pounds. Despite her silver hair, her trim figure clad in the latest style made her look much younger than her seventy-plus years.

Taylor shifted her gaze to the den. Her grandfather sat hunched over the honey-colored oak desk that had come home with him after his retirement, totally immersed in a thick law book. Like a Norman Rockwell painting, the scene tugged at her heartstrings.

The click-clack of her heels on the hardwood floor must have alerted him. He looked up, and a fond smile lit his still-handsome features. "Taylor. This is a pleasant surprise. Come and give your grandpa a big hug."

His strong arms encircled her, and Taylor said a quiet prayer of thanks. Losing her parents had been almost more than she could bear. If she had lost him...

She pushed the thought from her mind and hugged his lean frame extra hard. "You're looking good."

She pulled away and held him at arm's length. He reminded her so much of her father. The same nose, the same strong features. Only her father's hair had been dark brown, while Grandpa Bill's chestnut strands were peppered with silver.

"He needs to take it easy if he wants to stay looking that way." Nana said from the doorway, a bundle of letters in one hand.

"Oh, Kaye." Grandpa Bill rolled his eyes.

"You already had one heart attack. I don't want you to have another."

Taylor frowned. "Have you been having more chest pain?"

"No."

"Yes." Nana looked at her husband sternly. "Tell Taylor the truth, Bill."

"Okay, maybe a little now and again. But—" he pulled a small medicine container from his shirt pocket "—the nitro takes care of it right away."

"What does your cardiologist say?" Taylor tried unsuccessfully to keep the anxiety from her voice.

"The doctors say he needs to slow down and not let everything bother him so much." Nana's words were clearly as much for her husband's benefit as for Taylor's. "Once this case is completed—"

Taylor looked at them questioningly.

"Bill's doing some legal work for a friend. It wasn't supposed to take much time, but—"

“It’s almost over, Kaye. Then I’ll have time to relax, maybe golf more.” He turned to Taylor as if eager to get the focus off himself. “How about you, sweetheart? Been out playing lately?”

“I’ve been too busy. I think I’ve only played eighteen a couple times this year.”

“I can’t imagine what the two of you see in that game.” Nana shook her head. “Bill, why don’t you and Taylor relax in the living room? I’m going to make us all some iced tea.”

“Sounds good to me,” Taylor said.

“My dear.” Grandpa Bill crooked his arm, and Taylor took it. They walked to the living room arm in arm.

“I remember when we couldn’t get you off the links. That new job must be taking up a lot of time. Or perhaps it’s not the job. Maybe it’s a young man?”

The image of Nick flashed in her mind, and Taylor’s face warmed. She forced her attention to her grandfather, noticing the lines of fatigue around his eyes and mouth. If only man troubles were all she had to worry about. She forced herself to breathe past the sudden tightness in her chest.

“Grandpa Bill—” She stopped, not sure what to say.

A frown marred his worn face. “Taylor, is something wrong?”

Did his complexion suddenly seem more ashen? Her breath caught in her throat. “No, no, everything is going great.”

His brows drew together, and his eyes filled with concern. “Princess, you can tell me.”

She met his gaze head-on and forced a bright smile. “Everything’s just great.”

“That’s the second time you said that, and I don’t believe it for a minute. Something’s bothering my girl. I can tell.” He pulled her to the couch and made her sit down. His large hand, so like her father’s, gently cradled hers. “You just remember, your grandmother and I are always here for you.”

She cuddled next to him like she used to when she’d been a little girl. Her head leaned against his shoulder, and his hand lightly stroked her hair. The familiar loving gesture brought tears to her eyes. “Oh, Grandpa Bill. You’re right. It is a man.”

Her frustrations centered on a man, all right. One man. Nicholas Lanagan III.

A twinkle returned to her grandfather’s eyes, and a more reassuring color returned to his face. “I thought as much. Who is he? How long have you been seeing him?”

“Whoa. Hold it a minute, counselor.” Taylor jerked upright and realized he’d completely misunderstood.

“What’s going on in here?” Nana strode into the room, a silver tray with a pitcher of tea and three glasses balanced in her hands.

“Taylor’s got a new boyfriend. And I’ve got a hunch it’s serious.”

A flash of joy erased the worry on Nana’s face. She hurried across the room, setting the tray on the credenza, the tea forgotten. “Back up. I want to hear all about him. How you met. How long you’ve been dating. Don’t leave out any details.”

Taylor groaned and stalled for time. “What about the iced tea?”

“It can wait.” Nana’s eyes sparkled. The love on their faces shone as bright as the afternoon sun, and at that moment Taylor knew she would do anything to spare these two people more hurt. Even if it meant telling a little white lie. Or two. She took a deep breath. “We’ve been seeing each other casually for some time. It’s getting kind of serious.”

“Enough of the mystery,” Nana said. “Who is he?”

“Do we know him? Does he golf?” Bill added.

Taylor laughed and patted his hand. “You’re just looking for someone to round out your foursome.”

A brief flash of sorrow skittered across her grandfather’s face, and guilt stabbed Taylor. Her father’s death had left that slot vacant.

Grandpa Bill seemed to force a smile to his face. “All I want—” he grabbed his wife’s hand “—all we want is to see you happy. And if this man makes you happy—”

“I think he can, Grandpa Bill. I really think he can.” The lies slipped off her tongue so naturally she could almost believe them herself. Taylor paused.

She’d nearly passed the point of no return. Could she do it? Accept an engagement to a man she didn’t know? Even for a summer? Her belief in love, commitment and the sanctity of marriage hadn’t changed.

But love, commitment and the sanctity of marriage didn’t enter into this arrangement. After all, she reminded herself, she wouldn’t actually be getting married, and even real engagements often were broken. What harm would there be if she agreed to Lanagan’s deal? What would happen if she didn’t? As she studied her grandparents, she knew what had to be done.

CHAPTER FOUR

Drat.” Taylor pulled the linen dress off and tossed it onto her bed with the other discarded outfits in a well-practiced move. If only she’d thought to ask where they were eating this evening.

Her hand reached into the closet, finally settling on a sleek, midi-length wrap dress in soft chambray. The delicate V-neckline and cinched waist gave it a flattering silhouette, while the subtle side slit added just a touch of sophistication. It was effortlessly stylish—casual but polished.

She paired it with strappy nude block-heel sandals, adding a bit of height without sacrificing comfort. A simple silver pendant necklace and delicate hoop earrings completed the look, striking just the right balance between relaxed and refined.

Hair up or down?

She grabbed a swath and twisted it into a loose low bun, then let a few strands fall around her face before shaking her head and releasing it altogether. Tonight, she’d leave it down.

She frowned in the mirror, rubbing off the pink lipstick and reached for her favorite cinnamon shade.

The doorbell chimed, and Taylor’s head shot up. A trail of reddish-brown streaked across her chin. She grabbed a tissue and hurriedly scrubbed her face before heading down the stairs. She stopped in the foyer and cast a quick glance in the mirror. A flush stained her cheeks, and her eyes were brighter than normal.

The way her heart pounded in her chest, you’d think this was a date and not simply a business meeting. She took a deep, steadying breath, pasted a welcoming smile on her face and opened the door. “Nick. Hello.”

Like her, he’d dressed casually. With a blue shirt deepening his eyes to the color of the ocean and his hair gleaming like the surface of her ebony piano, he was even more attractive than in his business suit.

“Come on in.”

“I thought we’d start this out right.” He held out an assortment of spring flowers interspersed with baby’s breath.

“Thank you.” Taylor smiled as she took the bouquet. It’d been a long time since a man—other than her grandfather—had surprised her with flowers. She stepped aside to let him pass. “Have a seat while I put these in water.”

Taylor gestured to a chair in the living room and headed for the kitchen. Reaching into the upper cupboard for her mother’s crystal vase, she caught a glimpse of him through the colonnade’s arch surveying her living quarters.

Most of the ornate furniture and limited-edition prints had been her parents’. She’d briefly considered selling them to help pay her father’s gambling debts, but immediately discarded the notion. Her grandparents were well aware what these heirlooms meant to her, and no excuse for selling them would have been good enough.

Her hands shook as she quickly arranged the flowers. She adjusted one last sprig of baby’s breath and carried the vase into the living room, the fresh scent of spring filling the room.

“I grew up with antiques.” Nick reverently caressed the smooth finish of an early-nineteenth-century satinwood drum table. “This is beautiful workmanship.”

Taylor smiled and set the vase on the mantel. The table had been her mother’s favorite. “The inlaid purpleheart wood makes the piece.”

“Obviously you like the good stuff. Is that why you need the money?” His arm swept out, encompassing the furnishings. “So you can live like this?”

Taylor took a deep breath and tried to keep the irritation from showing in her face. “I like nice things. From the looks of your car in my driveway, so do you.”

He didn’t tense up. Instead, he carefully set down an ornate vase he’d picked up and studied her.

She shifted under his intense gaze. “The point is it’s really none of your business what I need the money for—”

“You’re right.” He inclined his head. “You’re considering my offer?”

“Maybe. If you’re still willing to pay me fifty thousand dollars a month.”

He hesitated. “That’s what I said.”

She narrowed her gaze. “You don’t sound so sure anymore.”

“I’m sure. I need a fiancée, and you need money. We’re the perfect couple.”

“That’s stretching it a little,” Taylor said dryly. “By the way, I went to see my grandpa this afternoon. I told him about you.”

“You spoke with your grandfather,” he repeated softly, his eyes flat and expressionless. “The judge.”

“Do you know him?” She’d hadn’t considered the possibility.

“I’ve heard of him. We’ve never met.”

“Well, he wants to meet you. He had a lot of questions—”

“What did you tell him?”

The harshness in his tone took her by surprise. “What could I tell him?”

“Answer my question, Taylor.”

His abruptness sent her temper soaring. No wonder the man didn’t have a girlfriend. In a few minutes, he wouldn’t have a fiancée, temporary or otherwise.

“Wait just one minute, buster. Don’t you dare use that tone with me.”

His eyes narrowed and his back stiffened, ramrod straight.

“There was nothing improper about my offer.”

Shock tempered her anger. “I’m not saying there was.”

“Then what are you saying?”

“We don’t know if we even like each other, but you think we can convince our friends and family we’re in love? I’m not so sure. I don’t know if we can pull this off and I don’t want my grandparents hurt.”

“Are they suspicious?”

“Not yet.” She shook her head, remembering their reaction. “Actually, when I told them we were involved, maybe seriously, they were thrilled.”

“You told your grandfather we were serious?” The tenseness in his jaw eased, and he expelled a deep breath. “Then his questions—”

Totally bewildered at his reaction, Taylor could only stare. “Were about you. Where you grew up, if you had any brothers or sisters, stuff that I didn’t have a clue how to answer.”

“We can take care of that,” he said with a relieved grin. “Over dinner I’ll bore you with my life story.”

“That’s a start, but…” Taylor paused, refusing to shove aside her concerns. “What makes you so sure you can convince everyone you’re in love with me? You don’t even know me.”

“Well.” A dimple in his cheek flashed. “I *was* in a few plays back in high school.”

“Oh, I get it,” she said. “You’ll play Romeo. I’ll be Juliet. Is that the plan?”

“I want this to work.” His eyes blazed with determination. “And it will.”

Taylor could only shake her head. Nick’s confidence and self-assurance reminded her so much of her father. Robert Rollins believed there was no goal too high that it couldn’t be reached and no obstacle too large that it couldn’t be overcome.

Until he’d gotten in way over his head…

Taylor pushed the disturbing thought away and answered Nick’s confident smile hesitantly with one of her own. Lying had always been something she abhorred. Still, she needed the money. And who would it hurt?

If only she could be as certain as Nick they could pull it off.

They walked in silence to the sleek silver-blue sports car parked at the curb. Taylor waited while he opened the door. She’d barely settled into the plush leather seats of the Jaguar XK8 when an obvious thought struck her and she wondered why she hadn’t thought of it before.

“I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we treat tonight as a sort of dress rehearsal? We could *act* the part of a couple in love and at the end of the evening critique our performance. Then we’ll have a better idea whether or not we can pull this off.”

“Sounds good to me.” Nick reached over and brought her hand to his mouth, placing a kiss in the palm.

A surge of heat shot up her arm, and Taylor started to pull away, then noticed his impish grin. She chuckled and slipped her hand from his grasp.

Almost reluctantly he flipped the ignition, and the car sped away from the curb.

“Is the Lodge okay?” Nick turned the car off the highway onto a familiar dirt road.

“That’s fine.”

Built by a handful of wealthy businessmen, the exclusive private club was originally designed as a gathering place for sportsmen. Over the years, the tennis courts and golf course had been added, and the men-only rule had fallen by the wayside. The Lodge housed the Drake restaurant, famous in the region for its wild game cuisine.

He turned slowly onto the spacious grounds, and Taylor lowered the window. The soft fragrance of lilacs teased her nose, and she inhaled deeply. She reveled in the refreshing scent and ignored the breeze mussing her hair.

The headlights illuminated the award-winning golf course that lined both sides of the gently winding drive. She smiled as the eighth hole came and went. She’d had her first and only hole-in-one there. A sixteenth birthday present to herself.

“You look lovely tonight.” Nick’s voice broke into her thoughts.

Taylor had to give him points for trying. He’d clearly jumped into the role of adoring fiancée while she sat there blushing

like some awestruck schoolgirl out for the first time.

She forced herself to envision what she would say—how she would react—if she loved this stranger sitting beside her. Taking a deep breath, she tentatively slid closer and leaned her head against his shoulder. It seemed unnatural to be so physically close to someone she'd just met, but she reminded herself it was no different than sitting in a crowded stadium at a Broncos game shoved up against some stranger.

But no stranger at a game had ever smelled so good or made her heart race so fast. Nick turned his head, and she could sense his gaze, but instead of looking up, she snuggled closer.

With a push of a button, Nick filled the Jag with strains of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony, her favorite piece.

She raised her head and smiled. "You like classical music?"

"I do. But I can switch—"

"No," she said before he could make a move. "I like it, too. A lot."

His lips curved in a self-satisfied smile before he turned his attention to the road.

Taylor returned her head to his shoulder and let the music transport her away from her worries, soothing the tightness in her limbs, allowing her to relax fully for the first time since she'd opened that envelope with the pink slip stuffed inside.

The car rounded the horseshoe-shaped drive in front of the Lodge, and Taylor reluctantly straightened. Turning the car over to valet parking, Nick offered his arm to Taylor and they walked into the Great Room of the Lodge.

Nick stepped forward to give the maître d' their names. Taylor scanned the crowded room, hoping she wouldn't see anyone she knew.

"The table will be ready in a minute," Nick said, the palm of his hand lightly resting on the small of her back. "Can I get you anything from the bar?"

"No, thanks. I don't—"

"Taylor, over here."

Her heart caught in her throat. Even across the noisy room, she recognized Grandpa Bill's voice.

"Nick." Another voice rang out from a far corner.

The arm around her shoulder tightened, and an expletive slipped past Nick's lips. A smile that didn't quite reach his eyes tipped the corners of his mouth as he waved.

"Who's the guy headed this way?" he asked softly, talking through a smile, his breath warm against her ear.

"My grandfather." She glanced at the balding man barreling his way through the crowd. "Who's yours?"

"My soon-to-be business partner Henry Waters. His daughter, Claire, is the reason I need a fiancée." His fingers dug into her arm. "Smile."

"Just don't let on to my grandfather that I lost my job," she said under her breath.

What rotten luck! They hadn't even finished their first rehearsal and now they stood center stage. Apparently, this was opening night, after all. She reached to push back a wayward strand of hair, and Nick grasped her hand, holding it tightly.

"Well, now, who do we have here?"

Nick turned in mock resignation to face the knowing smile lingering on the lips of the large, middle-aged man.

"Henry, I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"This must be your fiancée." The man chuckled. "At least I hope she is."

"Sweetheart, this is Henry Waters, the guy I've been telling you about. Henry, this is Taylor Rollins."

Nick cast her a sideways glance, and Taylor knew the moment had arrived. A split second to decide whether or not to take on the role.

"His fiancée," she said. "For now, anyway."

Nick's blue eyes flashed a gentle but firm warning. "Taylor and I can't wait for the wedding." He brought her hand to his mouth and caressed it with his lips. "Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

"Absolutely." She swallowed hard and smiled brightly. "Darling."

Henry stared, his dark eyes sharp and assessing. "Rollins, eh? Any relation to Bill?"

"I'm her grandfather."

"Bill, old buddy. I didn't see you." Henry extended his hand and slapped Taylor's grandfather on the back. "It's been a long time. How have you been?"

"Doing good." Bill cast a curious glance at Nick, who stood with his arm draped around Taylor's shoulders.

"I was just offering Nick and Taylor my congratulations," Henry said.

"Congratulations?"

"On their engagement. Don't tell me you didn't know."

"Of course I knew. I just didn't know they'd made the announcement public," her grandfather said smoothly, shooting Taylor a glance that told her she had some explaining to do.

"Nick told me earlier he'd proposed but wasn't sure of the answer. I don't mind admitting it took me by surprise. I'd always hoped he'd be my son-in-law someday. But I can blame my daughter for that. She left him alone too long. It was only

natural he'd find someone else." Henry Waters rambled on, and Taylor shot a glance at Nick.

His expression didn't change but his hand tightened on hers.

"Anyway, that's water under the bridge. He certainly couldn't have done any better. Taylor seems like a lovely girl, and there's not a family in the state better thought of than yours, Bill."

"Nice of you to say, Henry."

Taylor swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. She'd made the right choice. No sacrifice would be too great if it preserved her father's reputation and her grandfather's health.

Her grandfather turned to Nick, and Taylor knew she should introduce the two, but Mr. Waters would wonder why Nick and Grandpa Bill had never met, and the whole deception would be over before it began.

"Son, it looks like congratulations are in order." For a moment Grandpa Bill studied Nick intently, and Taylor realized why he'd been so formidable in the courtroom.

Nick returned the gaze steadily with a measuring one of his own until her grandfather smiled. "You'll have to come over to the house so we can formally welcome you to the family."

"Why don't you both join us for dinner?" Taylor said weakly, hoping they'd refuse.

Her grandfather shook his head. Regret laced his eyes. "I wish I could. But I'm here on business. In fact, we were just being seated when I caught a glimpse of you and had to come over."

"Of course." She smiled with relief, realizing again how much she loved this man. "I'll call you and Nana tomorrow."

"You do that." Her grandfather brushed a light kiss across her forehead, said his goodbyes and headed back to the dining room.

"I've got to get going, too." Henry clapped Nick on the back. "Jack Corrigan is over at the bar waiting."

Nick's face tightened. "I thought your negotiations with him ended when you accepted my offer."

"Jack and I are still old friends, Nick," Henry said with a hint of reproof, "although I don't think he's quite forgiven me yet for picking Lanagan Associates over his company."

Nick's biceps tightened beneath her arm, but the smile he flashed epitomized confidence. "Friendship or not, he has to know you made the best choice. Be sure and tell him hello for me."

"I'll do better than that. I'll tell him to expect a wedding invitation. Any idea when the happy day will be?"

"No," Taylor said at the exact same moment Nick answered "Yes."

Henry laughed.

Nick smiled and shrugged. "We've tossed around a few dates, nothing definite yet. I guarantee you'll be one of the first to know."

Taylor leaned back against Nick and kept a smile firmly in place until Henry Waters was out of sight.

How was she ever going to pull this off?

CHAPTER FIVE

Taylor slipped the key into the lock and turned to Nick. “The evening wasn’t as bad as—”

“Before you stroke my ego with more kind words—” Nick’s fingers glided sensuously up her arm, igniting an unexpected warmth beneath her skin “—I think it would be a good idea to seal this engagement with a kiss.”

Her pulse jumped.

She tilted her head, feigning nonchalance. “And why would you think that?”

“We need the practice.” His voice was smooth, laced with teasing—but there was something else beneath it. Something that sent a ripple of heat through her veins. “And in case someone’s watching.”

Taylor laughed, flicking a glance toward the old oak tree in the front yard. “Wave to Grandpa Bill.”

Nick didn’t even glance away. His hand found hers, warm and firm, holding her still.

The laughter died in her throat.

Her instinct was to pull away—but his grip tightened. Not demanding. Not forceful. Just enough to make her forget why she should resist.

“Okay, maybe he’s not there tonight—” his lips brushed against her hair, his fingers tracing the line of her cheek “—but we still need the practice.”

A shiver ran down her spine.

His touch was light but deliberate, like he was giving her time to pull away. But she didn’t.

Her heart pounded beneath the soft fabric of her dress.

His jaw relaxed, and his lips hovered a breath from hers—a moment suspended between hesitation and inevitability.

Then, he kissed her.

A gentle brush at first, as if testing the waters, then deeper, surer. His lips moved over hers with a warmth that sent heat rippling through her body, melting whatever protests had remained.

Before she could stop herself, her arms lifted, wrapping around his neck.

Nick exhaled, pulling her closer.

Her heart thundered, each second stretching into something dangerous.

Something real.

The moment fractured when she pulled back, breathless.

Nick searched her eyes, his own filled with something undeniable.

“Wow.” He raised a brow, a slow, lazy smile playing at his lips. “That was some dress rehearsal.”

Taylor’s cheeks flushed as she stepped back, shaking her head.

“I think we’ve practiced enough for one evening.”

Nick reached for her again, but she quickly sidestepped him.

“Practice makes perfect,” he murmured, his voice low, coaxing. His heated gaze roamed her face, searching. “Are you sure?”

Of course she wasn’t sure.

But she was sensible. Responsible.

“Positive.”

Nick sighed dramatically. “Just one more for the road?”

She folded her arms, biting back a smile. “Not tonight.”

“But since we’re engaged, I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities.”

Nick’s expression shifted, something unreadable flickering across his face.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny velvet box, pushing it into her hand.

“Here. You’ll need this.”

Taylor froze.

The air seemed thicker, the weight of the small box pressing far heavier than it should.

Her heart twisted.

She had dreamed of receiving an engagement ring since she was a little girl. But never like this. Never as a business arrangement.

Nick arched a brow. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

Her fingers trembled as she snapped the box open.

She gasped.

The large, emerald-cut diamond in an antique setting caught the light, casting a prism of colors against her skin.

At least five carats.

“Nick, this is—” she swallowed hard, suddenly struggling for words. “This is way too much. I can’t accept this.”

“Sure you can.” His tone was casual, but there was something softer in his eyes as he lifted the ring from its velvet nest and slipped it onto her finger.

“It was my grandmother’s. Just remember, I want it back when we break up.”

Taylor blinked.

Of course. A beautiful loaned ring for their temporary engagement.

Her lips twisted into something between a smile and a grimace. “Gee, thanks, Romeo.”

Nick ignored her sarcasm, instead catching her hand and lifting it toward the porch light.

The diamond gleamed, its brilliance mocking her.

“It looks good on you, Juliet.” His voice was lower now, quieter. “I guess it’s official. We’re engaged.”

Taylor’s heart tightened.

“Temporarily,” she murmured.

Nick didn’t react.

The gem flashed, catching the glow from the porch light, casting a dance of colors across her skin.

A beautiful prop.

A precious lie.

A ring meant to symbolize love and commitment—but here, nothing more than a well-crafted deception.

Her stomach twisted.

Was this really the road she was meant to travel?

Nick’s voice cut through the silence.

“What are you thinking?”

Taylor forced herself to push away the doubt.

She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze.

“I’m thinking,” she said lightly, twisting the ring around her finger, “I can hardly wait to see what happens in Act Two.”



Nick leaned back in his leather chair, lacing his fingers behind his head, his piercing gaze fixed on her. Unapologetic. Unbothered. Completely Nick.

“Mind telling me what’s so important that I had to leave a meeting that took me two weeks to arrange?” His voice held that maddening, smooth confidence. “The way you’re acting, I can’t imagine it’s because you missed me.”

Taylor’s blood simmered.

Three days. Three days.

No calls. No texts. No contact at all.

Three days of dodging her grandparents’ questions. Three days of feeling like a fool for trusting that he would at least make this charade look believable.

“The way I’m acting?” Her tone was sharp, her nails digging into her palm. “How do you think I’d act if the man I just introduced as my fiancé vanished off the face of the earth? No texts, no calls—”

“I was out of town.”

“I don’t care if you were in China.” Taylor’s frustration boiled over. Only death would have been a valid excuse for ignoring her messages.

Nick exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. “I was busy.”

“Busy?” she repeated, voice thick with sarcasm. She marched to his desk, grabbed his sleek black phone, and shoved it into his hand. “How many seconds out of your oh-so-packed schedule would it have taken to text? Five? Three?”

His lips quirked.

“Don’t you dare smile at me, mister.” She jabbed a finger toward his chest, refusing to be charmed or distracted. “What was I supposed to say when my grandparents kept asking about you? That I couldn’t bring you over because I had no idea where you were? That you wouldn’t return my calls? I wish I had a quarter for every time your admin told me you were

‘unavailable.’”

Nick’s amusement vanished. His jaw tightened as he set his phone down with deliberate control. “That’s her standard response to callers.”

“Even to your fiancée?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. His gaze flickered—guilt?—before he gave a small shrug. “I must have forgotten to mention—”

Taylor’s fists clenched.

“Nick Lanagan, if I had a rope, you would be swinging from the chandelier in the lobby right now.”

“What a romantic picture.”

The sultry voice from the doorway sent a chill down Taylor’s spine.

She turned, instinctively on guard.

The woman leaned against the doorframe as if she owned the room. Dressed in an impeccable white linen sheath that emphasized a deep, sun-kissed tan, she exuded effortless confidence. A cinched alligator belt highlighted her slender waist, and long, dark waves cascaded over her bare shoulders like silk.

Her lips curved into a knowing smile.

“Though I must admit,” she continued, “ropes don’t really do much for me.” She trailed a manicured nail along the doorframe, her cherry-red nails flashing in the light. “I’ve always been partial to satin sheets and champagne.”

Taylor froze.

So this was Claire Waters.

Nick’s ex. The woman Taylor had unknowingly stepped in front of.

A barracuda.

Taylor had met her type before—political predators who viewed men as conquests, whether they were married, engaged, or just breathing.

Claire’s dark eyes glittered, sharp and assessing.

Nick exhaled, standing and stepping to Taylor’s side.

“Claire,” he said smoothly, his tone unreadable. “I’d like you to meet my fiancée, Taylor Rollins.”

He rested a hand on the small of Taylor’s back—a subtle claim.

Taylor tipped her head, letting a careful, polished smile grace her lips.

You’re not the only one who knows how to play games, sweetheart.

Claire crossed the room, hips swinging in an exaggerated sway. She stopped a few feet away, looking Taylor over with slow, deliberate calculation.

Sizing her up.

“Do I detect trouble in paradise?”

Nick laughed, and before Taylor could react, his arm slipped around her shoulders.

“Just a little quarrel,” he murmured, his voice teasing, his touch too practiced. “In fact, if you hadn’t interrupted, we’d already be at the kissing and making-up stage.”

Claire’s smirk deepened.

“Oh, don’t let me stop you.” She waved a hand, dismissive, her red nails slicing through the air like tiny weapons.

Nick hesitated for the briefest moment.

Then he turned, curling a finger under Taylor’s chin, tilting her face toward his.

His eyes softened.

“I’m sorry I was so inconsiderate,” he murmured. “Will you forgive me?”

Taylor’s breath caught.

Was this for Claire’s benefit? Or was there real regret there?

With Claire watching their every move, she had no way of knowing.

She forced herself to nod.

“Yes. I’ll forgive you.”

Nick didn’t hesitate.

He lowered his head, and before she could prepare, his lips met hers.

A slow, deliberate kiss—not rushed, not hesitant.

And despite everything, she melted.

For a second, she forgot about Claire. About the game.

It felt real.

Then, as quickly as it began, she pulled back, warmth creeping up her neck.

“Nick, not here. We have an audience.”

Taylor turned just in time to see Claire’s gaze narrow.

The other woman's eyes flickered to the impressive diamond on Taylor's left hand. Taylor curled her fingers around Nick's arm, angling the ring into the light, letting her see it. Claire's eyes widened.

Satisfaction curled through Taylor's stomach.

Nick's lips tipped upward in amusement, clearly catching her intention.

Claire's attention flickered back to Nick, her smile returning, smooth as silk.

"Well." She sighed dramatically. "Daddy and I have decided to throw you an engagement party."

Taylor stiffened.

Claire's eyes gleamed with mischief.

"Assuming, of course, you two will still be together then."

Nick chuckled, his arm tightening around Taylor's waist.

"Don't worry about that, Claire." His voice was all confidence, all certainty. "This is the woman for me."

For one fraction of a second, Claire's face stiffened.

Then, just as quickly, she recovered, flashing a sly smile.

"If you're happy," she purred, "I'm happy."

Taylor smiled sweetly.

Game on.

Claire reached into her designer handbag, pulling out a sleek leather notepad and a gold-tipped pen. Her movements were deliberate, almost lazy, but there was a gleam of anticipation in her dark eyes.

"I'll need your mother's current address so I can send her an invitation."

Nick didn't even hesitate. "Don't waste your stamp."

He rounded his desk, hit the do-not-disturb button on his phone, and turned back to Claire with a look that could have frozen steel.

Claire simply smiled—all glossy confidence and silk-lined condescension.

"Now, Nick, I'm sure Sylvia would love your fiancée and would be crushed if she didn't have the opportunity to toast your engagement."

Nick's expression didn't change, but Taylor felt the shift in the room.

Claire didn't stop there.

"In fact," Claire continued, tucking a strand of raven-dark hair behind one ear, "Daddy told me the cutest story yesterday, and I said, 'Well, it sounds like Nick got himself a woman just like his mother!'"

Taylor stiffened.

Claire turned to her, the picture of innocence, her lips pouty, her lashes lowering in faux sweetness. "You don't mind if I tell it, do you?"

Taylor's spine snapped straight. "I'm not sure what story you're referring to."

Claire sighed dreamily, as if reminiscing. "It's the one where you visited your grandparents for the summer and refused to wear the same outfit twice."

Nick visibly tensed.

Claire shot him a sideways glance before pressing on, savoring every second.

"Daddy said you maxed out your grandfather's credit card and threw a fit at the mall when he told you no more shopping. It was the talk of Cedar Ridge for months." She let the words settle, then gave a faux-apologetic smile. "Sounds like your mother, doesn't it, Nick?"

Taylor's heart pounded.

It was an old memory, one she'd long buried—the summer her mother had died. The anger. The grief. The rebellion. Her father had vanished into his campaign, leaving her behind. She'd acted out, pushing the only people who had tried to love her.

She swallowed hard. "I'm surprised your father remembers. That was a long time ago. I was barely sixteen."

Claire's smile stayed in place. "Ah, but those are our formative years, aren't they?"

Taylor opened her mouth, but Claire didn't give her the chance.

"I guess I always thought Nick was looking for a different kind of woman."

Silence stretched.

Nick's expression became impenetrable, his features hardening in a way that set Taylor on edge.

He wasn't defending her.

He wasn't saying anything.

Taylor's temper flared.

"He was," she said coolly. "Me."

Claire blinked.

For the briefest moment, something flickered across her face—annoyance, maybe even surprise—before she smoothed it

away, lowering her lashes like a curtain drawn between them.

“Of course,” she murmured, voice dripping with mock sweetness.

She gracefully stood, brushing invisible lint off her dress. “Well, I need to scoot.” Her gaze shifted back to Nick, as if Taylor wasn’t even in the room.

“Nick, I’ll give you a call this week. We’ll do lunch.”

Nick leaned against his desk, arms crossing over his broad chest. “I’m not sure I can make it. But maybe you and Taylor can get together.”

Claire’s smile faltered—just slightly.

“Sure.” The single word was tight, her eyes flashing, but she didn’t let her mask slip for long. She grabbed her bag and stepped toward the door. “Daddy and I are meeting at eleven, and he’ll have my head if I keep him waiting.”

As soon as the door clicked shut, Taylor exhaled.

Nick rubbed his jaw, his gaze locked on the closed door.

“I don’t think she bought it,” he muttered.

“What gave it away?” Taylor shot back.

“She was way too nice.”

Taylor’s brows shot up. “That was nice?”

Nick shook his head. “I wish I were kidding.”

“Charming,” Taylor muttered. “That wasn’t quite the word I’d use.”

“We all make mistakes.” Nick’s voice dropped, quieter now. Regret laced his tone. “Claire was one of mine. A big one.”

Taylor hesitated, watching him.

She wasn’t sure why, but his seriousness unsettled her.

“You know she’s still interested, right? Engagement or no engagement. She practically threw herself at you.”

“I expected as much.” He lifted his gaze to hers, studying her.

It unnerved her.

“That’s why you’re here,” he said. “To run interference. So I can actually get some work done.”

Taylor sighed. Right. The arrangement.

“But,” he added, his mouth tipping into a devilish grin, “you’re going to have to loosen up. Otherwise, she’ll never believe this engagement is real.”

“I’m doing the best I can—”

He shrugged. “I’m not saying you don’t show promise. The kiss was pretty good.”

Taylor’s stomach flipped.

He grinned, devastatingly confident, his dimples deepening. “With a little practice, I think we could really nail it. And since we don’t have an audience now…”

He stepped forward, eyes locked onto hers.

She should have stopped him.

She wanted to stop him.

But her heart pounded too fast, her pulse thrumming in her ears.

And she really, really liked those dimples.

Then, as if a switch flipped, reality crashed back.

She took a quick step back, tilting her chin defiantly.

“Since we don’t have an audience,” she said, clearing her throat, “we need to talk about you meeting my grandparents.”

His smile vanished.

“Tonight,” she added.

Nick exhaled sharply, walking around to his desk and pulling up his calendar on the screen. His gaze flickered downward before he shook his head.

“Tonight’s not good for me. I’ve—”

“Tonight.” Taylor crossed her arms. “I’m not putting them off any longer. Pick me up at seven.”

His lips tightened. His eyes darkened.

For a long moment, she thought he might refuse.

Then—snap.

He closed the calendar with an irritated click.

“Seven it is.”

She ignored his scowl.

“Nick?” she called sweetly.

He glanced up, clearly still annoyed. “What?”

“Don’t forget to tell Miss Dietrich that I’m your fiancée and she’s to put me through when I call.”

She smiled, syrupy sweet, but her gaze was sharp. Direct. Unwavering.

Something flickered in his eyes.

Something that looked a lot like respect.

“Consider her told.”

Taylor didn’t wait for another word.

She turned, closing the door behind her, stepping back into the bustling world of Lanagan Associates.

With a little more effort, this business arrangement could work.

At the end of summer, she’d have her money. He’d have his merger.

They’d part ways, and no one would be the wiser.

No one would get hurt.

It sounded reasonable.

So why did she have the sinking feeling it wasn’t going to be that simple?

CHAPTER SIX

Nick leaned back into the overstuffed sofa, taking a slow sip of rich, dark espresso. The scent of freshly brewed coffee and something warmly spiced filled the air, mingling with the faint traces of lemon polish that clung to the antique wood furniture.

Taylor's grandmother—who had insisted he call her Nana—placed a festive plate of delicate cookies on the coffee table at his side.

Nick's gaze slid over the assorted treats, appreciating their precise arrangement. Homemade. Thoughtful. He reached for a small powdered sugar-covered confection, and when he took a bite, Nana's smile widened in clear approval.

Across from him, Taylor's green eyes flickered with something unreadable—relief, perhaps? Maybe even pleasure?

His temporary fiancée looked especially beautiful tonight.

The warm glow of the lamplight picked up the red undertones in her hair, making it appear like burnished copper. Her emerald eyes, sharp and luminous, shimmered as she watched the interaction unfold.

On impulse, Nick reached over and covered her hand with his, giving it a small, reassuring squeeze.

His palm pressed against the solid weight of the engagement ring—a ring that wasn't really hers, a symbol of a lie they were both trying to sell.

But what surprised him wasn't the cold metal against his skin—it was the coldness of her fingers.

She was nervous.

It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but it was there.

Not as relaxed as she appeared, after all.

He filed the thought away for later. For now, he turned his attention to Bill Rollins, who, thankfully, had not insisted on anything more than “Bill.”

“Have you known Henry Waters long?” Nick asked, keeping his tone casual.

Bill paused, as if choosing his words carefully. “Actually... I've known Henry for almost thirty years. He and I have served on a couple of committees together, and we've golfed in the same league for years.” He tilted his head slightly. “How about you?”

Nick took a slow breath, thinking back to his first impression of Henry Waters.

Loud-mouthed. Overconfident. Drank too much.

That assessment hadn't changed. But over the years, Nick had come to respect the man's business instincts and unwavering loyalty—especially when it came to his friends and his family.

And that was the problem with Claire.

“I met him at a Rotary Golf Scramble several years ago,” Nick said finally.

“I didn't know you golfed.”

Taylor's soft voice broke into his thoughts, making him glance at her.

It was an innocent statement. A simple observation.

And yet, for the first time since arriving, Nick nearly groaned.

He covered it with a smile. “Sure you did, sweetheart.” He tilted his head, feigning amusement. “Remember we talked about going out to the Lodge sometime?”

Taylor's lips parted slightly, understanding filling her eyes.

A second later, she let out a light laugh, the sound musical and effortless.

“How could I have forgotten?”

She was quick. He had to give her that.

Beside them, Bill's face lit up.

“If you're free on Friday morning, some friends and I get together for eighteen holes. We tee off at nine.”

Nick felt Taylor stiffen beside him.

Interesting.

Did she think he was going to bluntly refuse? That he would brush off the invitation and alienate a potential ally?

She didn't know him as well as she thought.

Nick had built an empire on his ability to read people, to anticipate their expectations and deliver just enough to keep them satisfied.

He knew how to decline without offending.

He knew how to say no without ever actually saying it.

Nick opened his mouth, already preparing a gracious, tactical excuse—

And then Taylor spoke.

“Grandpa, maybe Nick would like to know who else he'd be playing with.”

Her voice was soft, almost casual.

Nick's gaze sharpened slightly.

Bill chuckled. “Of course, my dear.” His smile overflowed with love as he glanced at his granddaughter before turning back to Nick. “You might even know them—Jack Corrigan and Tom Watts.”

Nick's stomach tightened.

His smile did not falter.

He leaned back, tilting his head in mock thoughtfulness.

“Jack and I have met.”

Technically, that wasn't a lie.

Jack Corrigan had been one of the bidders for Henry's company. One of the losers.

Bill's brows lifted slightly. “Ah, that's right. Jack had really counted on getting that bid.”

Nick's teeth clenched behind his easy smile.

So.

That was why Corrigan was still cozying up to Henry.

The man was looking for an opening.

Waiting for a chance to make Henry change his mind.

Too bad he was wasting his time.

Nick would make sure of that.

He nearly turned down the invitation right then. Nearly.

Then paused.

There might be some value in being part of this foursome after all.

The refusal died on his tongue.

Instead, he smiled.

“Fridays are usually good for me,” he said smoothly. The lie slipped out easily.

Bill's face lit up, clearly pleased. “Wonderful! We meet at the clubhouse for coffee at eight if you'd like to join us.”

Nick nodded, casually slipping an arm around Taylor's shoulders, drawing her just a little closer.

“Works for me,” he said lightly.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Taylor's lips part slightly, her gaze flickering with something unreadable.

Surprise, maybe.

Suspicion.

But Nick didn't worry about that.

He had just scored major points tonight.

And in the grand game of deception, every small victory counted.



Utterly drained, Taylor leaned her head against the soft leather headrest, closing her eyes with a sigh.

The smooth purr of the Jaguar's engine worked its way into her frayed nerves, each quiet hum of the wheels against the pavement soothing the lingering tension from the evening.

From the moment they had stepped foot into her grandparents' house, every fiber of her being had been on alert.

The weight of this deception pressed down on her like a thousand bricks.

What had she been thinking?

How could she ever hope to convince two people who knew her better than anyone in the world that she was in love with Nicholas Lanagan?

And that he was in love with her?

It had been an impossible task.

And yet—

She had underestimated Nick. Again.

With a warm smile and an easy charm, he had woven a perfect illusion of a man completely, irrevocably in love.

The most unsettling part?

He had been so good, she had almost believed him herself.

She could see now why he had built a business empire. His confidence, his ability to persuade, his way of making people feel what he wanted them to feel—it was impressive.

And dangerous.

“Nick...” Her voice was quieter than she intended. “Did you feel—I don’t know—uncomfortable at all this evening?”

He chuckled, the deep timbre of his voice vibrating through the air.

“Will you bite my head off if I say no?”

Taylor sighed heavily, rubbing at her temple. “They loved you.” She glanced at him in the dim interior of the car. “Your champagne toast brought tears to Nana’s eyes.”

Nick shrugged, smirking. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Taylor groaned. “I’m just worried—”

“You worry too much.”

A year ago, worry and Taylor Rollins would never have been mentioned in the same breath.

She had once been carefree, impulsive, untethered.

Now?

Now she was this.

“I just hope they won’t be too upset when we break up.” Her voice was softer now, more vulnerable than she wanted it to be. “They’ve been hurt enough for one lifetime.”

Nick’s expression sobered slightly.

“Losing their daughter-in-law and then their son... that would have been tough.”

A chill settled in the car, nothing to do with the air conditioning.

Taylor swallowed hard.

Her mother had been gone for over ten years, but discussing her father’s death still made her chest tighten painfully.

“It was horrible.”

Nick was silent for a long moment.

Then—gently, “Did your father and his parents have a close relationship?”

Taylor let out a small, bitter laugh.

“He was their only son. The light of their life.”

Nick’s eyes flicked toward her, his voice carefully neutral. “You sound bitter.”

Taylor hesitated.

“Do I?” She frowned. “I don’t mean to. I mean... I’m not.” She let out a slow breath. “My father was a great guy.”

Nick didn’t speak, but she could feel his curiosity pressing in the air between them.

“Tell me about him.”

Taylor turned her head, her brows lifting slightly.

“Why?”

Nick’s grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel.

“Your grandfather mentioned him several times tonight.” He paused. “He seemed to assume I already knew all about him.”

Taylor stared at him for a beat.

Then it clicked.

“My grandpa obviously likes you.” A small, sad smile touched her lips. “He doesn’t talk about my father much anymore.”

“He did to me.”

Taylor swallowed.

She knew why.

Nick had played the adoring fiancé so well that her grandfather had lowered his guard.

She forced herself to stay detached.

“You played a very convincing leading man tonight,” she murmured.

Nick’s mouth quirked. “That toast—how did I put it again?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “To the woman who made me realize that I could have all the riches in the world but be poor without her by my side.”

“And don’t forget,” he added, “the part where I said you were my best friend.”

Taylor turned her head sharply, studying his profile.

His best friend?

Her heart stuttered unexpectedly.

Nana had been moved. Even Grandpa Bill had gotten misty-eyed.

Nick shot her a crooked grin. "Your grandparents seemed to find it very touching."

Taylor exhaled sharply and shook her head. "You're incorrigible."

A low chuckle rumbled from his chest.

The worst part?

She wasn't even angry about it.

Nick had that undeniable quality, the romantic-hero type appeal that made people—made her—want to believe him.

Actresses always fall in love with their leading men.

Nonsense.

She wasn't some naive Hollywood starlet.

She was a responsible adult who knew the line between fiction and reality.

She had a job to do.

And as long as she remembered she was playing a role—

She'd be just fine.

No matter how realistic the part felt.

No matter how handsome the leading man was.



The Cedar Ridge Country Club hummed with life on Friday morning, the early sunlight spilling across the pristine greens. The rhythmic *thwack* of golf balls echoed across the fairways as groups of players teed off under a cloudless sky. Though tee times had begun as early as six a.m., the nine o'clock slot had attracted a different crowd—one less concerned with beating the sunrise and more content to linger over coffee in the clubhouse before stepping onto the course.

Nick sat at a round table with Grandpa Bill and his two friends, feeling an odd mixture of relaxation and vigilance. He appreciated the easy camaraderie of the group, but he wasn't blind to the dynamics at play.

Tom Watts, a retired attorney, seemed like a pleasant enough guy—affable, chatty, the type of man who enjoyed a leisurely game more for the conversation than the competition.

Jack Corrigan, on the other hand, was a different story. A businessman through and through, his sharp gaze hinted at a mind always calculating, always assessing. Given that Nick and Jack had been on opposite ends of a few deals in the past, it wasn't lost on him that the older man might be eyeing this breakfast as more than just a friendly gathering.

And Bill—Bill was watching him, too.

The announcement of Nick and Taylor's engagement had sent a ripple of surprise through the group, and while Tom had simply raised his eyebrows, Jack's interest had sharpened.

"Congrats on your engagement." Jack leaned back in his chair, his smile easy, but his tone laced with curiosity. "I didn't even realize Taylor was dating anyone."

A subtle shift passed between the men. Nick could feel it, the unspoken question hanging in the air.

Jack turned his attention to Bill. "You never mentioned that."

Bill shrugged, his mouth twitching in a small, unreadable smile. "I didn't know."

Tom frowned slightly. "Didn't Taylor just move here three months ago?" His confusion was evident, his brow furrowing. "That's quite the whirlwind romance."

Nick felt the weight of their stares. He took a measured sip of his coffee, keeping his expression smooth. This wasn't his first time maneuvering through high-stakes conversations—though he usually wasn't playing defense in matters of his *personal* life.

"She did," he answered, keeping his voice casual. "But we go back further than that."

He set his cup down deliberately. "Taylor worked at ComTech in Denver before moving here." A pause. Just enough to let that fact settle. "I've had dealings with ComTech. And, well... I get to Denver quite often. More so in the last year."

It wasn't a lie. Not entirely. But it was just vague enough to sidestep the questions he *really* didn't want to answer.

Bill studied him for a beat before letting out a chuckle, shaking his head. "Now I understand why Taylor was so eager to move here."

Nick tensed.

Bill's eyes twinkled as he leaned back in his chair. "She said it was to be closer to Kaye and me, but I'm guessing some of it had to do with *this* guy."

He jerked a thumb in Nick's direction, and Tom let out a laugh while Jack lifted his coffee cup, watching the exchange with keen interest.

Nick forced a modest smile. "I can't imagine not being in the same town as my fiancée."

The words came out smoothly, but beneath the table, he curled his fingers into his palm, aware of just how thin the ice was beneath him.

Bill nodded approvingly. "Well, we've always hoped Taylor would find the right man." His expression softened, sincerity edging his words. "And the fact that you golf?" He grinned, giving Nick a knowing look. "Well, that's just an extra plus."

Nick exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. The moment of scrutiny passed, replaced by easy conversation as the men turned their attention back to their coffee and their upcoming round of golf. But Nick couldn't quite shake the feeling that the game had already begun—long before they ever stepped onto the course.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nick eased the Jaguar into one of the last remaining spots in the gravel lot, fingers drumming absently against the steering wheel before shutting off the engine. He removed the key but didn't move, his gaze shifting to the clear, endless stretch of sky above them.

The often-unpredictable northeastern Colorado weather had cooperated beautifully—balmy temperatures, no clouds in sight.

"You couldn't have picked a more perfect day for a company picnic," Taylor's voice was light, but the underlying apprehension was unmistakable.

She had faced situations like this before—as a politician's daughter, she had mastered the art of smiling through scrutiny.

But this was different.

This time, it wasn't her father's colleagues watching her.

It was Nick's.

And their judgment would not be about policy or campaigns—but about her.

"The date is picked a year in advance," Nick said, finally shifting in his seat. "That way everyone can plan ahead."

Taylor nodded, sifting through memories. "Now that you mention it, I remember seeing something about a picnic in my welcome packet when I was first hired."

Nick smirked. "It's a big deal."

Taylor raised a skeptical brow. "A company picnic?"

He unbuckled his seatbelt and stepped out, rounding the front of the car before opening her door.

"Just wait," he murmured, offering his hand. "You'll see."

His fingers closed around hers.

The warmth sent a jolt up her arm, and it took every ounce of self-control not to pull away.

Her body had never reacted this way before—not even with Tony, her best friend.

Her heart picked up speed, a flutter of excitement and panic tingling up her spine.

She was twenty-six, not sixteen.

She should be able to stand next to a man without feeling like her entire world had tilted on its axis.

So why did Nick's presence—his touch—throw her off balance?

She had always been good at hiding emotions, especially the troublesome ones.

So she did what she did best.

She smiled.

She let him help her out of the low-slung sports car, ignoring the subtle, musky scent of his cologne.

They strolled down a mulch-strewn path, the soft scent of pine and damp earth filling the air. Sunlight dappled through the leaves, casting shifting patterns across the winding trail.

A ground squirrel darted across the path.

Taylor turned, delighted, lifting her face toward Nick's as she reached out—fingertips brushing his shoulder.

"Did you—"

She never finished the sentence.

Nick's lips found hers.

The question—the moment—the entire world—ceased to exist.

It was a brief kiss. Soft. Undemanding.

But her heart lurched all the same.

His fingers grazed her cheek, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

A tender gesture.

She couldn't breathe.

"That's better," he murmured.

“Better?” Her voice was unsteady. “What do you mean better?”

His gaze swept over her, slow and knowing.

“You have that ‘I’ve just been kissed’ look.” His voice dropped slightly. “Now you look like a woman in love.”

In love?

She wanted to laugh, but the tightness in her throat made it impossible.

Before she could form a response, his dimple flashed.

“On second thought...”

He dipped his head again.

And this time, when his mouth covered hers, the world truly fell away.

There was no acting in this kiss.

No script.

No performance.

Just warmth.

Just Nick.

She curled her arms around his neck, the fabric of his shirt soft beneath her fingers.

His hand splayed against the small of her back, drawing her closer.

The scent of pine, cologne, and something distinctly Nick surrounded her, drowning her in a moment she hadn’t planned for.

Then—

“All right, you two. Break it up.”

Taylor jerked back, her breath ragged—or at least, she tried to pull back.

Nick’s arms didn’t budge.

Unlike her, he looked completely unruffled, his only reaction a slow shift of his gaze toward the interruption.

“Erik.”

Nick’s voice held the slightest hint of irritation.

“Shouldn’t you be manning the grill or something?”

Erik leaned casually against a tree, arms folded, his grin full of mischief.

“I’d rather watch you.”

Taylor laughed—she couldn’t help it.

She had only met Erik a few times, but something told her this was classic Erik.

“Nick and I were just discussing the picnic,” she said, regretting the words the second they left her mouth.

Nick’s brow lifted, lips twitching.

Erik laughed outright.

“Let me guess,” Erik said. “We’re having a kissing booth, and Nick was just checking to see if you’d be worth a dollar a pop?”

“Erik.” Nick’s tone carried a low warning.

Erik ignored him completely.

His eyes raked over Taylor’s outfit, the fitted jeans, the sleeveless top.

For a split second, she wondered if she had chosen wrong.

They had looked fine in the mirror at home, but under Erik’s scrutiny, she suddenly wasn’t so sure.

“I’d be happy to help with the research,” Erik teased, reaching for her arm. “Give a second opinion.”

“Don’t even try it.”

Nick’s voice was light, but the warning in his blue eyes was deadly serious.

Erik’s hand dropped.

But instead of looking offended, his grin widened.

“All right, have it your way.”

Nick moved his arm so Taylor’s hand slid down to his, locking his fingers around hers.

They started down the path again, Erik falling in step behind them.

“You get a good crowd?” Nick asked.

“You bet,” Erik said. “Even Miss Dietrich showed up this year.”

Nick stopped abruptly.

“She did?”

Taylor frowned. “She hasn’t come before?”

Nick’s expression softened. “Not since my father died.”

The weight of that statement settled over them.

“Well,” Erik muttered, “I wish she’d stayed away. She’s been hounding me about when we’re eating.”

Nick’s lips twitched.

“All right, let’s go.”

But before he did, he lowered his mouth to hers again.

Taylor stiffened at the public display—but when she met Nick’s gaze, something in it made her forget why she had ever resisted.

“Nick,” Erik cleared his throat. “Think about the meat.”

Nick lingered just a second longer, then finally smirked.

“I’m ready.”



The picnic was unlike any Taylor had ever attended. She’d expected the long rows of tables covered with red and white cloths, overflowing with salads to satisfy any and all tastes. The chips were there, too, along with the roasted sweet corn and watermelon. It took three tables to handle all the pies, and Taylor’s mouth watered at the sight of a pumpkin pie with pecan streusel topping.

Nick didn’t let her linger near the tempting buffet or the employees who were stealing glances in their direction.

Instead, he led her—past the curious eyes of the crowd, past the small clusters of co-workers whispering amongst themselves, and past Miss Dietrich, whose expression was as unyielding as ever.

They stopped before a raised platform, and Nick gestured toward the two small wooden steps leading up to it.

Taylor hesitated.

Nick gave her hand a small squeeze. “Come on.”

She climbed onto the raw plywood stage, and Nick moved quickly to stand beside her. A hush settled over the picnic grounds.

Everyone had been waiting for him.

For them.

Her guilt intensified.

Then Nick spoke.

And the moment he did, the tension vanished.

He started with a joke, easing the expectant crowd into laughter, before seamlessly shifting into what they had all been waiting to hear.

“You all know how much this company means to me.”

His deep, confident voice carried easily over the gathered employees and their families.

“I never thought I’d find anything that mattered as much to me. But—” He turned to Taylor, his expression softening just enough to be convincing.

“I was wrong.”

The crowd stilled.

Nick’s lips curved into a smile, the perfect blend of humble and sincere.

“When I met Taylor Rollins, it was no contest.”

A ripple of excitement spread through the audience.

“And, although we’ll be formally announcing our engagement in a few weeks, I wanted all of you to be the first to know.”

He pulled her close, his arm wrapping around her waist.

The cheers erupted.

Taylor plastered on what she hoped was a properly adoring expression.

Nick glanced at her—his eyes assessing, searching for any sign that she wasn’t fully committed to the role.

Whatever he saw in her face must have satisfied him, because he gave her a subtle nod of approval before locking their hands together.

His smile remained easy, his posture relaxed, but Taylor wasn’t fooled.

His grip was a little too tight.

A muscle in his jaw twitched.

He wasn’t as calm as he appeared.

Taylor had grown up with a politician, a supremely confident man who never let on when he had worries or doubts.

She recognized the act.

And something about that realization made her feel closer to Nick than she had before.

Impulsively, she turned and kissed him lightly on the mouth.

For a fraction of a second, surprise flickered in his eyes.

Then, he responded.

His arms tightened, and he pulled her fully against him.

“Nick—” she started, but he silenced her with another kiss.

It was an exquisite kiss, his lips lingering, sending a slow, delicious warmth through her veins.

The crowd roared their approval.

When he finally released her, his expression held something... different.

Something tender.

Taylor’s breath caught.

She forced herself to smile and wave to the crowd.

At the edge of the gathering, Miss Dietrich stood with arms crossed, her gaze unreadable.

“Let’s eat,” Nick said smoothly.

As if on cue, the employees and their families scattered toward the food-laden tables.

Taylor let her shoulders slump in relief. The hard part was over.

Nick gave her hand one last squeeze. “You did good.”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for this,” she said with a sigh. “My stomach is churning.”

“That’s because—” he guided her gently toward the food tables “—you’re hungry.”

She rolled her eyes but let him lead her toward the tantalizing scent of barbecue.

The massive metal smoker loomed ahead, and Taylor realized where Erik had disappeared to once they’d reached the picnic ground. Resplendent in a chef’s hat and apron, the attorney stood behind the grill, handing out platters of ribs and barbecued beef with dramatic flair.

Taylor’s stomach growled, and she had to admit that maybe Nick was right. Maybe she was just hungry.

“Mr. Lanagan.”

Taylor turned and vaguely recognized the man—someone from her brief time at the company—who stopped them.

“I hate to interrupt, but could I speak with you a minute?”

Nick hesitated.

She could see the conflict in his expression—his promise not to desert her warring with his business instincts.

Taylor smiled. “Go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

Taylor took her place in line and filled her plate to the point of overflowing. She balanced it carefully in one hand, gripping a tall plastic cup of iced tea in the other.

The picnic tables were rapidly filling, and Taylor glanced around looking for a place to squeeze in.

“You’re welcome to join me, if you like.” The perfectly modulated voice sounded from her right.

Taylor turned.

Miss Dietrich.

Her stomach tightened. They’d barely exchanged ten words since they’d met, but the woman still intimidated her.

She was set to politely decline the offer, but then she noticed the empty space beside Miss Dietrich—how no one had joined her table. Before she could overthink it, Taylor carefully lowered her plate and cup to the table’s rough surface, then slid onto the bench opposite the woman.

She dropped a paper napkin onto her lap and lifted her gaze to find Miss Dietrich staring unabashedly.

Startled, Taylor shifted her gaze and popped a chip in her mouth.

Miss Dietrich hesitated for a second, then grabbed a chip from her own plate and took a bite. “The sour cream and onion are my favorite.”

The tension in Taylor’s shoulders eased slightly. Away from the domain of her office, the woman actually seemed pleasant.

Maybe this wasn’t going to be as bad as she’d thought.

Taylor picked up another chip, holding it loosely in her fingers. “You’ve known Nick for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Since he was a little boy,” Miss Dietrich said matter-of-factly. “I was his father’s secretary for over twenty years.”

“What was he like?” Though the barbecued beef on her plate beckoned, the desire to learn more about Nick overpowered her appetite.

“Nick? Or his father?”

“Both.”

Miss Dietrich dabbed the corners of her mouth with the edge of her napkin. “Nick was a sweet, serious little boy. He adored his father.”

“It sounds like they were very close.”

“As close as they could be.” Miss Dietrich replied carefully.

“But what about Nick’s mom?” Taylor asked. “Where did she fit into his life?”

Miss Dietrich’s lips pursed slightly.

“Mr. Lanagan was a good man. He did—”

Before she could finish, Nick slid onto the bench beside Taylor, his arm draping casually around her shoulders.

“My two favorite ladies.”

Miss Dietrich looked away.

Taylor forced her focus back to the conversation, pushing aside the way Nick's arm felt too natural draped across her shoulders.

"Miss Dietrich was just telling me about your father's accomplishments," she said, her voice carefully even. "It sounds like he was a remarkable man."

Nick nodded, his expression shifting into something deeper, unreadable.

"He was," he said simply.

For a moment, something flickered in his blue gaze—respect, pride... and something else she couldn't quite name.

"He was the reason Lanagan Associates flourished. It took a lot of time and effort, but to him, it was worth it. The company wasn't just his job—it was his life."

Taylor turned her gaze toward Miss Dietrich, expecting confirmation.

But the older woman remained silent, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

The question nagged at her. The one Miss Dietrich had sidestepped earlier.

She turned back to Nick.

"But what about you and your mom?"

A small shadow passed over his expression, but it was gone so fast, she almost thought she imagined it.

Nick shrugged, reaching across the table and grabbing a potato chip from her plate like they did this every day.

"We understood. Or at least, I did."

His tone was calm, matter-of-fact.

"Dad always said that for a business to be a success, it has to come before anything else in a man's life."

Taylor nodded as if what he'd said made perfect sense—instead of being the exact opposite of everything she believed in her soul.

She wanted to ask him if he truly believed that, too.

Wanted to challenge the cold finality in his words.

Wanted to point out that success without love meant nothing.

But the weight of Miss Dietrich's presence made her hesitate.

And besides, did it really matter?

She wasn't marrying him.

This was temporary. A business arrangement.

When she really did get married, it would be to a man who shared her faith and her values.

A man who put family before his career.

A man who loved her with his whole heart.

She took a slow breath, letting the thought ground her.

Then, against her better judgment, she glanced at Nick.

And sighed.

And maybe—if it wasn't too much to ask—if she was really lucky...

That man would be as handsome as Nick Lanagan.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Taylor stared at the phone in her hand, her thumb hovering over the screen.

In the week since the picnic, Nick had been buried in work—so much so that they hadn't spent any “together” time since. Which, under normal circumstances, would have been perfectly fine.

Except these weren't normal circumstances.

They were supposed to be convincing the world they were in love.

So when she had invited him to church with her and her grandparents on Sunday, she had expected pushback.

Would he refuse outright?

Would he see it for what it was—a way to convince her grandparents that their engagement was real?

Thankfully, he had agreed.

What she hadn't expected was for her Nana and Grandpa Bill to waste no time sharing the news with Pastor Schmidt.

And what she really hadn't expected—what had stunned her completely—was discovering that the pastor had already spoken to Nick.

According to Pastor Schmidt, Nick was in the process of transferring his membership from a Denver congregation.

He was eager to get involved in some of the standing committees.

Taylor had forced herself to smile and act as though she already knew all about it.

Meanwhile, her grandfather had beamed, making sure the pastor knew that the finance committee—the one he chaired—could always use another member.

Taylor leaned back against the sofa, her thoughts a jumbled mess of emotions. She should have been thrilled to hear about Nick's interest in church involvement.

It was a good thing, right?

Then why didn't it ring true?

If he was so interested in being part of the church, why had he insisted they attend the early service, saying—

"At least this way, only the morning will be wasted."

The words had stung.

She had bitten her tongue, reminding herself that Nick's faith—or lack of it—wasn't her business.

He was her employer.

Not her boyfriend. Not her fiancé.

Maybe once she knew him better, she could subtly encourage him to re-evaluate his priorities.

Taylor let out a small chuckle, shaking her head at the absurdity of the thought.

Once she knew him better?

A bitter-sweetness settled over her.

Nick was a stranger.

And she needed to remember—

By the time she did get to know him better,

He'd be history.



Nick hung up the phone, unable to keep the irritation from creeping into his expression.

He had just finished his obligatory daily call to Taylor.

As he'd told Erik, checking in was a small price to pay to maintain control of the situation.

A simple five-minute call ensured he could head off any potential issues before they became real problems.

And it wasn't as if he had to clear his schedule for it.

Half the time, he skimmed through emails while she talked.

Not that he didn't like Taylor or enjoy spending time with her.

He especially liked kissing her.

At the picnic there had been absolutely no reason for him to kiss her in front of Erik. Erik knew the score, knew the engagement was a sham. Nick didn't need to make a point. The simple truth was he did it for the pure enjoyment.

Nick leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting to the photo now sitting atop his desk.

She had left it for him the morning after their dinner with her grandparents, along with a neatly folded note.

It had been a thoughtful touch—one he hadn't even considered.

Of course, a man would have a photo of his fiancée in his office. It was the natural thing to do.

His lips tilted upward.

It was a good picture.

Then again, Taylor was a beautiful woman.

Maybe that was why he had said yes to her request.

Or maybe—deep down—he had actually wanted to see her again.

His gaze drifted back to the photo, lingering on her full lips, and suddenly, saying yes had felt... easy.

That was how he found himself agreeing to attend church with her and her grandparents on Sunday.

At least he had the good sense to insist on the early service.

"That way, only the morning will be wasted."

The words still rang in his head.

He knew how to play the game.

Eventually, he would get to know the congregation, network, build relationships. His father had always said that church was a valuable place to make new contacts and reinforce old ones.

His mother, of course, had hated that mindset. She would bristle whenever his father mentioned business and church in the same breath.

"That is not the purpose of church, Nicholas."

His father had just laughed, clapped Nick on the back, and said, "Women never understand business."

Sylvia Lanagan might not have understood business, but she had certainly understood how to spend money.

Nick's jaw tightened.

Too much money.

So much that, by the time he had taken over, the company had been teetering on the verge of bankruptcy.

A familiar bitterness twisted in his chest.

She should have spent less time at charity galas and dinner parties—and more time with his father when he had needed her most.

Instead, she had paraded him around, her arm hooked through his, while his father grew sicker by the day.

According to the housekeeper, his parents had fought constantly that final year.

Nick hadn't been there to see it firsthand.

He had been away at college, getting his degree, focused on his own future.

And then, suddenly, his father was gone.

Nick clenched his fists.

If only he had seen it coming.

If only he had been home more.

If only—

A sharp knock at the door cut off the useless thoughts.

He didn't glance up. "Just put the folders on the counter, Miss Dietrich."

"The old hag isn't out there."

The feminine voice was too familiar.

Nick barely hid his groan.

"Claire, I'm busy."

The overpowering scent of musk filled the air as she sauntered closer.

Nick refused to look up, his focus locked on the troubling report from his new product chief.

Claire reached over, snatching the paper from his hand.

Nick jerked it back, glaring.

She just laughed and tossed it back on the desk, settling into one of the leather chairs across from him. "Still the same old Nick."

"Who else would I be?" He didn't bother to mask his irritation.

Claire tapped a perfectly manicured nail against her bottom lip, feigning thoughtfulness. "Maybe a love-struck fool?"

Nick exhaled sharply. "Give it up, Claire."

She crossed her legs, the movement purposefully slow, and smiled.

"Just making conversation." She glanced at him, her dark eyes sharp and assessing. "No need to be so touchy."

Nick's grip on the desk tightened.

What was it about Claire that pushed all his buttons?

"You're awfully cranky today," she mused, studying him. "Are you and the girlfriend not getting along?"

"Her name is Taylor."

Claire smirked. "If you say so."

Nick leaned back and finally gave in to the inevitable.

He shoved the papers aside, rubbing his temple.

"Five minutes. That's all you get."

Claire's eyes darkened, irritation flashing across her carefully composed expression.

"You're an arrogant jerk, Nick Lanagan." Her voice was smooth, but the bite was there. "No wonder I find you so appealing."

Nick raised a brow. "Clock's ticking."

Claire sighed dramatically, then leaned forward. "Daddy was going to call, but I said I'd stop by and ask you personally. He wants you to meet us for breakfast Sunday morning. Some guy that heads his operations area in New Jersey is going to be in town."

Nick's pulse kicked up.

After all these years, it was finally happening.

The deal was coming together.

This was the final step.

Sunday morning.

Excitement buzzed in his veins—until reality crashed in.

Sunday.

Church.

His stomach twisted.

"Sunday morning isn't good." He offered Claire his most engaging smile, wishing he'd been nicer to her earlier. "I'm free all afternoon. Or any other time."

"He's leaving at noon."

"That's the only time he's available." Claire rose effortlessly from the chair. "What's the problem? If I know you, it can't be because you want to sleep late."

Sleep late? There hadn't been a day in the last four years that he'd risen past seven.

If only his reason could be that simple. Bill Rollins might understand him skipping church, but he'd promised Taylor... But what did that matter?

She worked for him.

He didn't owe her anything.

Certainly not an explanation.

Nick sighed, forcing a smile. "On second thought, Sunday morning will work."

Claire beamed. "I knew you'd see reason."

He stood, moving around his desk and gesturing toward the door. "Let Miss Dietrich know the time and place on your way out."

Instead of leaving, Claire stepped closer.

Too close.

The musk of her perfume surrounded him.

Her fingertips grazed his sleeve, sliding up his arm as she lifted her mouth to his. It took only one simple movement for her to reach up and pull his face to hers. For her mouth to meet his.

The kiss was warm.

Calculated.

And it left him cold.

A sharp clearing of the throat shattered the moment.

"Mr. Lanagan."

Nick stiffened and stepped back.

Miss Dietrich stood in the doorway, arms crossed, eyes flinty.

Nick cleared his throat, resisting the urge to brush away the taste of Claire from his lips with the back of his hand. "Yes, Miss Dietrich."

Claire, pleased with herself, turned to Miss Dietrich with a haughty smile.

Nick could see why Erik called her Catwoman. She looked like a cat that had just swallowed a canary.

Disapproval radiated from every inch of Miss Dietrich's ramrod stiff posture. The older woman's gaze slid dismissively over Claire before meeting Nick's head-on. "Your fiancée called."

Nick cleared his throat and forced an interested smile. "Did she leave a message?"

"There was something she'd forgotten to tell you when you spoke this morning. I told her you were in conference. She wanted you to call when you were free."

"Miss Waters is just leaving." He'd done nothing wrong, so why did he feel like he had?

Claire ran a long red fingernail up his sleeve. "But we were just getting started."

Nick leveled her a warning glance. "Goodbye, Claire."

She hesitated then shrugged. "I've got some business to take care of anyway." Claire's lofty gaze settled on the secretary.

"Mr. Lanagan is meeting me at nine a.m. Sunday at the Heritage Hotel. Put it on his calendar."

Her request was imperious and clearly designed to put Miss Dietrich in her place.

Miss Dietrich's expression didn't change.

She simply turned, spine still ramrod straight, and walked away with a disdainful sniff.

Nick grinned behind his hand.

Claire might have been Henry Waters' little princess, but she had just learned the hard way—

No one got the best of Miss Dietrich.



Nick shifted in the high-backed wooden chair, fighting the urge to glance at his watch.

Would it be rude to leave?

They had started with business—which he had appreciated. No idle chit-chat, no wasted time.

But now?

Now, the conversation had taken a personal turn, and Nick had no patience for it.

His gaze drifted around the Pioneer Room of the historic Heritage Hotel. The recent remodel had stripped away the rustic wagon-wheel motif in favor of something more opulent.

Stained glass topped each window, casting shards of colored light across the polished hardwood floors.

Fine China, sterling silverware, and crystal glasses had replaced the ceramic mugs and dented cutlery of the past.

Even the linens were crisp and freshly pressed.

The only thing Nick could appreciate was that the waitress had finally cleared the table. He barely remembered what he had eaten, but he knew one thing for certain—

Jack Corrigan's unexpected presence had killed his appetite.

Nick set down his coffee cup, waving away a refill, and subtly clenched his jaw as Claire's foot slid up his leg beneath the table.

Again.

She had spent the entire meal pressing her advantage.

It took every ounce of self-control to ignore her.

At the other end of the table, Jack stirred his coffee, then turned toward Nick. "So, how's that beautiful fiancée of yours doing?"

Nick forced a smile—this time, it wasn't difficult. "Great."

Because, to his genuine surprise, Taylor had been a real trooper about his last-minute schedule change.

She had even offered to call her grandparents to explain.

Instead, he had done it himself.

The least he could do.

Jack chuckled, adding another spoonful of sugar to his cup. "Fiancée?"

Nick glanced at Clint Donovan, Henry's operations chief, who had raised a curious brow.

"Nick is engaged to Taylor Rollins," Jack answered smoothly, before Nick could respond. "Her father was Senator Robert Rollins. Died in that car accident last year."

Nick watched as Clint's gaze flicked from Claire to him, his expression shifting from confusion to interest.

"But I thought you two—"

Nick's jaw clenched.

"Claire and I dated—" He kept his tone even, controlled. "She left town. I met Taylor. The rest is history."

Clint's gaze turned toward Henry, as if waiting for some unspoken confirmation.

Henry sighed, shaking his head.

“I made no secret of the fact that I hoped my Claire and Nick would end up together.” His gaze flicked toward his daughter; the disappointment clear. “But she just had to take that job in D.C.”

Nick didn’t miss Claire’s eye roll or the way she leaned forward, curling a finger toward Clint.

Clint obliged, tipping his head closer.

In a conspiratorial whisper, just loud enough for everyone at the table to hear, Claire said, “What Daddy is trying to say is Taylor got him on the rebound.”

Nick inhaled slowly and counted to ten.

Claire’s smile was all satisfaction.

She wasn’t talking to Clint—she was talking to him.

“I’ve tried to tell him,” Claire added, her voice syrupy sweet, “now that I’m back, he doesn’t have to settle for second best.”

“Claire!” Henry’s tone sharpened.

Across the table, Jack Corrigan choked on his coffee.

Clint quirked a brow.

Nick’s hand curled into a fist beneath the table, but his voice remained smooth as glass. “I don’t think anyone who has ever met Taylor would consider her a second-choice kind of woman, Claire.”

Claire shrugged, taking a leisurely sip of her mimosa, as if completely unfazed. “It must have been hard to lose the contract, Jack.”

Nick stiffened.

Clint, oblivious to the already tense atmosphere, turned toward Jack Corrigan. “Those bids were so close.”

The weight in the room shifted.

A beat of silence passed.

Jack set his cup down with a measured hand. “So I understand,” he said, voice easy. “But that was Henry’s call.”

Henry’s call.

Nick had seen it in Jack’s eyes before—the unanswered question.

Why had Henry chosen Lanagan Associates over Corrigan Technologies?

Henry and Jack had been friends for years.

What had changed?

Nick already knew the answer.

Claire’s fingertips grazing up his thigh only confirmed it.

Nick didn’t react.

Didn’t give her the satisfaction.

Instead, he moved with precision, sliding his hand under the white linen tablecloth, wrapping his fingers firmly around her wrist, stopping her.

A flicker of amusement danced in Claire’s eyes.

She lifted her glass to her lips.

And blew him a kiss.

Across the table, Henry’s gaze sharpened, watching the exchange with renewed interest.

Nick kept his expression neutral, bringing his coffee to his lips, playing the long game.

Because he saw it now.

Henry’s loyalty wasn’t to Lanagan Associates.

It wasn’t even to Nick’s vision for the company.

It was to the idea of Nick as his future son-in-law.

Nick set his coffee cup down, mentally adjusting his strategy. Henry wouldn’t back out of the deal—not unless he had a valid business reason.

But if Nick so much as entertained Claire’s games, if he gave Henry even the slightest glimmer of hope—

All bets were off.

The merger would be in jeopardy.

Which meant he had only one job.

Keep this fake engagement on track.

Keep Claire at bay.

And by the end of the summer?

Waters Inc. would be his.

CHAPTER NINE

Nick jammed his hands into his pockets, scowling at the heavy wooden doors of the church. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this.”

Taylor exhaled sharply. “Will you relax? You look like you’re headed to the gas chamber instead of a premarital counseling session.”

“Same difference.” He shook his head, dark hair glinting beneath the fluorescent lights of the vestibule. “I still can’t believe I agreed to this.”

“You already said that,” she snapped.

Her heart was hammering, but for an entirely different reason. Unlike Nick, she wasn’t worried about being bored. She was terrified.

She’d known Pastor Schmidt since she was a child. He had a way of seeing right through people—and if he suspected their engagement was a sham, it was game over.

She doubted even Nick’s charm could fix that.

The office door burst open before she could dwell on her nerves any longer.

A skinny blonde with a cascade of puffy bangs dragged a reluctant young man into the waiting area.

“C’mon, Tom.” Her voice was high, sharp, with the perfect level of theatrical whine to set Taylor’s teeth on edge. “We’re late!”

“Mandy.” Tom yanked his hand away, glaring over the rims of his glasses. “Quit pullin’ on me.”

Taylor stifled a laugh.

Drama couple, incoming.

Mandy whirled, blinking rapidly, as if Tom had just broken her heart. Her lower lip trembled, the remnants of her pink lipstick half-chewed off.

“Oh, baby...” Tom sighed, his annoyance melting into immediate concern. “Don’t cry.”

She sniffled. Loudly.

Tom frantically searched his pockets, pulling out a crumpled tissue, which he offered like a lifeline.

Taylor glanced at Nick, catching his amused smirk.

They didn’t even have to speak. They were thinking the same thing.

Mandy had crying on demand down to an art form.

Before she could turn on the waterworks, the door to Pastor Schmidt’s office opened. “Welcome!”

Pastor Schmidt stepped forward with his signature warm smile, motioning the four of them inside. “We’re a small group tonight, so we should all get to know each other really well.”

Nick groaned under his breath.

Taylor jabbed him in the ribs.

His pained gasp was deeply satisfying.

She moved forward to greet the minister. It was only through her faith and Pastor Schmidt that she’d been able to survive the death of her father. Every time she’d thought she couldn’t go on, he’d been there with words from the scripture to remind her that she wasn’t alone.

“Pastor.” She braced herself and gestured to her reluctant fiancé. “I don’t believe you’ve met Nick yet.”

“Only over the phone,” Pastor Schmidt said, shaking Nick’s hand. “I’ve known Taylor since she was a little girl.”

Taylor squirmed under the approval in the pastor’s eyes and wondered if he would smile with the same degree of fondness if he knew that her engagement was all a lie.

She squared her shoulders. She had a good reason for agreeing to this arrangement and she doubted that given the whole story even the good pastor could find fault with her motives. Plus, if she played this right, he’d never know.

As if he could sense her unease, Nick’s arm slid around her shoulders, his grip solid, reassuring. Then he offered her that heart-stopping grin she found increasingly hard to resist.

Taylor felt the tension slip from her spine.

It was an act, but for a moment, it didn't feel like one.

She let him tangle his fingers with hers, and together, they followed Tom and Mandy into the study.

They settled into a semicircle of chairs, Nick sprawled lazily, Taylor sitting ramrod straight.

"Let's get started," Pastor Schmidt said, rubbing his hands together.

Taylor listened in horror as he laid out the agenda for the next six *Together Forever* sessions.

Sharing thoughts.

Discussing feelings.

This was not the lecture format she'd been hoping for.

"Nick," the pastor said suddenly. "Why don't you start? Tell us what first attracted you to Taylor."

Taylor's heart shot into her throat.

Nick hesitated. His gaze shifted to her, studying her face for a moment too long.

She smiled encouragingly.

"It was her spirit," he said finally. His voice was steady, deliberate. "She's determined. I admire that."

A slow, unexpected heat crept up Taylor's neck.

Nick had never said anything like that before.

And worse—he sounded like he meant it.

"Taylor?" Pastor Schmidt raised a brow.

What had first attracted her to Nick?

She thought back to that first moment in his office. Dark hair, sharp jawline, piercing blue eyes.

The truth slipped out before she could stop it.

"He was so handsome."

Silence.

Then Mandy giggled.

Taylor's face burned.

Pastor Schmidt's lips twitched as if suppressing a laugh. "Nothing wrong with honesty."

Nick, of course, looked ridiculously pleased with himself.

Taylor resisted the urge to elbow him.

"Okay, Mandy." The pastor turned toward the blonde. "What about you?"

Mandy blinked. "What first attracted me to Nick? Or Tom?"

Nick choked back a cough.

Taylor bit the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing.

Pastor Schmidt shot Mandy the same glare he'd used in confirmation class when someone had tried to pass notes.

She straightened immediately. "What attracted me first to my Tommy boy?"

Taylor knew right then and there—they were in for a novel-length monologue.

Mandy launched into a speech about Tom's generosity, his humor, his kindness.

By the time she finally wrapped it up, Pastor Schmidt looked like he was regretting his life choices.

Tom, thankfully, was brief.

"She's fun. And loves big."

Mandy beamed.

Pastor Schmidt sighed in relief.

"We've got a good group here," he said. "I think we're going to work well together."

Taylor nodded along, though she wasn't convinced.

If he wanted to be optimistic, who was she to be a naysayer?

Like a coach trying to rev up his players before a big game, the minister launched into a sermon on Christian love and commitment. Taylor leaned back in her chair and relaxed. This was more what she'd expected.

He'd talk.

They'd listen.

"At the end of each session, you'll be given a homework assignment," Pastor Schmidt said.

Nick visibly stiffened.

Taylor shot him a side-eye glare.

"I want you to discuss what you expect from each other in marriage," the pastor continued.

Mandy brightened. "Like who mows the lawn?"

Tom perked up. "We could make a list!"

The pastor smiled patiently. "Not quite. I'm talking about what role Christ will play in your married life."

Taylor gulped.

Oh, boy.

She cast a quick glance at Nick, expecting him to look equally uncomfortable.

Instead, he just smirked.

Mandy opened her mouth, but Pastor Schmidt lifted a gentle hand, silencing her mid-breath.

“I’m not going to say more,” he said, smiling. “I want to leave it as open-ended as possible.”

Mandy immediately raised her hand, like an eager second-grader desperate to be called on.

“Pastor!”

He sighed but nodded patiently. “Yes, Mandy?”

“Why did you ask what I liked about Tom?” She frowned, her thin brows scrunching in confusion. “You asked all of us and then we didn’t even talk about it.”

Taylor bit back a groan.

Because you talked about it enough for all of us.

But deep down, she understood the question. The whole exercise had felt a bit... unfinished.

Pastor Schmidt didn’t seem surprised. Instead, he folded his hands and said, “Since you brought it up... next time I’ll ask you what first made you think you were in love with your fiancé. The session after that, we’ll cover another relationship topic. By the end, the reason for all these questions should be clear.”

He paused for effect, then added, “I’d say more, but I don’t want to give away the purpose.”

Translation: Get ready to squirm.

Before Mandy could launch into another interrogation, the pastor ushered them toward the door.

“Don’t forget your homework.” His warm gaze swept over them. “Mandy, what do you expect from Tom? Taylor, what do you expect from Nick? And vice versa.”

Taylor cast a sideways glance at Nick.

What do I expect from him?

Well. That was easy.

Fifty thousand dollars a month and an uneventful engagement.

Hardly the stuff dreams were made of.

But then again—she hadn’t dreamed much in the past year.

Once her father’s debts were paid, her life would finally be her own again.

Then maybe—just maybe—she’d come back to a class like this.

With a man who actually loved her.

And this time, she wouldn’t have to lie.



One outside, instead of immediately sliding into the convertible, Taylor paused at the open door.

“Nick.” She hesitated, then smiled. “Thanks again for coming tonight. I know premarital counseling wasn’t exactly in the terms of our engagement.”

“Neither was the company picnic,” Nick said with an easy grin.

“Do you have time to stop for coffee?” For some reason, Taylor wasn’t ready for the evening to end. “We could get our homework out of the way.”

Nick paused as if seriously considering her invitation before he shook his head. “I can’t. I have some proposals to review before tomorrow. I’ll be up most of the night as it is.”

“We’d better get going then.” Taylor shoved aside her disappointment and reminded herself—spending unnecessary time having coffee wasn’t part of their arrangement, either.

A loud curse echoed across the parking lot.

Taylor frowned and glanced across the concrete expanse.

Nick shifted his gaze to the only other car in the deserted lot.

The vehicle was small and boxy, an older-model Honda Civic, its oxidized red paint fading to a dull pink in the glow of the streetlights. One hubcap was missing, and the bumper was held together with zip ties and hope.

“Isn’t that Tom and Mandy?”

“Looks like they need some help.” Despite his words about the work waiting at home, Nick didn’t hesitate. He headed across the pavement with long, purposeful strides.

Taylor had to run to keep up with him.

“Is the Civic dead?” Mandy’s worried voice carried in the breeze.

“It’s not dead.” Tom’s muffled voice sounded from under the hood. “But the battery is shot.”

“Can I help?” Nick stopped next to Tom. His gaze shifted to the grease-covered motor, and his head joined Tom’s under the

hood.

Taylor stood on her tiptoes and peered over Nick's shoulder. She glanced at his intense expression. Did Nick know anything about engines?

"It's the battery." Tom's glasses had slipped down his nose, and he pushed them back with a grease-covered finger. "Couldn't have come at a worse time."

"Do you have any cables? We could try to jump it."

Tom shook his head.

"There's an auto parts store a couple of blocks from here. You can pick up a battery there." Nick glanced at his watch. "They should still be open. I can give you a lift."

Tom shifted uncomfortably. "Fact is, I don't have the money for a new one right now. But maybe you could give us a ride home?"

Taylor's heart went out to the boy. She wished she could offer him the money, but the twenty dollars in her wallet had to last until her next fiancée payment.

"Don't worry about it." Nick clapped a hand on the young man's back. "I have some extra cash I can lend you for the battery. You can pay me later."

Pride warred with relief on Tom's face. Finally, he nodded. "I'll pay you on the fifteenth, if that's okay?"

"That'd be fine."

Nick's casual attitude told Taylor he didn't care if the young man paid him back or not.

Taylor shifted her gaze to the Jag. "Why don't Mandy and I just wait here? It's a little tight in that back seat."

"Is that your car?" Tom followed Taylor's gaze and gave a low whistle. "What is it?"

"Vintage Jaguar," Nick said. "An XK8."

Taylor and Mandy followed the guys over to the shiny red sports car.

"Twelve cylinders?" Tom ran his hands appreciatively over the sleek surface.

"V-eight," Nick said. "Thirty-two valves."

"Wow." Tom's eyes widened. "I bet it's fast."

"Zero to sixty in less than seven seconds."

"Smooth."

Taylor looked at Mandy, and they exchanged a knowing smile. Cars and sports—men's universal language.

"Are you sure you don't want to ride with us?" Nick cast Taylor a questioning look.

"We'll be fine." She smiled reassuringly. "It's a beautiful night, and this is a safe neighborhood. After all—" she gestured toward the church and the adjoining parsonage "—God is right next door."

Nick brushed a quick kiss across her lips and opened the car door. "Let's go."

He didn't have to ask twice. Tom practically dove into the passenger seat.

"I wish the guys at work could see me now." The young man laced his fingers together behind his head and stretched back against the ivory-colored leather. "Man, is this livin' or what?"

Mandy giggled.

Taylor smiled.

The engine roared to life, and in a matter of seconds, the car left the parking lot and sped off down the street.

Mandy waved until they were out of sight, then dug into her oversize purse and pulled out a tattered pack of chewing gum.

"Want some?"

Taylor shook her head.

"Let me know if you change your mind." Mandy shoved three pieces into her mouth and dropped the pack into her bag. "Want to go sit in the car?"

Taylor shrugged. "Okay."

Compared to the Jag, the Civic looked like a poor relative on its last leg. The passenger door stuck, and Mandy had to pry it open from the inside. She cleared some fast-food wrappers from the seat and tossed them into the back. "We drove through and got takeout on the way here."

Taylor smiled and brushed a stray French fry onto the floor before she sat down. "When are you and Tom getting married?"

"October thirty-first."

Taylor turned in her seat, not sure she'd heard the girl correctly. "Halloween?"

"It's my birthday," Mandy said promptly.

"You're getting married on your birthday?" Taylor spoke slowly and distinctly. "And your birthday's on Halloween?"

"That's right." A dreamy expression crossed Mandy's face. "I told Tom if we got married on my birthday, he could be my present."

Taylor smiled weakly, unsure how to respond.

"Pastor Schmidt isn't too keen on it," Mandy continued. "He nixed my idea of having the reception be a masquerade party."

“Did he?” Taylor tried to keep her expression blank.

“When are you and Nick doing the deed?”

Taylor’s eyes widened. She cleared her throat. “Pardon me?”

“Doing the deed.” Mandy repeated. “You know, getting married?”

Taylor wondered what the young woman would say if she answered honestly and said never. “Sometime this fall, I think.”

“You think?” Mandy frowned. “Don’t you know?”

“We’ll be firming up the date shortly,” Taylor said smoothly. “Now tell me all about this Halloween wedding of yours. It sounds like fun.”

CHAPTER TEN

Taylor sighed with relief when the Civic disappeared from view thirty minutes later. Her ears were still ringing from Mandy's constant chatter.

"Tom was impressed by the car." She cast Nick a sideways glance.

"I know." Nick shook his head, a mix of amusement and disbelief playing on his features. "It's amazing how some guys are so into that stuff."

"What are you saying, some guys?" Taylor teased. "I heard that zero-to-sixty talk coming out of your mouth."

The corners of Nick's lips twitched. "I can talk the talk as well as anyone. But spending seventy-five grand on a sports car? That's not me."

"Then why did you buy it?"

Nick's expression darkened. "I didn't. My father did. Shortly before he died."

A small silence settled between them.

Nick never talked about his father. Not once. And whenever she'd tried to bring him up, Nick deflected.

Taylor hesitated, curiosity prickling at her. His father sounded like a fascinating man, driven and brilliant. Yet something deeper lurked beneath—a tension Nick never voiced.

Before she could say anything, he pivoted the conversation.

"Tom told me he and Mandy are getting married on Halloween," he said lightly. "Said we're invited to the wedding."

Taylor forced a smile. *We won't be together by then.*

"Did he tell you Mandy wanted to wear black and have her attendants in orange taffeta?" she asked.

Nick roared with laughter. "No way."

"It's true. But Pastor Schmidt nixed that idea," Taylor said, borrowing Mandy's word. "Now she's wearing white, and the groomsmen will wear black."

"She wanted a black wedding dress?" Nick shook his head in disbelief. "I can't believe she'd even consider it."

Taylor arched a brow. "Think who we're talking about here."

"Fair point," he admitted.

"Besides," she added, "it might have looked elegant."

Nick smirked. "Would you ever wear black?"

The offhand question caught her off guard. *Would I?*

It shouldn't have surprised her. He didn't know her. He didn't know her dreams for the future, what kind of wedding she wanted, what kind of life she envisioned. *Would we ever see each other again after this summer? Would we be friends? Would he come to my wedding? Would I go to his?*

A strange tightness curled in her chest.

"Maybe." She forced a small smile, trying to keep it light. "Who knows what the future holds? I certainly don't."



By the time Nick pulled into his driveway, it was after ten.

He changed into sweats, then grabbed his laptop, setting up in his usual spot on the couch. Normally, he'd be so lost in his work that hours would disappear before he even noticed.

Tonight, though, he couldn't seem to focus.

His father's Jaguar.

The thought kept circling back.

He'd never questioned why his father had made the purchase before. Seventy-five thousand dollars wasn't a large amount of cash—not to him, not to a man like his father.

But that year had been a critical time for Lanagan Associates. The company had been in the middle of an expensive conversion project. Money had been tight.

Had his father been part of the problem?

The realization left a strange, unsettled feeling in his gut.

Nick exhaled sharply and shoved the thought aside.

It doesn't matter now.

If he didn't stay focused on work, Lanagan Associates would struggle again—and this time, he'd have no one to blame but himself.



Taylor stood in the entryway, her gaze sweeping the already crowded ballroom. The party she'd dreaded for weeks stretched before her, a glittering affair of polished smiles and whispered conversations.

So this is it.

The past four weeks had been a whirlwind of dress fittings, meetings, and carefully orchestrated appearances, all culminating in tonight's event. By evening's end, her engagement to Nicholas Lanagan III would be official.

Engagement.

The last step before marriage, Nana had said, her voice filled with unfiltered joy. *As if this were real. As if I weren't lying to everyone I love.*

Taylor's stomach tightened under the weight of guilt.

"Would you relax?"

Nick stood at her side, resplendent in his black tux, an easy smile etched on his handsome face. He lightly brushed back a strand of her hair. "It's a party, not an execution."

"Then why do I feel like my head is in a noose and I'm ready to swing?"

His lips quirked. "Your body's telling you that you need some—" He snagged a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and pressed it into her hand. "—of this. Give it a try."

Taylor arched a brow, hesitating. "Wouldn't be trying to get me drunk, would you?"

"On one glass?" Nick grinned. "Not hardly."

Normally, Taylor didn't drink. She'd never much liked the taste of alcohol—or the way it made her feel. But tonight, the tiny crystal flute felt like a lifeline. She raised it to her lips and took a tentative sip. Then another.

Not bad.

The bubbles tickled her throat, the sweet taste unexpectedly enjoyable.

Too bad the glass was so small.

Before she even had time to set it down, a waiter appeared and replaced it with another.

This time, Taylor took it without hesitation. She smiled her thanks, swirling the golden liquid. "Maybe tonight won't be so bad after all."

Nick quirked a brow, watching her. "I think we'll make it," he murmured, a faint twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "One way or another."

She peered over the rim of her champagne glass and surveyed the room.

A small get-together for twenty, she'd imagined. A quiet celebration with close family and friends. Instead, the party had spiraled into a five-hundred-guest spectacle, orchestrated by Henry Waters and Claire, who'd apparently decided that subtlety was for peasants.

The ballroom of the historic Heritage Hotel was transformed into something out of a dream. Hundreds of candles flickered in ornate beveled mirrors, reflecting an amber glow over linen-draped tables edged with lace. The scent of fresh orchids and gardenias—flown in from Hawaii at her grandparents' insistence—clung thick in the air.

A six-piece orchestra played a slow, elegant melody, while waiters in black ties navigated seamlessly through the throng, silver trays held high, offering flutes of champagne and decadent hors d'oeuvres. Three bars and double the number of buffet tables overflowed with everything from imported cheeses to prime rib carved to order.

Taylor's stomach growled.

She'd been so busy she hadn't eaten all day.

She stole a glance at one of the buffets, promising herself she'd grab something to eat soon.

But for now, another flute of champagne magically appeared in her hand.

Nick waved away an offered glass, his expression hardening slightly.

"This is really something." His voice lacked its usual ease.

Taylor turned, surprised at the edge in his tone.

"Henry and your grandparents certainly went all out," Nick said, his blue eyes scanning the over-the-top extravagance.

“They sure did,” Taylor forced a smile, even as a sharp pang of unease twisted in her gut.

It was one thing to play along—another to let them spend a fortune on a fantasy. By the time this engagement ended, her grandparents would have a massive bill—one they had no idea was for nothing.

She wished she could stop them. But they wouldn’t hear of it.

"You only get engaged once, sweetheart," Nana had said, beaming.

Unless, of course, you’re Taylor and Nick.

Unless the entire thing is one beautifully executed lie.

Nick’s gaze flicked to her, watching her too closely. “You’re lovely.”

Her heart turned over.

She hadn’t expected him to sound so sincere.

Taylor said a silent thank-you to Nana for insisting she wear something new.

The sleek ivory gown, threaded with metallic copper, hugged Taylor’s figure like it had been made just for her.

They’d found it in an exclusive showroom on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue, a boutique so high-end that even breathing the air inside felt expensive. The neckline dipped a little lower than she was used to, but Nana had proclaimed it perfect, waving off Taylor’s concerns with a flick of her manicured hand.

"A dress like this will make a statement, darling."

Taylor had nearly choked at the price tag.

Last year, she wouldn’t have thought twice about it. This year? That was a different story.

With her financial situation precarious at best, Taylor had planned to wear something she already owned—one of the many designer gowns hanging in her closet, barely worn.

But Nana had been appalled at the suggestion.

"A new dress is my engagement gift to you. No arguments."

And just like that, a weekend shopping trip was booked, complete with first-class airline tickets and a suite at the Palmer House Hotel.

Taylor had barely finished telling Nick about it when she caught the slight lift of his brow. He hadn’t said a word, but she’d gotten the distinct impression he didn’t approve.

Men.

Who could understand them? She’d assumed he’d be happy to have a few days to himself. Instead, his reaction had been...unreadable.

It only confirmed how little she really knew about him.

She understood the public Nick Lanagan—the polished, savvy businessman, the man who commanded a boardroom with sheer presence alone, the one who could charm an entire room when it suited his purposes.

But glimpses of the private Nick had been far rarer.

The Nick who listened patiently while her grandfather reminisced about her father’s accomplishments.

The Nick who had agreed to go to church, despite looking like a man who’d rather face a corporate takeover.

The Nick who had checked on his admin after her fender bender, personally, rather than sending someone else.

She found herself watching him more closely these days, trying to understand which version of Nick was the real one.

“How’s Miss Dietrich?” she asked casually.

“She’ll be back on Monday. The cast came off yesterday.” He studied her, his enigmatic gaze lingering a beat too long. “Why?”

“Just wondering.”

Before he could read too much into it, she gestured across the ballroom, shifting the conversation.

“Isn’t that Henry over by the potted palm?”

She pointed toward the portly man, his tuxedo crisp but his stance a little too relaxed, standing beneath a towering palm tree as if he were a penguin stranded in the tropics.

“That’s him, all right.”

Nick’s arm tightened around her waist, his fingers resting lightly against her back.

"Ready?"

Taylor downed the rest of her champagne, grateful for the warm buzz chasing away the nerves.

“Absolutely.”

Nick’s lips curved into that dangerously charming smile she was beginning to recognize all too well, and together, they wove through the crowd, accepting congratulations, polite handshakes, and thinly veiled curiosity until they reached their host.

Despite the earliness of the evening, Henry Waters’s glassy-eyed stare suggested he’d already made friends with the champagne.

His beady gaze swept over her, lingering just a little too long. “You look beautiful, my dear.”

Taylor smiled politely, but inside, her nerves tightened.

“Doesn’t Taylor look simply fabulous, my dear?”

“Very nice,” Claire agreed flatly, sparing Taylor only the briefest of glances.

Her interest, however, sharpened considerably when she turned to Nick. “Now you, darling, look positively hunky.”

Nick shot Taylor a warning look, but she was already fighting back a laugh.

Henry rubbed his hands together, surveying the room with self-satisfaction. “I’d say anybody who’s anybody is here tonight.”

“Speaking of anybody...” Claire’s voice lowered to a sultry whisper, her gaze locking on someone across the room. She reminded Taylor of a tigress spotting fresh meat. “Look who just walked in. I never thought he’d come. Not all the way from D.C.”

Taylor followed her line of sight, but a tall man in a cowboy hat blocked her view.

Taylor’s grandparents, as well as her parents, had been well acquainted with the Washington social scene, and they’d sent invitations to many of their friends. From the size of the crowd, it appeared most had taken them up on their offer and flown in for the festivities.

Henry didn’t bother to look, but his loud, boisterous chuckle attracted the stares of nearby guests. “Claire, darling, half the people here are from Washington. The room’s crawling with politicians.”

“No more for you.” Claire snatched his champagne flute away. “Daddy, *Tony Karelli* is on his way over.”

Taylor’s breath caught. “*Tony?*”

Claire arched a perfectly sculpted brow. “You know him?”

A thousand memories surged forward at once.

Tony Karelli. Her friend. Her secret ally.

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.” Taylor frowned, searching her memory. “I guess there could be more than one.”

She and Tony had met as teenagers. Tony had been brilliant and genuinely kind, but a bad case of acne, thick-lensed glasses straight out of the ‘80s, and a little too much baby fat had made him an easy target.

She had befriended him anyway, drawn to his sharp wit and endearing awkwardness. But their classmates hadn’t been so kind. They’d been mockingly dubbed Beauty and the Beast, a cruel nickname that had followed them through high school.

Over the years, they’d lost touch.

Last she’d heard, he was in Europe.

Claire’s dark eyes glittered. Smug. Amused. Knowing.

“His father used to be a senator from New York,” she purred, “and now? He’s the ambassador to Italy.”

Taylor’s breath hitched. “Then it is the Tony I knew—”

A familiar voice drifted through the crowd. “I wondered if you’d remember me.”

Taylor whirled around—and felt her heart leap.

The man standing before her was not the Tony she remembered.

This Tony was tall, broad-shouldered, dangerously handsome.

His brown eyes twinkled with warmth, but his smile?

That was still the same.

Without thinking, Taylor threw her arms around him.

“Tony,” she breathed, as he lifted her off the ground.

“I’m sorry about your father,” he whispered. *“I wished I could have been there for you.”*

Taylor swallowed the lump in her throat.

“I know you would have,” she said softly.

And for the first time that evening, she felt something real.

“Why, if it isn’t little Tony Karelli.” Grandpa Bill’s amused voice pulled Taylor from her daze. “See, Kaye, I told you that’s who that was.”

Tony released her and turned to shake her grandfather’s hand, his grip firm. “Judge Rollins, it’s great to see you again, sir. But as you can see, I’m not so little anymore.”

“No, you’re not,” Bill said with a chuckle. “All grown-up now. How’s your father?”

“Busy as ever. He and Mother are still in Italy.”

A warm glow spread through Taylor. As her grandfather quizzed Tony about the last few years, she barely registered Nick’s stiff posture beside her or Claire’s not-so-subtle side glances.

Her grandfather was right. Tony had grown up. The jet-black hair was the same, slightly longer than Nick’s, and his brown eyes held that same warmth she remembered. But everything else...

The acne was gone, leaving behind smooth, tanned skin. The thick glasses had been replaced by contacts, and any traces of baby fat had melted away, revealing a strong, athletic build.

“What happened to your glasses?” Taylor blurted when her grandfather paused for breath.

Tony grinned—something he hadn’t done much in high school. “Contacts. And a little laser surgery.”

Taylor smiled back, genuinely happy for her old friend.

“Isn’t it funny?” Nana mused with a wistful sigh. “You two coming together again after all these years... at Taylor’s engagement party, no less. There was a time we thought it would be you and Taylor tying the knot.”

Taylor barely had time to react before Grandpa Bill shot his wife a look. Nana flushed pink.

“A man would be lucky to have Taylor as a wife.” Tony’s voice was warm but held a note of surprise. “I can’t believe you’re getting married.”

A warmth crept up Taylor’s neck as a thick silence settled between them.

Nick stepped forward, his posture stiff but his smile easy.

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” He extended his hand. “Nick Lanagan. Taylor’s fiancé.” His arm slid around her shoulders—possessive, intentional. “Glad you could make it.”

Tony shifted slightly, but his polished facade remained intact. “Actually, I wasn’t on the guest list. I—”

“He’s here as my guest, Nick.” Claire cut in smoothly, sidling up to Tony, rubbing against Tony like a cat. “We’re...” Her fingers traced along his sleeve. “Very good friends.”

Taylor’s jaw dropped. She snapped it shut.

Nick’s fingers tightened around her arm. “Sweetheart, I feel like dancing.”

Before she could process what was happening, he whisked her onto the dance floor. The smooth scent of his cologne wrapped around her as she tilted her face up to him.

“Nick, why did—” Her words disappeared as his lips claimed hers.

The kiss was soft, warm, deliberate. A performance. A carefully calculated move.

And for a fleeting moment, Taylor forgot.

It ended just as suddenly as it began.

“What was that for?” she asked, breathless.

Nick’s lips curved into a teasing smile. “Can’t a man kiss his fiancée without having a reason?” But his gaze flickered around the room, scanning for reactions.

And just like that, reality hit her like a slap.

It was all an act.

Taylor swallowed hard and turned her gaze toward the dance floor. Across the room, Claire and Tony barely moved, bodies pressed close, swaying in place. Tony’s dark head bent toward Claire’s, and her manicured fingers toyed with his hair.

“Look at them.” Taylor nudged Nick with her elbow.

He followed her gaze, expression unreadable. “Jealous?”

“No, of course not,” she snapped, though the tightness in her chest begged to differ. “It’s just that Tony’s a good friend.”

Nick’s smirk deepened, infuriating her further. “Don’t you care?”

“Why should I?” He shrugged. “I’m not interested in Claire. If he wants her, more power to him.”

A cold knot formed in Taylor’s stomach. How could Nick be so indifferent? He, of all people, knew exactly what Claire was like.

Her gaze landed on Tony again—just in time to see Claire kiss him.

“I get it now.” Nick’s voice was smug. “You still have a thing for your old boyfriend. You’re worried he might not be available by the time you’re free again.”

“You’re insane.” Taylor’s cheeks burned. Tony had always been a friend, nothing more. Hadn’t he?

“Stay away from him, Taylor.”

Taylor bristled. “Tony thinks we’re engaged. He’d never—”

“Don’t bet on it.” Nick’s voice was quiet, but his jaw was tight. “I saw the way he looked at you.”

Before she could respond, a familiar voice cut through the tension.

“You two having a good time?”

Grandpa Bill and Nana danced up beside them, smiling warmly.

For a fraction of a second, Nick’s face froze.

Taylor swallowed her frustration and forced a bright smile. “Just wonderful.”

She turned to Nick, her lips curving sweetly. “I was just telling Nick—engagements are fun, but this one can’t end too soon for me.”

Grandpa Bill blinked, then chuckled. “Can’t wait for that honeymoon, eh?”

“Bill!” Nana scolded, but the teasing twinkle in her husband’s eyes didn’t fade.

He clapped Nick on the shoulder. “Can’t say that I blame you, son. Can’t say that I blame you one bit.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nick pulled out of the hotel's parking garage and activated the sound system. The opening strains of Eroica filled the quiet interior, the symphony Taylor loved.

He glanced at her. She'd leaned her head against the seat, her thick auburn hair cascading over her shoulders, eyes closed. When she first slid into the car, she'd murmured something about feeling light-headed.

The evening had gone better than expected. Taylor had been flawless, charming his business associates and stealing the spotlight with effortless grace.

And yet—Nick's grip tightened on the wheel—Tony's presence had been a sharp, unwelcome reminder that this woman wasn't his. Not really. Had she meant it when she'd said she couldn't wait for the engagement to be over?

His jaw tensed. He needed to stop thinking about it.

"I had a great time tonight," he said, forcing his voice into an easy drawl. "You were wonderful."

Taylor's eyes fluttered open. She quirked a brow. "Does that mean I get a bonus?"

He smirked. "I might be able to throw in an extra ten dollars in this week's check."

"Scrooge."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"You're not welcome." But a small, playful smile tugged at her lips. "It really was a lovely engagement party."

"The kind you've always dreamed of?"

A half-laugh escaped her, tinged with wistfulness. "Not exactly. I kept wishing my parents were there. Though... if they were, I wouldn't even be in this fake engagement."

Nick swallowed. Fake. The word had never sat well with him. "Sometimes," he admitted quietly, "it doesn't feel fake to me."

Taylor stilled, then turned toward the window. Her voice was softer this time. "I know. Sometimes it doesn't to me, either."

His tension eased, just a fraction.

She chuckled suddenly, a husky, warm sound. "When Henry climbed on that table..."

Nick laughed. That had been a sight. Henry Waters, swaying atop an antique side table, a champagne bottle in one hand, a glass in the other.

"He'd have been fine if Claire hadn't tried to yank him down."

Taylor giggled. "I thought she was going to split that dress right up the side."

Nick smirked. "Did you see the way she looked at Tony when he pulled her away?"

"Steam was practically pouring out of her nose."

"She should've been grateful. Another second, and Henry would've landed right on top of her." Nick gave an exaggerated shudder. "That's a terrifying thought."

Taylor's expression turned thoughtful. "Claire's a beautiful woman. I'm sure plenty of men wouldn't mind rolling around on the floor with her."

"They can have her." Nick's voice dropped a notch. "Now, you and I—" he paused, pulse kicking up at the thought "—on that floor? That's a different story."

Taylor fanned herself dramatically. "Is it stuffy in here to you?"

Stuffy? Not exactly the word he'd use. Sweltering. Tense. Downright torturous.

He studied her more closely and frowned. "You don't look so good."

"All of a sudden, I feel awful." She pushed a button, lowering the window, letting the night air rush in. The breeze lifted her dark waves, revealing a far-too-pale complexion. "Can you pull over?"

His eyes darted to the road. Concrete on both sides. No immediate turnoff. "Are you going to be sick?"

"No. I don't think so." She took a slow breath, lashes sweeping down against her cheeks. "I just need fresh air. I'll be okay."

Not convinced. Nick made a sharp right and pulled onto a quiet residential street, easing the car to a stop.

“Taylor?”

“I’m fine. Really.” She gave a wan smile. “I just got dizzy. If you’re not in a rush, I might walk for a few minutes. Clear my head.”

Her hand trembled as she tucked her hair behind her ear, betraying how not fine she was.

Nick pushed open his door. “A walk in the moonlight,” he mused. “How romantic. Mind if I join you?”

Taylor hesitated, then nodded. “I’d like that.”

By the time he reached her, she was already standing in the grass, swaying slightly. But color was returning to her cheeks, a soft flush replacing the pale green.

“You’re looking better.”

She lifted her gaze to his, eyes glittering. Mischievous. Playful. Dangerous.

“You’re looking pretty good yourself.”

Nick took a slow step closer. “I had a great time tonight.”

“Me too.” A teasing smile played at her lips. “Do you remember when I was dancing with Tony, and you cut in?”

His stomach clenched. He remembered too well. One dance had turned into three, and before he could stop himself, he’d needed to have her in his arms instead.

“When you put your arms around me...” She bit her lip. “I had the strangest thought.”

His brow lifted. “Oh?”

“What would happen,” she mused, “if I put my arms around your neck—” her hands slid over his shoulders, warm and sure “—and kissed you? Right there. On the dance floor.”

Nick’s throat went dry. “Why would you have wanted to do that?”

She traced her fingers along his jaw, igniting something deep inside him.

“Because,” she whispered, “even though we don’t have a future, I’m attracted to you.”

His pulse roared.

“You’ve got great-looking eyes,” she continued, a slow, seductive smile curving her lips. “Bet you already know that.”

Her fingers slid into his hair, sending a sharp jolt through him. “And you’ve got really nice hair.”

Nick gritted his teeth, catching her wrist. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

She murmured in protest, leaning in, her breath warm against his lips. “Kiss me.”

“Taylor—”

“C’mon, Nicholas.” Her long lashes fluttered provocatively. “Just one little kiss.”

That was all it took.

With a groan, he yanked her against him, crushing his mouth over hers. It wasn’t sweet. It was hunger and heat and every single second of pent-up tension unleashed.

Taylor melted into him, arms sliding inside his jacket, fingers pressing into his back.

A voice shattered the moment.

“Hey! What’s going on out there?”

Nick’s head jerked up.

An elderly man stood behind a screen door, scowling, a very large German shepherd snarling at his feet.

Great.

Taylor tugged on his lapel, whispering, “Ignore them.”

The old man squinted. “You got five seconds to get off my property, or I’m calling the cops. This is a decent neighborhood.”

Nick swore under his breath. Well, when he put it that way...

“Time to go.” He nudged Taylor toward the car, ignoring her protests. He settled her into the seat, buckled her belt, then climbed in beside her and hit the gas, leaving the man—and his dog—behind.

The silence between them simmered.

“How are you feeling?” he asked finally.

Taylor sighed. “Dizzy.” Then, after a pause, “And a lot disappointed.”

Nick couldn’t agree more.

Neither of them spoke the rest of the drive.

When he pulled up to her house, she turned to him, eyes dark and unreadable. “Want to come in for coffee?”

He shook his head. “Not a good idea.”

“You’re right.” She sighed, unbuckling her seat belt, disappointment flickering in her green eyes. “Don’t you just hate it?”

Nick glanced at her “Hate what?”

“Doing the right thing.” She let out another sigh, leaning back against the door. “Sometimes I wish—just once—I could do what I wanted instead of being so...responsible.”

Nick’s fingers flexed around the steering wheel. He knew exactly how she felt. He’d spent years cleaning up his mother’s

financial disasters, putting his life on hold to save a company teetering on the edge of ruin. He'd been the responsible one. Resentful. Angry. And, if he were being honest, he still was.

Taylor turned her face toward him, watching him through the dim glow of the dashboard lights. "Just once." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I wish I could be reckless."

Nick swallowed hard. "If you weren't so responsible," he echoed, deliberately using her word, "what's the first thing you'd do?"

A flush crept up her cheeks. She hesitated, her fingers curling into her lap, and he could practically see her debating whether or not to say it aloud.

Finally, her gaze met his. "There's no point in talking about it. It's not going to happen."

Something unsettled stirred inside him.

"So, what now?" he asked, his voice quieter than before.

"Now, I go to my bed. And you go home to yours."

Nick should have left it at that.

But instead, before he could stop himself, he said, "What about Tony?"

Taylor stiffened. "What about him?"

"Are you going back to him when this ends?"

A frown creased her forehead. "Tony's my friend."

Nick let out a rough laugh. "Claire used to be my friend."

Taylor shook her head, clearly unimpressed with the comparison. "I don't think we're defining 'friend' the same way."

Nick clenched his jaw. He wanted to push further, to ask her exactly what Tony meant to her. But he had no right. Not really.

To the world, they were engaged. But Tony probably knew her better than he did.

That thought twisted inside him.

They walked in silence up the steps to her front door.

Nick had planned to give her a light kiss on the cheek. Something brief, polite. A simple good-night.

But at the last second, she tilted her head—

And the moment his lips met hers, he was lost.

Her mouth was soft and warm, and when she leaned into him, his arms tightened instinctively around her waist. The kiss deepened before he could stop it. Heat surged, wild and consuming.

Then, suddenly, she pulled back.

Her breath was uneven, her chest rising and falling with each ragged inhale. Wide green eyes met his, filled with something she wasn't ready to admit.

"I'd better go."

And before he could respond, she turned and disappeared inside, the door closing with a solid, definitive thud.

Nick exhaled a sharp curse and strode back to the Jag, yanking open the door.

With one flick of his wrist, the engine roared to life. He hit the accelerator, jerking away from the curb, the tires gripping the pavement too hard.

What the hell was he thinking?

Every fiber in his body warned him against her. Taylor was a woman with a house full of priceless antiques, a closet filled with designer clothes, and debts as high as Pike's Peak.

Claire had hit the nail on the head when she said Taylor was just like his mother.

Getting emotionally involved with a woman like that made absolutely no sense.

And yet.

Even knowing all that, he still couldn't help wanting her.

And that made the least sense of all.



"This might take more time than I thought." Claire leaned forward in her chair, leveling Tony with a narrow, gleaming gaze. "How long can you stay?"

Tony considered his options. The only thing waiting for him in D.C. was the mountain of gambling debt his father had flatly refused to cover. No job. No prospects. No money—except for whatever Claire had promised. He took a slow sip of coffee. "As long as you need me, sweetheart."

"Good." Claire's lips curved in satisfaction as she settled back against the burgundy leather. Even in broad daylight, with the silk of her chemise skimming her thighs, she looked every inch the predator. But to his disappointment, business was all she cared about.

"She responded to you," Claire murmured, almost to herself.

Tony lifted a shoulder. “Told you she would.”

He knew Taylor had been glad to see him. But he’d also seen how her eyes had darted past him, searching for Nick—even while he held her in his arms. “She and I were always close.”

Claire tapped a manicured nail against her cup. “Just how close were you?”

Tony’s grin widened. “Close.”

Her eyes sharpened. “Did you sleep with her?”

Ah. Now they were getting to it. If he said yes, he had no doubt Claire would slip him a little extra for the effort. But if he lied? If she found out? He’d rather deal with the loan sharks.

He sighed, feigning regret. “‘Fraid not.”

Claire’s expression darkened. “Are you lying to me?” Her voice cooled by several degrees. “Because if you are—”

“Why would I lie?” Tony cut in quickly.

She studied him, suspicion written all over her face. “Maybe you’re protecting her.”

“I’m telling the truth, Claire.” He took another sip, letting the pause stretch. “But you’re right—I do want to protect her. That’s why I’m here.”

One perfectly arched brow lifted.

“Okay,” he admitted, exhaling. “I need the money. We both know that. But that doesn’t mean I want Taylor stuck with some jerk.” He leaned forward slightly. “If Nick’s as bad as you claim, then I’m doing her a favor. And if I happen to make a few bucks in the process?” He smirked. “Well, let’s just call that a win-win.”

Claire’s gaze flickered with interest, but Tony still felt like a sixteen-year-old nerd sweating under the scrutiny of the queen bee. He straightened. That kid was long gone. He belonged with the beautiful people now. He got the invites. He played the game. He knew how to win.

Still, Claire wasn’t letting up. “I can’t believe the two of you never fooled around.”

Tony shrugged. “Taylor’s saving herself for marriage.”

Claire blinked. “You’re kidding. She’s twenty-six.”

“Not everyone jumps into bed, Claire.” The words came out drier than intended.

Claire snorted. “No, just the smart ones.”

Tony shifted uncomfortably, hating that old, nagging feeling that he wasn’t quite good enough.

Finally, Claire exhaled. “Okay. First step—rekindle your friendship. Make her trust you again.”

She leaned in, a slow, predatory smile curling her lips. “Then? You break them up. It’s as simple as that.”

Tony groaned inwardly.

Simple? Not by a long shot.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Taylor stared at the phone in her hand, willing it to ring. Willing it to be him.

Two days since the party, and the only thing she'd heard from Nick was a curt call Sunday morning: *Skipping church today*. Every time the phone rang, she hoped for that deep baritone, only to get her grandmother twice and three texts from friends. *Please let it be him*.

The phone chimed, and she grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Recovered from the party?"

Taylor's heart sank, but she forced a smile into her voice. Tony.

"Just about," she said lightly.

"Didn't think I'd ever see you drink so much champagne." Amusement laced his tone.

She winced. "Never again."

"Headache?"

"The worst. Every time I moved, my head throbbed." And every time she *thought* about that night, she cringed. She'd been reckless. With Nick. And he hadn't called since.

"We should go out, catch up properly."

Taylor hesitated. "That sounds nice."

"Tomorrow?"

"Text me in a day or two, we'll set a time," she hedged.

"I'll call you tomorrow."

She hung up, relieved he hadn't pushed. Normally, she'd jump at the chance to see an old friend, but the thought of blocking out time with Nick—just in case—made her hesitate.

What was she thinking?

Heat rushed up her face, remembering how she'd thrown herself at him that night. Was that why he hadn't called?

Enough. She squared her shoulders. If he didn't reach out tomorrow, she'd call him herself.



"How was the party?"

Nick scowled as Erik did his usual and propped his feet on the glass coffee table. "Tell me why you weren't there."

"She insisted I go."

Nick barely heard him. He'd been restless, distracted all morning, and the news he'd received earlier only made things worse.

He pushed back from his desk and poured another coffee—his third—ignoring Erik's smirk.

"That stuff is basically drain cleaner."

"Spare me the health lecture from a guy who thinks tabloids count as news."

"Hey, I'm an *inquiring man*."

Nick groaned. Erik's fondness for sensational headlines had been a source of irritation since college—especially after he'd tanked their group project by citing one in a research paper. Nick had never forgiven him for that B.

"How was the wedding?" Nick asked, more to change the subject than out of interest.

"Same minister, same organist, same singer," Erik said dryly. "Mom's got them on retainer." He shook his head. "Different groom, though. This one was into country music—had *Here Comes the Bride* played on a steel guitar."

Nick nearly choked on his coffee. "That's...something."

"I'll book him for your wedding." Erik smirked. "Frequent-user discount."

Nick rolled his eyes, remembering Grandpa Bill's joke about the honeymoon.

“Keep the steel guitar,” Nick said, grinning wickedly. “But the wedding night? Now *that’s* different.”

Erik’s smirk widened. “*Knew* you had the hots for her.”

Nick tensed.

“I knew it the second you made that crazy proposal. It was impulsive. So unlike you.”

Nick looked away. “Like you said—she’s a beautiful woman.”

But that wasn’t it. *Not really.*

Tony’s expression when he cut in on their dance flashed in Nick’s mind. Karelli was no fool. He saw what Nick didn’t want to admit.

“So, the pretend engagement is officially official?”

Nick exhaled. “Announced in front of five hundred people Saturday night. Society page on Sunday. Yeah, I’d say it’s official.”

Erik shook his head. “Man. You two deserve Oscars.”

Nick accepted the compliment with a half-smile. If only Erik knew how little acting was involved.

Over the past few weeks, the once clear line between real and pretend had blurred.

Being invited to dinner parties as a couple, golfing with Bill Rollins and being treated as one of the family, even texting and talking with Taylor every day had become part of his life.

This morning that fact had been driven home when an employee stopped him in the hall to offer his congratulations and he’d found himself saying, “I’m a lucky man,” and meaning it.

The closing curtain needed to fall on this charade, and fast. Or he just might end up in love with his leading lady.

“Now would be a good time for you to contact Henry’s attorneys. See if you can push things along. Get some of those last few contract issues resolved.”

“Merger means end of engagement.”

“It’ll save me some cash.” Nick dropped into his desk chair, picked up the pen and drummed it against the edge of the desk.

“You’ll lose your fiancée.”

“She’s never been mine to lose.”

He ignored the voice deep inside that insisted Taylor was his girlfriend. His fiancée. *His.*

She was so wrong for him. If his heart didn’t quite agree. Nick had never let it direct his decisions in the past and he wasn’t about to start now.

Yet every time he thought about Tony Karelli, about the way Taylor had smiled at him, hugged him like they were the only two people in the room—something twisted inside him.

He shoved the thought aside and tapped the pen harder against the desk.

“She’s not what I need,” he muttered.

“Maybe,” Erik said, studying him, “but she might be what you *want*.”

Nick shot him a glare. “I want this *deal* closed.”

Erik sighed. “Yeah. Sure.” He rose from the chair, adjusting his tie. “But for what it’s worth? If I were you, I’d start thinking about what happens *after* the merger. Because I have a feeling this whole thing doesn’t just end when you sign the contract.”

Nick didn’t respond.

Because for the first time since this arrangement started, he wasn’t so sure, either.

When his desk phone rang, Nick motioned for Erik to stay put. “Put her through.”

“Taylor,” he said, more gruffly than he intended. “What’s up?”

“We’re golfing Friday afternoon.”

Nick frowned. “We are?”

“Tiffany needed another couple for a charity scramble. I figured we’d be going out anyway, so—”

“Friday’s not good.”

A pause. “Why not?”

He hated the disappointment in her voice. But it was better this way.

“I’ve got work.”

“You can’t spare one afternoon?”

“I gave you last weekend,” he said bluntly. “This engagement was supposed to give me *more* free time, not less. Just tell your friend we can’t—”

“No worries.” Her tone cooled instantly. “I’ll find another partner.”

Guilt twisted in his chest.

“Nick, about the other night...” Her voice dropped. “I was embarrassed. I rarely drink, and the champagne affected me more than I expected. If I said or did anything to offend you, I’m really sorry.”

Nick closed his eyes.

“Don’t give it a second thought.” He forced a lightness into his tone. “You didn’t do or say anything I can hold against you.”

The lie slipped out easily.

Taylor exhaled. “Good. I was worried. About Friday, if Tiffany and I weren’t such good friends I would have said no, too.

This consulting work is taking more of my time than I thought.”

“I know they’re glad to have your help.”

Before he could respond, she continued. “It’s ironic. You fire me, offer me a job as your fiancée, then hire me as a consultant. What a deal.”

She laughed, and the lilt in her voice that had been there when she’d first called returned. “I have to go—someone’s calling. Chat later.”

Nick lowered the receiver, frowning.

She didn’t seem to care much.

Maybe Erik was right. Maybe keeping his distance wasn’t just smart—it was necessary.

“Why aren’t you golfing with her Friday?” Erik asked.

Nick ignored him.

Erik leaned forward. “You *do* know you’re supposed to *like* your fiancée, right?”

Nick forced a smirk. “That’s what the money’s for.”

Erik didn’t look amused. “I heard you’re paying her to consult on the Burkhalter project.”

Nick nodded. “They were lost without her.”

Erik hesitated. “Did you ever check why she got fired?”

Nick tensed. He’d been trying not to think about that.

“Harv from HR called this morning.”

Erik narrowed his eyes. “And?”

Nick exhaled. “Her termination was a mistake.”

A beat of silence.

“What?”

“The pink slip she got was meant for a *Kay* Taylor in audit.”

Erik stared. “Nick. Holy—”

“Harv asked what I wanted to do.” Nick rubbed his jaw. “I told him not to tell Taylor. She’s got a lot going on. Didn’t want her feeling obligated to go back full-time.”

“As if this whole fiancée-for-money thing wasn’t bad enough.” Erik slowly removed his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “When are you going to tell her?”

Nick set his cup down on the desk slowly and deliberately. “Keep in mind the only reason she’d even considered my offer was because she’d lost her job and needed the money. What’s going to happen if she finds out she still has the job?”

“Nick. Listen. You have to tell her.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” A hard edge crept into Nick’s voice. “I’m paying her a bundle to be my fiancée. Not to mention the money she’s earning now as a contract employee. She’s not hurting under this arrangement.”

The lines of concentration deepened along Erik’s brows. “Wake up and smell the lawsuit, Nick. I don’t have to remind you she was hesitant enough about agreeing to this engagement. If she finds out you’ve deceived her—there’s no telling what she’ll do.”

“Once the merger is complete, I’ll give her back her old job. With a raise,” he added hastily.

Erik leaned back and fit his fingers together. “You can’t believe she’d actually take it.”

“Why not?”

“Because everyone thinks your engagement is real. It’s bound to be awkward when it ends. You really think she’ll want to come back and work for you like nothing happened?” Erik shook his head. “No way.”

Nick looked away. “Then I’ll give her a great recommendation.”

An incredulous chuckle spurted from Erik’s lips. “I can just see it. Last assignment-fiancée. Job duties-social companion, attractive escort, occasional golf partner.”

Nick’s jaw clenched. “You know what I meant.”

Erik stood. “Keep her happy, Nick.” His voice was firm. “Happy people don’t sue.”

Nick stared at his desk long after Erik left.

Because deep down, he wasn’t worried about Taylor suing him.

He was worried about *losing her*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nick returned to his old habit of staying late and coming in early, throwing himself into work with the kind of relentless focus that had once been second nature. It was safer this way—numbers, reports, negotiations. Things he could control. Things that didn't ask anything of him beyond results. Yet, no matter how many contracts he approved or emails he answered, his mind kept drifting elsewhere.

To Taylor. To the way she'd smiled at him at the party, so effortlessly engaging with the people who mattered to his career. To the way she'd pressed against him on the dance floor, sending heat searing through his veins. To the way she'd walked away at her doorstep, leaving him standing there with a need he couldn't explain.

He scowled at the stack of reports. Work was supposed to keep his mind occupied. So why was it failing now?

The door swung open, and Nick groaned. "Miss Dietrich, I thought I told you—" He stopped mid-sentence, his posture snapping straight. "Mother. What a surprise."

Sylvia Lanagan Childs stood before him, poised as always, her polished veneer only slightly softened by the warm smile she offered. The last time he'd seen her had been...when? Thanksgiving? No, before that. He hadn't even made it home for the holidays.

"What, no kiss?" she teased lightly, but there was a familiar wariness in her eyes. A hesitation he knew all too well.

Nick rose, rounding the desk with the same forced politeness he always had with her. He brushed a quick kiss against her cheek, the faint scent of lavender reaching him. For a moment, it triggered an old memory—her tucking him into bed as a boy, that same floral scent lingering in the air. It had been a long time since she'd been that mother.

"Have a seat." He gestured toward the chair across from his desk.

Even though they lived in the same town, it had been nearly a year since they'd last seen each other. He studied her now, noticing the subtle signs of aging she'd once fought so hard to keep at bay—the faint creases around her mouth, the strands of gray tucked into her auburn hair.

"You look tired," she said, her voice softer now.

"Not tired. Just busy." He gestured to the reports, using them as a shield between them.

She exhaled lightly, as if she had expected that answer. "I won't keep you long." She reached into her bag and pulled out an envelope, setting it carefully on the desk. "I'm sorry I missed your engagement party. Charlie and I were in Switzerland, and the invitation must have come while we were away."

Nick stared at the envelope, irritation flashing through him. Claire must have invited her against his wishes. He had planned to keep her out of this part of his life—not out of cruelty, but because it was easier that way. Less complicated.

"You look surprised," Sylvia observed, tilting her head slightly. "Don't tell me I wasn't supposed to be invited?"

"Of course you were." The lie tasted bitter on his tongue. He hadn't considered how much it would hurt her to be left out. He pushed the thought away. "I didn't realize you were out of the country."

Her lips pressed together, and something flickered in her gaze—hurt, perhaps, though she quickly masked it. She nudged the envelope toward him. "Please accept my congratulations. I hope you and Taylor will be very happy."

Nick picked it up, his chest tightening. He had assumed it was money. It always had been, hadn't it? The one currency she understood. The one way she had tried to mend the damage between them.

"We don't need your money," he said, his voice harsher than he intended.

"There's no money in the envelope," she replied, her voice quiet but firm. "Only love and good wishes."

A pang of guilt hit him square in the chest. He looked up at her, and for the first time in a long while, he saw the woman she used to be—the one who had once tried to hold their family together before it all unraveled. The one who had fought for his father's attention as hard as Nick had, only to lose in the end.

She rose abruptly, smoothing her skirt with the elegance she always carried. Her expression was composed, but he could see the tightness in her shoulders, the way she blinked a little too rapidly. "I'll leave you to your work."

The words barely registered before another voice broke the silence.

"I promise I won't stay but a minute—" Taylor's voice carried into the room as she walked in, only to stop short. Her eyes

widened when she saw Sylvia, and something in Nick's chest clenched at the contrast between them—his mother, distant and guarded; Taylor, warm and open.

"I'm sorry," Taylor said quickly, glancing between them. "No one was at the front desk. I didn't realize you had company."

Nick exhaled, forcing himself to shake off the lingering emotions. "Miss Dietrich had some errands to run." He rounded the desk and placed a hand lightly on Taylor's waist, brushing a welcoming kiss against her cheek. "Taylor, I'd like you to meet my mother, Sylvia Childs. Mother, my fiancée, Taylor Rollins."

Sylvia stood, a polite smile settling over her lips, but Nick caught the flicker of wariness. He cursed himself for it. She'd probably assumed he would marry someone like Claire—wealthy, connected, polished in the way she had always approved of. But Taylor... Taylor was something else entirely.

To his surprise, Taylor's face lit up with delight, her warmth cutting through the tension. "Mrs. Childs, what a pleasure to finally meet you. I'd hoped to see you at the engagement party. Nick and I were so disappointed you couldn't make it."

Something in Sylvia's face softened, just a little. "That's why I stopped by. My husband and I were out of town and didn't get the invitation until we returned." She gestured toward the envelope still unopened on the desk. "I dropped by with a card. I didn't have time to pick up any—"

"Don't you worry about that." Taylor closed the distance between them and—without hesitation—gave Sylvia a gentle hug. "Your good wishes are all we need."

Nick felt something twist inside him. He'd never seen his mother look so startled.

When Taylor pulled away, Sylvia blinked rapidly, her composure wavering for just a second.

"You're a lucky man, Nick," she said, shifting her gaze back to him. "You take good care of her."

The unexpected approval made his throat tighten. He had spent years believing nothing he did would ever be enough for her. That no matter how much he achieved, it would never quite make up for what she thought she lost.

"I will," he said, his voice rougher than he intended.

Sylvia turned back to Taylor, something like genuine fondness in her eyes. "And, Taylor, you make him happy."

Taylor didn't hesitate. She met Sylvia's gaze with a quiet sincerity that even Nick wasn't expecting. "I'll do my best."

For a moment, an unspoken understanding passed between them. A moment Nick couldn't quite define.

Then Sylvia gathered her purse, blinking rapidly again. "Congratulations. I wish you both only the best."

And just like that, she was gone.

The door closed softly behind her, leaving a silence in its wake.

Taylor sank into the chair Sylvia had vacated, exhaling slowly. "Your mother seems like a nice woman. I'm glad I finally got to meet her."

Nick sat down heavily, rubbing a hand over his jaw. He felt...drained. "Yeah."

His fingers toyed with the envelope before pushing it toward Taylor. "Open it if you want."

She didn't hesitate. Her voice was soft as she read Sylvia's handwritten note. "*Make sure that the choices you make, the priorities you set as a couple, are the ones that will give you both the true happiness you deserve.*"

Nick stared at the words, a strange tightness in his chest. His mother had spent her life choosing wrong. His father had chosen wrong.

Was he?

"That's so sweet." Taylor smiled and lowered the paper. "I don't think I've ever heard that saying before."

"It was one of her favorites."

"Does she have any others?" Taylor lifted a brow.

You love that company more than you love me. More than you love Nick.

It wasn't a saying as much as a refrain heard over and over. Even now, five years after his father's death, he still railed against the thought.

After all, wasn't it him his father had asked to see while on his deathbed? Hadn't Nick been the one to hold his father's hand while his life slipped away? And hadn't he been the one his father had entrusted with his most valuable possession—the company?

Why did the thought suddenly make him sad?

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Anyway, none that I remember."

Her gaze narrowed, and she studied him thoughtfully but didn't comment. Instead, she picked up her bag and rose. "You're positive you can't golf tomorrow?"

Taylor sighed but nodded, accepting his excuse without pushing. "Okay. I understand. Maybe another time."

Nick watched her carefully. No argument, no teasing persuasion—just acceptance. For some reason, that bothered him more than if she'd tried to convince him otherwise. He was getting used to their time together, to her effortless way of making people feel comfortable, even when she was playing a role.

She hesitated at the door. "You know, Nick, your mom seems like she really cares about you."

He exhaled sharply. "She does."

Taylor tilted her head slightly, studying him. “Then maybe...you should call her sometime. You don’t have to, of course. Just something to think about.”

He frowned, his shoulders stiffening. “We have our own lives.”

She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “If you say so.” Then she lifted a hand in a casual wave. “See you later.”

And just like that, she was gone.

Nick ran a hand over his face and leaned back in his chair. First, his mother showing up unexpectedly. Then Taylor reading that card out loud, reminding him of words he’d spent years trying to ignore.

If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you always got.

His whole life, he’d done exactly that. He’d prioritized the company, controlled his emotions, and made sure nothing—no one—got close enough to shake his focus.

Yet here he was, sitting in an empty office, feeling something he couldn’t quite name as Taylor walked away without a second glance.

And he had no idea what to do about it.



Taylor waited while Tony loaded her clubs into his 4x4 Cherokee, the metallic clang of iron against iron cutting through the warm evening air. She shoved her hands into her pockets, shifting on her feet. “I hope Claire didn’t mind you coming with me tonight.”

Tony laughed, a low, knowing chuckle. “You’re incredible.”

She frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“If anyone’s going to be upset about you and me spending time together, it’s not Claire.” He closed the trunk with a heavy thud and arched a brow. “It’s your fiancé.”

Her stomach twisted. Try as she might, she still couldn’t understand why Nick hadn’t come today. *Why he hadn’t wanted to come.*

“You never told me why he bailed on you,” Tony pressed, his voice softer, but filled with quiet curiosity.

Taylor forced a shrug. “This golf match was last-minute. Nick had work to do.”

Tony tilted his head, watching her carefully, as if reading between the words she wasn’t saying. “So, you’re telling me he’s not lurking in the shadows, waiting to reclaim his territory? You’re free for the whole evening?”

“Not free,” Taylor countered, pushing thoughts of Nick aside with a teasing smile. “It’ll cost you.”

Playing along, Tony reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet with exaggerated flair. “Okay, how much?”

She grinned. “There’s a Dairy Queen down on Main I’ve been meaning to check out. Do you have enough for a—”

“Vanilla dip cone with butterscotch?” he finished, his smile turning boyish.

Taylor’s face lit up. “You remembered.”

“How could I forget? Hanging out at DQ with you was a big deal.” Tony reached over and tugged gently at her hair, a familiar gesture from their teenage years. “Tonight, we’ll go all out. Ice cream and drinks are on me.”

The easy warmth between them tugged at something inside her—something that had nothing to do with romance and everything to do with comfort, familiarity. Tony had been there in the days when life was simpler, when she hadn’t had to think about things like fake engagements or merger deals disguised as relationships.

Without thinking, she flung her arms around him. “You’re the best.”

His arms wrapped around her, warm and solid. But unlike before, the moment stretched—just long enough for Taylor to feel something shift. Was it her imagination, or did he seem reluctant to let her go?

She finally pulled back, studying his face. *Was she searching for something?* And if she found it, what then?

Tony must have sensed her unease, because he flashed an easy wink, and the warm friendliness in his grin reassured her. The moment passed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sitting atop one of the weathered picnic tables in front of the Dairy Queen, Taylor sipped her slush straight from the cup, tossing the straw aside. The bug zapper hummed overhead, and the balmy summer night wrapped around them like a memory. She could almost believe she was seventeen again—carefree, untouched by loss, by responsibility.

The stars hung heavy in the sky, and a gentle breeze ruffled Tony's dark hair, lifting it in soft, careless tufts.

Impulsively, she reached over and touched his arm. "I'm so glad we're still friends."

Tony's expression turned unexpectedly serious. "I've missed you, Taylor." His voice was quieter now, more reflective. "You were the best part of my life for a long time. Actually, you were my only friend."

Her heart clenched at the confession. "Tony—"

He shook his head. "It's true. Don't bother denying it."

She let out a breath, a wistful smile playing at her lips. "Those kids just couldn't see what a special guy you were." She lifted her hand and started counting on her fingers. "You're loyal, kind, fun to be with—"

"Stop, stop." Tony held up a hand, his neck flushing red. "You're making me sound like a cross between a Boy Scout and Lassie."

Taylor laughed, warmth flooding her chest. "All I'm trying to say is you're a great guy. Don't settle for less than you deserve. Promise me that?"

His gaze dipped to his drink before he nodded. "I promise."

A comfortable silence settled between them until Tony spoke again, his voice careful. "Do you really think your father hoped we'd end up together?"

Taylor took another sip of her Mr. Misty, considering. "Probably," she admitted. "He always liked you and your parents."

Tony's gaze grew distant, thoughtful. "He was a great guy. And your mother was the best. They were... the kind of couple you don't see much anymore."

Taylor swallowed against the tightness in her throat. "Yes, they were." Her voice softened. "I always promised myself that would be the kind of love I'd have."

Tony's gaze sharpened. "Do you think you'll have it with Nick?"

Something inside her twisted at the question. "That's an odd question." She forced a light laugh. "Of course."

Tony didn't look convinced. "Claire says you two haven't known each other very long."

Taylor stiffened. "Since when do you listen to Claire?"

He ignored her attempt to dodge the question. "I can understand you being lonely, with your parents gone and everything. But I don't want you to settle. You deserve more than—" He stopped, exhaling, as if debating whether to continue.

Taylor lifted her chin. "I appreciate your concern. I really do. But you don't need to worry. I love Nick. We're very happy together."

Tony's skepticism was impossible to miss.

"I'll admit the man is a workaholic, but I'm doing my best to change that."

Tony studied her for a long moment before reaching up, gently tipping her chin toward him. "I want you to promise me something."

She barely had time to register the shift in his tone before a voice cut through the moment like a blade.

"If she ever needs anything—or anyone—I'll be the one she turns to. Right, sweetheart?"

The deep, unmistakable voice sent a jolt through her. Taylor turned sharply, her heart lodging in her throat.

Nick.

He dropped onto the picnic table beside her with the kind of effortless confidence that made her pulse skip. His gaze flicked between her and Tony, sharp and unreadable.

Her stomach churned with guilt—irrational guilt. *She hadn't done anything wrong.* And yet, heat crept up her neck.

"Nick." She struggled for composure. "I didn't see you."

His lips curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "I don't doubt it. You two were... engaged."

“What brings you to this neighborhood?” she asked, trying to steer the conversation away from the heavy tension now pressing in around them.

Nick’s gaze flicked toward Tony before settling on her. “I just dropped Erik off. We had some business to discuss.”

Taylor seized the opportunity to change the subject. “The scramble was really fun. When you couldn’t make it, I called up Tony, and he was able to rearrange his plans. It’s too bad you couldn’t be there. I think you’d have enjoyed it.”

Nick’s jaw flexed, but then—just like that—his expression smoothed. His face creased into a sudden, effortless smile. “Just being with you, sweetheart, would be enough to make it enjoyable.”

Even though she knew he was slipping into his adoring fiancé role, a warmth spread through her. It seemed natural to lean into him, to rest her head against his shoulder. His arm wrapped around her, possessive and sure. Maybe she *had* caught the hang of this acting.

Or maybe...

“I’ll see her home from here, Karelli,” Nick said smoothly.

A muscle twitched in Tony’s jaw, but his smile remained easy. He glanced at Taylor. “Thanks for inviting me. If you ever need a partner—”

Nick’s grip on her waist tightened slightly. “She won’t.”

“I need to get going, anyway.” A muscle twitched in Tony’s jaw, but he masked it with an easy smile as he turned to Taylor and nodded. “Thanks for inviting me, Taylor. If you ever need a partner—”

“Won’t that be a little hard to do from D.C.?” Nick’s voice cut in, casual but edged with something sharper.

Tony turned back, his expression unreadable. “Actually, I may be sticking around. At least for the summer. Henry wants me to help him with a couple of projects.”

Taylor’s face lit up. “That’s wonderful! I can’t believe you’ll be here a while longer.” She turned to Nick, eyes bright. “Isn’t that great?”

Nick’s silence stretched for a beat too long before he finally gave a noncommittal half-smile.

“I’ll drop off your clubs tomorrow.” Tony tugged gently at a loose strand of Taylor’s hair, the gesture both playful and intimate. “Let me know what time works.”

“I will. Thanks again for today. I had fun.” She watched him walk away, the sound of his boots fading into the night, before turning back to Nick. “I hope while Tony’s in Cedar Ridge, you two can get better acquainted.”

Nick’s gaze flickered, something unreadable passing through his eyes. He studied her for a long moment, then gave another slow, deliberate half-smile.

Taylor picked up her slush and took a sip, trying to ignore the strange tension in the air. “I think you two have a lot in common.”

Nick let out a low chuckle, but there was little humor in it. “Offhand, I can think of at least one thing.”

She frowned, confused—until she remembered. *Claire*. They had both been involved with her. Taylor’s stomach knotted. “Nick, about—”

He stopped her words—and her breath—with a simple touch of his fingers against her lips. The warmth of them sent a shiver down her spine, but it was the solemnity in his gaze that made her heart pound.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking these past few days.” His voice was low, steady. “I’ve decided that as long as the whole world thinks we’re engaged, I need to start playing the part. That means being your escort, your golf partner... your fiancé.” His eyes held hers, unwavering. “It’s time I started acting like one.”

Taylor’s pulse skittered. *Acting like one?* How was she ever going to hold on to her sanity—not to mention her heart—if he really pulled out all the stops? Because *he* might be acting, but her responses were all too real.

His eyes twinkled, and for a moment she swore he could see right through her, could read every thought spinning in her mind.

Gazing into his deep blue eyes, she felt herself slipping—like standing at the edge of a tidepool, knowing that one step forward would pull her under.

Dangerous. This is dangerous.

Like a shot of whiskey, she downed the last of her slush in one desperate gulp and jerked upright, dislodging his hand from her shoulder. Suddenly, she could breathe again.

Until he took the empty cup from her and set it on the picnic table.

His gaze darkened. “You know what I want.”

Her heart hammered. “A Mr. Misty of your own?” she tried weakly.

His hand slid up her arm, slow and deliberate, sending little shocks through her skin. “Your beauty takes my breath away.”

A warmth spread over her skin, so intoxicating it made her dizzy. She forced a nervous laugh, gesturing at her casual outfit. “In this? I don’t think so.”

“It’s not what you’re wearing.” Nick’s fingers brushed the thin strap of her tank top, featherlight.

Taylor froze, her breath catching in her throat. “Nick, don’t.”

“Shh, sweetheart.” His voice was a whisper against the night as his hands found her arms, his mouth lowering toward hers.

His lips met hers—soft, gentle, devastating.

Her heart pounded erratically, her fingers curling against his chest. She was losing herself in him, drowning in the kiss, in the way he made her feel—like she was the only thing in his world at that moment.

She forced herself to pull away, to breathe. She turned her head, staring into the darkness, trying to steady the wild thrum of her pulse.

When she finally looked back, his gaze was locked on hers, dark and unreadable. Her mouth went dry. “I…”

“Taylor,” he murmured, his voice a slow caress. He reached up and brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Let me take you home.”

The words sent another shiver through her. There was no mistaking his meaning.

She swallowed hard. “You can’t.”

“Can’t?” His brows drew together, his expression shifting.

“I’m spending the night with my grandparents,” she blurted. “There was some kind of chemical spill in my neighborhood this afternoon. The fumes were terrible and the fire department suggested everyone find somewhere else to stay.”

She was chattering, she knew it, but she couldn’t seem to stop. A small, knowing smile lifted the corners of Nick’s lips, and he brushed his knuckles lightly across her cheek.

“Call your grandparents,” he said, his voice low. “Tell them you’ll stay at my place.”

She shook her head.

“Why not?” His jaw tightened slightly. “We are engaged.”

“For the moment.” She met his gaze, steady and unflinching. “And even if we were really engaged, we’re not married.”

Nick let out a slow breath. “You can’t be serious.”

She understood what he was feeling—*she felt it too*. But she also knew how quickly a moment could spiral into something she wasn’t ready for.

“I’m sorry, Nick.” Her voice was quiet, her hand resting lightly on his forearm.

His jaw clenched, frustration flickering across his features. “This is incredible.” He raked his fingers through his hair, exhaling sharply.

“Nick, I—”

“It’s okay.” He stood abruptly, his fists jammed into his pockets, tension radiating from him. “It’s probably better this way.”

His gaze drifted toward the flashing neon cone atop the Dairy Queen, his features tight, unreadable.

Taylor studied him for a long moment. “I know you won’t believe me,” she said softly, watching the way his shoulders tensed, “but this is hard for me too.”

His smile was strained, almost bitter. “Good.”

The car ride to her grandparents’ house was torture.

Nick kept the conversation light, polite, but underneath it all, the tension wrapped around them like a slow-burning fuse. The unspoken words, the weight of what had nearly happened—it filled the space between them, charged and heavy.

When they reached the house, he insisted on walking her to the door. The night stretched quiet around them, the porch light off, the only glow coming from the ornate lamp at the end of the driveway.

At the steps, Nick hesitated, glancing at the window as if expecting to see her grandfather peeking through the curtains. When he didn’t, his tension eased slightly, and he turned to Taylor.

She smiled, her lips soft, expectant.

Nick slipped his fingers into her hair and pulled her close. If all he could have was a good-night kiss, he’d make sure it was one she wouldn’t forget. One she’d dream about when she lay alone in her bed tonight.

Instead of meeting her lips right away, he teased her, letting his mouth linger where her shirt collar ended, pressing featherlight kisses along her skin. She shivered, arching instinctively, her breath catching.

And then he kissed her—deep, slow, intense.

For a moment, there was nothing else. Just them.

A sharp bark shattered the moment, followed by the flick of a porch light.

Nick pulled back, his breathing unsteady, his body taut with restraint.

Taylor straightened, pressing a shaky hand to her hair. Her eyes glittered in the harsh light; lips still parted.

Nick exhaled sharply. “You’d better go inside.”

She hesitated. “How do I look?”

Like someone who’s just been thoroughly kissed. His gaze raked over her, lingering. “Beautiful,” he murmured. “You look beautiful.”

Her lips curved into a dreamy smile. She reached for the doorknob, then hesitated, brushing her lips against his. “Sleep well, Nick.”

Nick let out a dry chuckle. Was she kidding? It would be a miracle if he slept at all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“What did you think of Pastor’s sermon this morning, Nick?” Nana added another generous dollop of jelly to her toast, her sharp eyes lifting to meet his.

Nick hesitated, taking a slow sip of his coffee. Stopping at the Pioneer Room after church had somehow become a regular event—one he hadn’t expected to enjoy as much as he did. At first, it had felt like just another part of the act, another way to reinforce the illusion of his engagement. But now? Now he found himself looking forward to the easy rhythm of Sunday mornings with Taylor and her grandparents.

He set his cup down, weighing his response. Technically, the minister had been excellent—strong delivery, good pacing, a touch of humor to keep people engaged. But Nick had a feeling Nana wasn’t asking about the quality of the speech. She was asking about the message. *Forgiveness*.

His jaw tensed.

“Excellent sermon,” he said evenly.

Nana studied him for a beat, then turned her attention to Taylor. “What’d you think about it, dear?”

Taylor set down her glass of milk, her fingers tracing the rim absently. Sunlight filtered through the stained-glass windows, catching the rich auburn strands of her hair and making them glow. She looked thoughtful, almost troubled.

“Forgiveness is a hard one,” she admitted. “I still struggle with it. Sometimes, it feels like forgiving someone excuses what they did, like it erases the hurt they caused.”

Nana nodded, her expression turning pensive. “I know what you mean. But that’s what I like about Pastor Schmidt’s sermons. They don’t just tell you what you should do—they make you think about why.”

Nick exhaled through his nose and stabbed at his eggs with his fork. *They made you think too much*.

When he’d first started coming to church with Taylor, he’d been able to tune out the sermons, to let the words roll off him like water off a duck’s back. But lately? Lately, they were creeping in. Sticking.

He didn’t like it.

And it wasn’t enough that he got blindsided by the message in church—they had to dissect it again over breakfast. It was enough to kill a guy’s appetite.

“Nick?”

He glanced up, realizing too late that he’d zoned out. Three pairs of eyes were locked on him.

Bill chuckled knowingly. “I think we lost you for a minute there.”

Nana gave him a pointed look. “I asked if you find it hard to forgive.”

Nick shifted in his chair. That hot seat feeling was back again. *Hard to forgive?* No, not usually. He prided himself on being a rational man, someone who didn’t waste energy nursing grudges. *Except when it came to Sylvia*.

“Not usually, no.” He forced a smile, reaching for the safest ground he could find. “In fact, I’ve already forgiven your grandfather for beating me at golf on Friday.”

Bill let out a hearty chuckle. “You should’ve seen the look on his face when we tallied up the scores.” He turned to Taylor. “Your fiancé isn’t used to losing to a senior citizen.”

Nick smirked, shaking his head. “Senior citizen? That’s debatable.”

A voice cut in behind him. “No way.”

Nick’s body went rigid before he even turned around. He knew that voice.

He schooled his features into something neutral as he turned, but the rock in his stomach didn’t budge.

“Tony!” Grandpa Bill’s voice was warm with genuine pleasure as he rose to clasp the younger man’s hand. “And Miss Waters, what a pleasure to see you again.”

Nick tightened his grip on his coffee cup.

Of course, Claire was here too. Because if there was one person who thrived on making things uncomfortable, it was her.

His stomach tensed, and suddenly, the easy camaraderie of the breakfast table felt suffocating.

Bill’s warm welcome only made things worse. “Pull up a couple of chairs. We’d love to have you join us,” he urged,

completely oblivious to the tension Nick felt crawling up the back of his neck.

“You’re incredibly kind,” Claire all but purred, placing a hand on Bill’s arm as she batted her lashes. “And please—” her gaze flickered to Taylor, then Nick, “—call me Claire.”

Nick finally turned, locking eyes with Tony first. The other man wore an easy, casual grin, but there was something too deliberate in the way he stood just a little too close to Taylor’s chair.

And Claire—she was watching him with that same calculating look she always had, like a cat playing with a mouse.

Nick forced himself to smile, but it felt more like baring his teeth. “Tony,” he said, his voice smooth, measured. “Claire.”

Bill, ever the gracious host, was already pulling out a chair for Claire. “Well, Claire,” he said, “what brings you and Tony out today? I didn’t think I saw you in church.”

Nick barely smothered a smirk at that. He could only imagine Claire’s reaction to a Sunday sermon.

“Church?” Claire started to laugh, then stopped, waving a dismissive hand. “Tony wanted to go on some nature walk at sunrise. He caught me at a weak moment and I agreed.”

Nick barely held back an eye roll. Yeah, right.

Taylor, who had been mostly quiet up until now, smiled as she turned to Tony. “When we lived in D.C., we used to walk almost every Saturday.”

Nick tensed.

“I remember.” Tony’s smile widened. “Every week for almost a year is hard to forget.”

Nick narrowed his gaze. He had known Taylor and Tony had been close, but almost a year of Saturday walks? That was more time than Nick had ever spent with her. The thought made his jaw tighten.

“Almost a year,” Claire echoed, her voice silky. “Why, after all that talking, you probably know more about Taylor than Nick does.”

Nick’s fingers twitched around his coffee cup, but he didn’t rise to the bait.

“I wouldn’t say that.” Tony shrugged, as if dismissing the thought. But his smug expression said otherwise.

Nick took a slow sip of coffee, letting the silence stretch before finally saying, “People change.”

Claire’s eyes glittered with amusement. “We all change over time,” Nana agreed, ever the peacemaker.

But Claire wasn’t done. “Let’s do a little test.” She leaned forward, her smile widening. “Let’s see how much Tony remembers from those long, intimate walks.”

“They weren’t intimate,” Taylor said sharply.

“We were just friends, Claire,” Tony added, though he didn’t sound particularly convincing.

“Okay, okay.” Claire waved a dismissive hand. “But you knew Taylor pretty well, right?”

Tony nodded.

“Alright then. First question.” She flicked a glance toward Nick before returning her gaze to Tony. “How many children did Taylor want to have?”

Nick smirked. That was easy. One. Maybe two.

Tony paused for a moment, then said, “Back then, she wanted six.”

Nick nearly choked on his coffee. “Six?” The word burst from his lips before he could stop it.

Across the table, Bill and Nana chuckled.

Taylor flushed.

And Claire? She looked downright delighted.

“I’m afraid he’s right,” Taylor admitted, her voice filled with self-conscious amusement. “Growing up as a ‘lonely only,’ I’d decided long ago that I wanted a whole house full of children.”

Nick could only stare at her. Six kids? Who in their right mind wanted six kids?

“What do you think of that, Nick?” Claire asked, her tone all too casual. “I seem to remember that at one time you weren’t sure if you wanted any children.”

All eyes turned to him, and for the first time that morning, he felt truly cornered. He resisted the urge to adjust his suddenly-too-tight collar.

Instead, he reached across the table, caught Taylor’s hand, and brought it to his lips.

“You forget, Claire,” he murmured, meeting Taylor’s startled gaze. “That was before I met Taylor.”

The silence that followed was heavy, thick with something unspoken.

Taylor’s fingers tightened slightly in his. And Nick held on, just a little longer than necessary.

That was before I met Taylor.

The words hung in the air, more potent than Nick had intended. Claire’s smile didn’t waver, but her eyes sharpened as if she sensed a shift she hadn’t accounted for. Tony, on the other hand, leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, watching Nick with a quiet intensity that set his teeth on edge.

Taylor’s fingers tensed in his grasp, and he glanced at her, half expecting to see a look of amusement at his theatrics. Instead, there was something softer in her expression—surprise, maybe, or something dangerously close to hope. Nick’s

stomach twisted. He'd spoken on instinct, the words slipping out before he could remind himself that none of this was real.

She was playing a role, and so was he.

But why did it feel different this time? Why did it feel like he'd just crossed a line he couldn't uncross?

"I have to admit, six kids is a bit more than I was expecting," he said, keeping his tone light, brushing his thumb along the back of her hand, a gesture meant to sell the act. But the way her fingers curled around his sent a flicker of warmth through him, unsettling and entirely unwelcome.

Taylor laughed, shaking her head. "That was teenage me talking. I'm not sure I'd survive six." Her eyes sparkled. "Maybe four."

Nick choked on his coffee. "Four?"

Grandpa Bill chuckled, clearly entertained. "That's a compromise, son."

"Four kids, a dog, and a house with a wraparound porch," Taylor mused, her voice playful, but her eyes distant, lost in a world Nick wasn't sure he belonged in.

The strangest thing was, for a fraction of a second, he could almost see it too.

"That's quite the dream, sweetheart," he murmured, pulling her closer.

Her gaze flickered to his, and for a moment, everything else—the crowded restaurant, Claire's scrutiny, Tony's thinly veiled annoyance—faded into the background. There was only her, the woman he was pretending to love, and the dangerous realization that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't entirely an act anymore.

Claire's smile never wavered, but Nick caught the sharp glint in her eyes—the satisfaction of someone who had successfully set a trap. He hadn't meant to react so strongly, hadn't planned to reach for Taylor's hand, let alone press his lips to it. But the thought of Tony knowing her past so intimately, of sharing memories with her that Nick would never be a part of, had ignited something raw and unfiltered inside him.

Taylor's fingers trembled slightly in his grasp, her blush deepening, but she didn't pull away. Instead, she met his gaze with something softer—surprise, maybe curiosity. Nick wasn't sure.

"Well," Claire drawled, leaning back in her chair, watching them like a cat toying with a pair of trapped mice. "I suppose love does change a person."

Nick forced a smile. "That's what they say."

Tony chuckled, the sound low and knowing. "Good to know I helped shape Taylor's future, then."

Nick's grip on Taylor's hand tightened slightly. The air between them thickened, charged with something he didn't quite understand but wasn't ready to analyze. His heart was pounding—too fast for a simple breakfast discussion.

Taylor, ever the peacemaker, smiled and turned to her grandfather. "Didn't you say you wanted to try the cinnamon rolls today, Grandpa?"

Bill chuckled, clearly entertained by the tension swirling around the table. "I did, and I plan to. But I have to say, watching you all squirm is nearly as satisfying."

Nana gave him a warning look, but there was a twinkle in her eyes. "Oh, hush, Bill."

Nick exhaled, feeling the moment shift. But the weight in his chest remained. It was only a game, a performance—one he'd started and had played convincingly. Yet, when he looked at Taylor now, he wasn't sure who was fooling who.



"When were you planning to drop the bombshell that you wanted six kids?" Nick's hands tightened around the steering wheel, his knuckles white. He kept his gaze locked on the road ahead, but his mind reeled.

Taylor arched an eyebrow. "How about after the wedding that's never going to happen?" Her voice was syrupy sweet, but the challenge in her eyes was unmistakable.

Nick blew out a harsh breath, knowing full well he was being unreasonable, yet somehow unable to rein himself in. "Who in this day and age wants that many kids?"

Her lips curved, her green eyes dancing with mischief. "I do."

His jaw clenched. "Well, I don't."

The words left his mouth with more force than he intended, but the image had already hit him—little boys with his dark hair and her green eyes, tugging at his sleeves, calling him Dad. He shoved it aside before it could settle.

Taylor let out an exasperated sigh and leaned back in her seat, clearly amused at his distress. "What does it matter? It's all pretend anyway."

"Pretend?" He turned to glance at her briefly before refocusing on the road. "How exactly does one pretend to want six kids?"

Taylor shrugged, her expression infuriatingly relaxed. "You're a smart guy. You'll think of something."

Nick raked a hand through his hair, realizing there was no winning this conversation. He pressed his foot down on the accelerator, eager to leave the topic in the dust behind them. He could only hope it wouldn't come up again.



The next day, after a round of golf, Bill Rollins clapped a hand on Nick's shoulder just as they were heading toward the clubhouse. "Go on ahead," he told the others.

Nick stifled a groan. He ran an honest business, didn't cheat at golf—why couldn't he catch a break?

"Six kids, huh?" Bill started, his voice carrying the weight of someone who'd seen enough life to know what mattered. "That's a big responsibility."

Nick forced a nod, bracing himself.

"I know Taylor is willing to make that commitment," Bill continued, his gaze sharp, "but you have to be willing too. Kids need both parents around."

Nick didn't miss the meaning beneath Bill's words. He'd noticed. Noticed how much time Nick spent at the office, how work always came first.

And he wasn't wrong.

Whether Nick had a wife and six kids at home or not, nothing would change. His work—his company—would always come first.

Bill studied him, waiting. "Are you sure a big family is what you want, son?"

Of course it wasn't. He knew it. Taylor knew it. But what would Bill think if he said that? Probably that his granddaughter had picked the wrong man.

Pretend you do.

Nick inhaled sharply and forced a laugh. He clapped a hand on Bill's back, mustering every ounce of charm he had.

"Call me crazy," he said with a grin he hoped was convincing, "but I really do."

The words tasted foreign on his tongue.

And for the first time, he wondered just how long he could keep pretending.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“I had a wonderful time tonight.” Taylor slid the key into the front door and turned to smile at Nick over her shoulder. “I love to dance.”

“It was fun,” Nick agreed, though *fun* didn’t quite capture the electricity of the evening.

They’d spent hours at the club in Denver, losing themselves in the music. The fast songs had been easy, a game of teasing glances and laughter. But the slow dances—that was where the trouble started. Pressed close, her body warm against his, her breath grazing his cheek, he’d battled every instinct that told him to kiss her, to forget about keeping things simple.

“Want to come in for a few minutes?” Taylor offered, pushing open the door. “I could make some coffee and...” A playful twinkle lit her eyes. “I’ve got a pint of chocolate chip ice cream we could share.”

Nick groaned. She knew he *loved* chocolate chip. And after an entire evening of restraint, she was tempting him with the two things he found impossible to resist—her and ice cream.

He should say no. He *needed* to say no.

“Sure. Why not?”

Foolish. Reckless. But he followed her inside anyway.



Minutes later, coffee was brewing, and the small carton of ice cream sat on the counter between them.

Taylor reached into the silverware drawer and held up two spoons. “One? Or two?”

He knew what she was remembering—that night at Dairy Queen, one spoon, one sundae, her laughter mixing with his. “One.”

Her lips quirked as she dropped the second spoon back into the drawer. She dipped into the soft ice cream and took a slow, lingering bite, her lashes fluttering closed. “Oh, wow. This is so good.”

Nick’s mouth curved. She had no idea how adorable she was.

She held the spoon out toward him, but he hesitated, watching her instead.

“Sweetheart, I can get you another spoon,” she teased. “It’s no problem, really.”

He liked when she called him that. Lately, she’d started saying it even when no one else was around.

“Now why wouldn’t I want to share with you?”

She shrugged. “I could be coming down with a cold. You could end up stuck in bed for a week.”

“I’m used to taking chances.” He reached for her wrist instead of the spoon, then slowly set it aside.

“Don’t you want some?” Her gaze shimmered with teasing warmth. “I can’t eat it all.”

“Oh, I want something,” Nick murmured, “but it’s not ice cream.”

He slipped an arm around her waist, drawing her against him. The moment her body pressed into his, it was over.

Soft. Warm. His.

He traced the curve of her cheek, watching the way her pupils dilated, the way her lips parted just slightly. Her arms wound around his neck, and whatever he’d meant to say was lost.

Their kiss was slow at first, exploratory, but the moment she sighed into his mouth, a switch flipped.

His restraint snapped.

He deepened the kiss, tasting the faint sweetness of chocolate chip, but it wasn’t enough—it would never be enough.

The counter dug into her back, but she didn’t pull away. Instead, she clutched at his shirt, pressing closer, her breath uneven.

Nick’s head spun.

“Let’s go upstairs.” His voice came out husky, more command than question.

Taylor blinked up at him. “Upstairs?”

“To the bedroom.”

His hand skimmed down her back, his intentions clear. Tonight, he would make her his. He would erase every doubt, every hesitation. They belonged together, and he would show her just how much.

“Nick.”

His name was barely a whisper, sultry, aching. A shiver ran through him.

“Yes, my love?” He feathered his fingers along her cheek, savoring the way she leaned into his touch.

Taylor swallowed hard. Her breath came fast, uneven. “If I led you on, I’m sorry...”

His mind stumbled.

What?

She stepped out of his embrace, putting space between them. His arms felt suddenly empty.

“What are you saying?” His voice was rougher now, a sharp contrast to the heat still burning inside him.

She gestured toward the door, regret shining in her eyes. “I think it’s time you leave.”

He stared at her, his pulse still hammering. She wanted this. She had kissed him back, held him like she needed him just as much as he needed her.

Didn’t she?

He barely registered her words as she ushered him toward the door.

“Before we both do something we’ll regret.”

Regret?

A humorless laugh scraped his throat, but he swallowed it down. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

Instead, he turned, stepping into the night, the cool air doing nothing to douse the fire still burning inside him.

He wasn’t sure what had just happened.

But for the first time in a long time, Nick Lanagan had no idea what to do next.



"I'll have a tall caramel macchiato, please."

Taylor stood at the coffee shop counter, inhaling the warm, rich aroma of espresso and vanilla. She'd have to settle for a salad for dinner to offset the indulgence, but for once, she didn't care.

“Whipped cream?” The barista poised the can over the cup.

“Please.” Taylor smiled, fishing a ten-dollar bill from her wallet.

"Taylor."

The familiar voice made her turn.

"Mrs. Childs." Taylor's lips curved into a warm smile. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"I was out shopping and decided to take a break." Sylvia gestured toward the counter. "The vanilla latte was calling my name."

Taylor chuckled. "It does have that effect."

Sylvia's smile wavered slightly. "I put my bags at a table over there. Would you care to join me?"

Taylor hesitated for only a moment. The errands could wait. "I'd love to."

They made their way to a table by the window after Sylvia got her latte. Outside, the late afternoon sun bathed the historic Town Square in a golden glow. Several years before, city planners had breathed new life into the aging district, restoring the brick buildings without stripping away their vintage charm. Though most shoppers still flocked to the mall at the edge of town, *Town Square* had found a loyal following—one that appreciated fine boutiques and was willing to pay a premium for high-end goods.

Taylor loved strolling through the shops, running her fingers over soft cashmere sweaters and admiring elegant dresses on display. Once, she'd been able to buy whatever she wanted without a second thought. Now, she settled for window shopping.

“Looks like you did some damage.” Taylor gestured toward the crisp shopping bags Sylvia had propped against the window ledge.

“Not as bad as it looks.” Sylvia waved a dismissive hand. “Charlie desperately needed new clothes, and McMurray’s was having a big sale.”

Taylor’s ears perked up. “Really?” Grandpa Bill’s birthday was coming up, and McMurray’s was *his* go-to store for classic menswear. Their quality was unmatched, and their service made shopping effortless. “I might have to stop over and see what they have.”

“You should. Georgine’s is having a sale too.” Sylvia’s gaze flickered to Taylor’s sweater, her expression knowing. “You’ve always had impeccable taste.”

Taylor smiled, though part of her wondered if Sylvia recognized the garment. Georgine’s had been her *favorite* boutique—before she had to cut back. The silk boatneck she wore today was at least three years old, but its timeless elegance kept it from

feeling outdated.

“I adore that store,” Taylor admitted.

“I was just on my way over there. Would you care to join me?”

Taylor’s fingers tightened slightly around her coffee cup. She shouldn’t. Her purse was empty, and her credit card was strictly for emergencies. But *what would it hurt to browse?*

“Sure, why not? It never hurts to look.”

Sylvia chuckled. “Or buy.”

Taylor lifted her macchiato in a playful toast. “I’ll drink to that.”

They laughed together, their easy camaraderie filling the cozy café. But outside, unseen by both women, an attractive brunette lingered on the sidewalk, her sharp eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

A slow grin spread across her lips—a *knowing, Cheshire cat grin*.



“Daddy.”

Claire pushed open the door to her father’s office, ignoring his admin’s frantic wave. She knew she should wait, but why bother? Timing was everything, and this—this was going to work out perfectly.

Two pairs of eyes lifted toward her. Henry Waters’ face broke into a warm smile, but Nick barely acknowledged her with a nod before his attention returned to the documents spread across the worktable.

Typical.

She expected nothing less from Nick Lanagan. So focused. So in control. So convinced he was untouchable.

That was about to change.

“Henry, about—”

“Nick, let’s take a break.” Her father cut him off, bellowing toward the outer office. “Helen! Bring us some iced tea.”

Claire strolled toward him and pressed a light kiss to his cheek before settling into the chair across from Nick. Close enough to watch him. Close enough to catch every flicker of reaction.

His guard was up, as always. But it wouldn’t stay that way.

“Daddy, I ran into Jack Corrigan downtown this morning. He said to tell you hello.”

Nick’s jaw tightened.

Claire’s lips curved. *Perfect*.

Henry’s brows lifted. “How’s he doing?”

“Good.” She let out a small sigh, shaking her head as if the news pained her. “Though he’s considering an offer from some West Coast firm.”

Her father straightened. “An offer?”

“A merger, I think.” Claire kept her tone light, almost casual. “Poor Jack. I think it really hurt him when you didn’t choose his firm. After all, you two have been friends for years.”

Henry cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “Jack understood. It was business.”

A muscle jumped in Nick’s jaw.

Claire could barely contain her satisfaction. She leaned forward slightly, holding Nick’s gaze.

“I told him not to rush into anything.” She widened her eyes, feigning innocence. “A deal’s not done until the papers are signed, right?”

Nick’s grip tightened on his pen. His expression didn’t change, but Claire saw it—that flicker of irritation beneath the polished exterior.

Excitement raced up her spine. *Now comes the real fun*.

She leaned back, crossing her legs slowly, deliberately. “By the way.” Her tone was almost an afterthought. “I saw your fiancée today.”

Nick’s eyes sharpened.

Gotcha.

“You did? Where?”

“Downtown.” Claire tilted her head slightly, watching the way his expression flickered between curiosity and something else. “Shopping. With your mother.”

Confusion flitted across his features, but Claire didn’t give him time to recover.

“Between the two of them, they must have had a dozen shopping bags.” She gave a saccharine smile and turned toward her father. “Isn’t it nice, Daddy?”

Henry frowned. “Nice?”

She kept her gaze locked on Nick’s, her words meant only for him. “Nick really did get himself a woman just like his

mother.”

Silence.

A slow, dangerous tension settled between them.

Oh, how she loved this game.



Just like his mother.

Nick’s fist slammed into the punching bag, his knuckles stinging even through the padded gloves.

If Taylor wanted to squander the over ten grand he’d paid her this week on designer clothes, he didn’t care.

Another hit. Harder.

If Taylor didn’t want him, he didn’t care.

His right hand shot out like a bullet, striking the leather with a sharp, satisfying thud. The bag jerked wildly, swinging back toward him, but he caught it, steadying it with one gloved hand. His breath came in short bursts, his chest rising and falling in time with the pulsing beat of his fury.

Bam. Right. Bam. Left.

The rhythm was his only escape, the only thing keeping his thoughts in check. After five minutes, the tension in his shoulders started to loosen. After ten, the anger that had burned hot enough to make him cancel his afternoon appointments began to fade.

After twenty, only exhaustion remained.

And something worse.

Disappointment.

Nick ripped off his gloves and sank onto the nearby bench, sweat dripping from his forehead, soaking into the collar of his shirt. He rubbed a hand over his face, his mind reeling.

With all the women in the world, why did he have to go and fall in love with one just like his mother?

Fall in love?

The thought hit him harder than any punch he’d thrown. His hands tightened into fists at his sides, as if denying the very possibility.

He couldn’t be in love with her.

This was an act. A business arrangement.

Wasn’t it?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Nick, about the other night...”

Taylor paused, pressing her lips together, then tried again. “I hope you don’t think I’m making a mountain out of a—aargh!”

Frustrated, she whirled and dropped onto the bed with a defeated sigh. If she couldn’t even say it out loud in the privacy of her grandparents’ guest room, how was she supposed to say it to him?

The memory of Nick’s expression that night still haunted her—the smoldering heat in his gaze, the way his fingers had traced her cheek, the husky whisper of her name. And then the moment when everything shifted, when she’d seen the raw need in his eyes and had known—known—that if she said yes, nothing between them would ever be the same again.

But she hadn’t said yes. And she wasn’t sure if Nick was more shocked or disappointed.

Taylor squeezed her eyes shut. He was a handsome man. She enjoyed his company. They laughed at the same jokes and shared an appreciation for chocolate chip ice cream and golf. The chemistry between them had been undeniable from the start, an undercurrent of desire simmering just beneath the surface, waiting for the right moment to explode.

She could handle the attraction. She could resist the pull of his touch, the way his voice softened when he said her name.

What terrified her was something much bigger.

Love.

The realization had crept in slowly, a whisper at the edge of her consciousness that grew louder with every look, every touch, every heartbeat she spent with him. And now, there was no denying it.

She was in love with her leading man.

That’s why the role had been so easy to play.

Because she wasn’t pretending.

The thought sent a fresh wave of anxiety washing over her. Did Nick feel the same? Had the lines between real and pretend blurred for him, too? Or was she just another woman he wanted in his bed—one he could walk away from when their arrangement ended?

That question had kept her awake for most of the night, twisting and turning in bed, her mind replaying every moment between them. At some point, exhaustion had won, pulling her into a restless sleep filled with dreams she didn’t want to analyze too closely.

Taylor exhaled sharply and grabbed her robe.

A good breakfast first. Then she’d decide what she was going to do about Nick.



“Taylor. What a surprise.”

A sinking feeling gripped Nick’s gut, but he forced a smile past his unease. Taylor showing up unannounced at his office wasn’t a good sign. He motioned toward the chair across from him. “Take a seat.”

“Good morning.” Her smile was too bright, her tone too smooth—like she was bracing herself for something.

Despite the effortless grace that always made him look twice, Nick couldn’t ignore the subtle lines of fatigue on her face. Her green eyes, normally so vibrant, seemed dimmed by restless nights and thoughts she hadn’t voiced.

He could relate. His own emotions had been on a relentless roller coaster, throwing his sleep off balance, making him question every instinct.

He wanted her. Not just physically—though God knew that part was driving him crazy—but in a way that unsettled him. Having Tony around had stirred up something raw and unfamiliar. Fear. Fear of losing her. So he’d pushed too hard. Moved too fast.

But he couldn’t lose what they were building.

There was something about Taylor that made him feel warm inside, that made him think about sitting in front of a fire on a

cold winter day with a dog at his feet and her at his side. Warm inside? Nick gave a strangled groan. He'd been burning with a different kind of fire last night.

She tilted her head slightly. "Did you say something?"

He blinked, realizing a low groan had slipped from his throat. "Before you start... I want you to know I'm sorry about last night." He raked a hand through his hair, the apology foreign on his lips. He should have been the one to reach out this morning, to clear the air. It would have taken all of five minutes. But instead, he'd buried himself in work—his go-to distraction.

If you always do what you've always done...

He shoved the thought aside and focused on Taylor.

She shifted, looking as if the plush leather of his office chair had suddenly turned to stone. "We need to talk."

Four words that never meant anything good.

"I thought that's what we were doing."

She humored him with a half-smile, but her eyes remained serious. "Do you want to start, or should I?"

His gut told him to walk away now. Whatever she was about to say wouldn't be what he wanted to hear. He stood abruptly. "Go ahead."

"I'd feel better if you sat down."

The slight tremble in her voice sent a prickle of concern down his spine. Against his better judgment, he sat, turning his chair toward her.

A chill settled between them, unspoken words tightening the air. He wanted to reach for her hand, to reassure her that whatever this was, they'd figure it out together. But he remained still, flicking an invisible piece of lint off his sleeve instead.

Taylor took a deep breath. "I don't want to simply sleep with someone or have sex. I want to make love."

The words were soft but firm, and the pink creeping up her cheeks told him how hard they were to say.

"And I want that person to be my husband," she continued, her gaze unwavering. "I want it to mean something. Not just... something I do with a guy I hired for the summer."

Nick flinched. "Is that all I am to you?"

His voice came out harsher than he intended, laced with something dangerously close to pain.

A flicker of regret crossed her face, but she didn't waver. Instead, she met his gaze head-on. "Tell me, Nick—what's the most important thing in your life?"

The answer was automatic. "This company. Making it stronger. Bigger. The best."

She gave a sad, knowing nod. "That's what I thought you'd say."

For one wild second, he wanted to grab her, kiss her, prove that this was more than just a business deal. That she meant more. But he hesitated, like he always did, and the moment passed.

"What does that have to do with us?" He kept his voice even, detached.

"It shows how far apart we are on everything that really matters."

"We're not that far apart." His voice dipped lower, smoother, the way he knew could persuade her. "We get along great. You like golf. I like golf—"

"This isn't about golf, Nick." Her voice sharpened. "Or chocolate chip ice cream. It's about who we are in here." She placed a hand over her heart, her green eyes luminous with emotion.

He scoffed, folding his arms. "I didn't realize I was such a bad guy."

"You're not." A shaky breath left her lips. "But our priorities? They don't match. We want different things. And because of that, there can never be anything real between us."

The words landed like a punch to the gut.

He forced himself to breathe evenly, to keep his expression impassive. "Let me guess. The most important thing in your life is family."

"God and family," she corrected. "I don't put my job above everything else."

His jaw tightened. "That's easy for you to say. You don't have people depending on you for a paycheck every month."

"You're right, I don't." Her voice softened. "But when it comes down to it, Nick, at the end of the day, isn't coming home to someone who loves you what really matters?"

"I suppose this is where the pitter-patter of twelve little feet comes in?" Sarcasm dripped from his tone.

"That's right." No hesitation. No apology. "When your father was dying, what mattered in that moment? How many people he employed? Or having his wife and son by his side?"

Nick stiffened. *Take care of the company.*

That was all his father had said before he took his last breath. No words of love for his wife. No words of comfort for his son.

Nick forced a chuckle, shaking off the weight pressing against his ribs. "This is getting way too serious. Why don't we just agree to disagree?"

"Agree to disagree?"

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “Like you said, we’re too far apart on what we believe. Why even discuss it?”

“What about us?”

“What us?” His voice was cool, detached. “You said it yourself—there can never be anything real between us.”

A flicker of hurt crossed her face. “I was hoping I was wrong.”

Nick swallowed hard, but his expression remained unreadable.

“I thought maybe...” Her voice faltered. “That you wanted more from me than just a good time.”

His throat tightened, but he forced out the words anyway. “You’re a beautiful woman.”

Taylor sucked in a sharp breath as if he’d slapped her. Without another word, she grabbed her bag and shot to her feet. “I wish I’d never agreed to this.”

“I wish I’d never asked.” He felt like a recalcitrant child talking back, trying to one-up her, but he couldn’t seem to make himself stop. “I should have given you your old job back the second I realized it was all a mistake.”

The second the words left his mouth, he regretted them. But it was too late.

She froze in the doorway. “My old job? What are you talking about?”

He stifled a curse.

“I found out recently there was a mistake. The pink slip was meant for Kay Taylor in the audit department. Not you. Funny, huh?”

She turned slowly, her expression unreadable. “And you didn’t tell me?”

Because I was afraid to lose you.

He shrugged. “What would’ve been the point?”

Taylor stared at him for a long moment, something breaking behind her eyes. “I thought I knew you.”

“I guess not.”

She turned, and this time, he didn’t stop her.

You want me as much as I want you.

Nick wanted to yell the words, hurl them like a challenge, force her to admit what they both knew. That the way she had melted into him, clung to him, wasn’t pretend. That the way her lips had trembled against his, the way she had felt in his arms, wasn’t an act.

But what would that prove?

Her body had said yes.

Her heart had said no.

And that, more than anything, was what gutted him.

The door closed with a quiet finality, and the sound of it ricocheted through the hollow space in his chest.

Hot anger surged—at Taylor, at himself, at this whole ridiculous mess. He had wanted her, wanted them, more than he was willing to admit. But she had walked away, just like that.

Like he didn’t matter.

Nick shot to his feet, needing to get out, to move, to breathe.

His gaze landed on the framed photograph on his wall—his father, holding up a trophy, smiling with the kind of pride Nick had spent his whole life chasing. He turned away.

The scent of Taylor’s perfume still hung in the air, delicate and tormenting, wrapping around his senses like a cruel reminder.

He had to get out.

Without knowing where he was going, he grabbed his keys, left the office, and drove.

The streets blurred past him, familiar sights feeling foreign under the weight pressing against his chest.

By the time he pulled into Town Square, the day was still bright and golden, mocking his dark mood.

He stepped out of the car, shoved his hands into his pockets, and started walking.

Storefronts passed in a haze of movement and color. A boutique with mannequins dressed in floral sundresses. A bakery with trays of fresh pastries stacked in the window. A toy shop, its shelves lined with teddy bears and rocking horses.

Places where people came to build something—a home, a life, a family. Mothers pushing strollers, couples holding hands, old friends stopping to chat. Life was happening all around him, but Nick felt separate from it. Like he was standing behind glass, watching it unfold on the other side.

His father had spent his life building an empire.

Nick had spent his life trying to preserve it.

And in doing so, he’d never stopped to ask himself why.

Or what it had cost him.

Today, the answer was painfully clear.

It had cost him Taylor.

And if he didn’t do something soon, it would cost him everything.



Nick sent up a silent plea for some solitude as he walked through the town square, but fate had other plans.

The place bustled with life—mothers corralling their children, elderly couples enjoying the shade, and shoppers weaving through the shortcut across the park. A second stroller clipped his ankle, and he barely held back a curse. With a sigh, he made his way to a nearby bench, rubbing at the ache in his leg.

He pulled out his phone, intending to check his schedule, but the moment the screen lit up, he shoved it back into his pocket. What did it matter? His calendar was full, his business thriving—yet the one thing he truly wanted had slipped right through his fingers.

The woman he loved wouldn't have him.

"Is there room for two on that bench?"

Nick's head snapped up.

Claire stood before him, the sunlight catching the golden strands in her dark hair. She wore a yellow sundress that hugged her figure, her tan skin glowing against the fabric. In one hand, she clutched a shopping bag, the other gripping her purse just a little too tightly.

There was something different about her today. A flicker of uncertainty—hesitation, even. An uncharacteristic blush crept up her neck, as though for once, she wasn't completely in control.

Nick should have said no.

He should have gotten up and walked away.

But unlike Taylor, here was a woman who wanted him.

He shoved down the voice of conscience clawing at his gut and gestured to the empty space beside him. "There's room."

Claire's smile brightened, though he noticed the way she studied him, as if assessing his mood.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" she remarked lightly.

Nick gave a noncommittal shrug. "I guess."

"I'm surprised Taylor isn't here with you."

Something bitter twisted in his chest. "She has her life. I have mine."

The words tasted like regret.

Claire tilted her head, watching him carefully. "I've missed you, Nick." Her voice was soft, lacking its usual edge. "We used to have a lot of fun together."

Under different circumstances, he would have dismissed the comment, maybe even laughed it off. But the wound Taylor had left was still fresh, raw and aching. Claire wasn't attacking him, wasn't belittling his choices—she was just there. And at that moment, he wasn't sure he wanted to be alone.

He nodded, his answer more honest than it should have been. "We did."

Claire leaned in slightly.

"Now you have Tony to show you a good time."

"He'd rather be with Taylor."

The words landed like a punch to the gut.

Nick forced an indifferent smirk. "Is that so?"

"It doesn't matter." Claire shrugged, but there was something wounded in her expression. "I don't want someone who doesn't want me."

Nick exhaled slowly. "Me, either."

Claire studied him, something unreadable flickering in the depths of her dark eyes. Then, slowly, she leaned in, her voice just above a whisper, low and sultry.

"I'd much rather be with you."

Nick didn't move.

Maybe he should have.

Maybe this was the moment to step back, to put distance between them before the situation spiraled into something he couldn't undo.

But he didn't.

Not when her fingers trailed lightly over his forearm, lingering just long enough to send a slow, deliberate message. Not when she lifted her hand to his chest, smoothing out an invisible crease in his shirt, her touch featherlight but unmistakable.

Not when she reached up, threading her fingers into his hair, tilting her head just so, her lips dangerously close to his ear as she whispered, "I don't know why you fight it, Nicky."

His breath came sharp through his nose.

Taylor had walked away.

Taylor had chosen to let him go.

Claire hadn't.

Her fingers traced the edge of his jaw, her nails barely skimming his skin. "I see you, Nick. I know what you need."

With one hand, he reached up—intending to stop her, to push her away—but instead, his fingers brushed against a loose strand of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. The scent of her perfume curled around him, heady and expensive.

Claire smiled, tilting her face toward his touch, her lashes fluttering as she stepped even closer, her body almost brushing his.

"You don't have to be alone," she murmured.

His pulse pounded.

He could walk away. He *should* walk away.

And yet, he stood there, caught in the moment, in the nearness of her, in the promise written in the curve of her lips.

And then—

"What's going on here?"

The voice rang sharp and firm.

Nick froze.

Claire's fingers stilled against his chest.

His stomach dropped as he turned toward the sound, already knowing before he even laid eyes on the person standing behind them.

And just like that, whatever had been about to happen vanished, crashing him back into reality like a cold slap of water to the face.

Nick jerked back as though burned, his head snapping up.

Bill Rollins stood on the sidewalk, his expression a mixture of shock, anger, and—worst of all—disappointment.

"Bill—" Nick started, but Taylor's grandfather lifted a hand.

"What the..." The older man took a deep breath, visibly reigning in his temper. "Will someone tell me what's going on here?"

Claire smirked. "What does it look like?"

Nick clenched his jaw, resisting the urge to curse. What the heck was he doing?

"Claire, Bill and I need to talk. Alone."

Claire opened her mouth, but the sharpness in Nick's gaze silenced whatever protest she had ready.

With a dramatic sigh, she stood, smoothing her dress like a woman utterly unbothered. "Nick, sweetheart, I'll be home after six. Call me."

Nick clenched his fists as he watched her saunter away.

The moment she disappeared from view, he turned back to Bill, but before he could say a word—

"It looks like you're cheating on my granddaughter," Bill said coolly. "Is that what you're doing, Nick? Cheating on Taylor?"

Nick prided himself on control. Even in the most heated business negotiations, he never lost his composure.

But as a hot flush crept up his neck, he realized he had no defense.

He forced himself to meet Bill's gaze. "Taylor and I have been having some problems."

"And you think turning to another woman will solve them?" Bill's voice was incredulous.

Nick exhaled slowly. "It was stupid."

"You bet it was stupid."

The blunt words hit him like a slap.

Bill's expression softened—just slightly—but his eyes remained sharp, assessing. "I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to be honest with me."

Nick stiffened.

"Do you love my granddaughter?"

The answer should have been immediate.

Instead, it clawed its way up his throat, thick and aching.

He closed his eyes for half a second, pushing past the anger, the rejection, the mess he'd made of everything.

All that remained was the truth.

"I do." His voice was hoarse. "Very much."

Bill exhaled, his shoulders relaxing. "Then go to her. Work out whatever problems you're having. Pray to the Almighty for guidance. He's helped Kaye and me through many a rough time. He can do the same for you. You just need to ask."

Nick let out a breath, running a hand down his face.

If only it could be that simple.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Taylor, it is you." A thread of pleasure ran through Nana's voice, but there was a note of surprise too. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

Taylor stiffened over the dresser drawer, her hands gripping the fabric of the pajamas she'd come to retrieve. She hurriedly swiped at the tears on her cheeks with the tips of her fingers, willing herself to compose. She hadn't expected anyone to be home.

"I thought you'd be at bridge." Her voice came out too tight.

"So did I." Nana chuckled. "I got all the way to Betty's only to find out that Margie and Eleanor have the flu. We're skipping this week."

"That's too bad," Taylor murmured.

A gentle hand settled on her shoulder. "Honey, is something wrong?"

Wrong? Taylor let out a shaky breath. What wasn't wrong?

Her heart ached so fiercely it felt as if it had been physically torn in two. She had finally admitted what she'd tried to deny for so long—she loved Nick. But he didn't love her back.

She forced a laugh, but it came out cracked and uneven. "What could be wrong?"

Nana turned her gently, her knowing gaze taking in the tear-streaked face Taylor had tried to hide. She didn't say anything—she didn't need to.

Taylor's chin wobbled. "Nick and I had a fight." Her voice barely held together.

"Every couple has their disagreements." Though filled with concern, Nana's tone was steady. "It's not all bad."

How could she say that? Taylor's head snapped up. "What's good about fighting with someone you love?"

The last word hit her like a wrecking ball, shattering the fragile wall she had built around her feelings. There it was.

She loved Nick.

The truth crashed over her like a tidal wave, and she couldn't stop the sob that tore free.

"Come, sit." Nana maneuvered her to the bed, guiding her down beside her. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Taylor shook her head quickly. How could she explain?

How could she tell her grandmother that the man she loved had wanted her body but not her heart? That he had known she'd been fired in error and still kept it from her? That everything between them had been built on a foundation of pretense, even when it had felt real?

She stared down at her hands, twisting them in her lap. "We... we had words," she finally whispered. "I think it's over. He's not the man I thought he was."

Nana's response was quiet. "It hurts, doesn't it?"

The ache in Taylor's chest tightened like a vice. All she could do was nod.

But what surprised her most was that Nana didn't try to defend Nick. She didn't say Taylor had misunderstood him. She didn't tell her to reconsider.

"I don't know who's right or who's wrong in this situation," Nana finally said, her voice as gentle as ever. "But I have lived long enough to know that at one time or another, those we love will disappoint us."

Taylor's head shot up. "You don't know—"

"Taylor." Her grandmother's voice was firmer now, steady as a rock. "Stop and think about what I just said. *At one time or another, those we love will disappoint us.*" She repeated the words slowly, emphasizing each one.

Taylor's breath hitched.

"What am I supposed to do?" She knew she sounded desperate, but she didn't care. "Overlook it? Pretend nothing happened?"

"No." Nana's troubled eyes searched hers. "I'm saying you leave your pride at the door and search your heart."

Taylor swallowed hard, her emotions a tangled mess. "I don't know..." Her voice wavered.

"Perhaps you and Nick aren't meant to be together." Nana's tone was gentle, but the sadness in it sent a fresh wave of pain

through Taylor.

Two months ago, if someone had told her that her grandmother would encourage her to end things, she would have welcomed it. But everything had changed.

Nick had changed.

She had changed.

And her heart wasn't ready to let him go.

Taylor's lips parted, her voice barely above a whisper. "Do you believe that?"

Nana hesitated. Then, slowly, she covered Taylor's hand with her own. "I don't know him as well as you do." Her grip tightened. "But what I see, I like."

Taylor bit her lip. "I thought I did, too. But after what he said this morning... I'm not sure."

Nana studied her carefully. "Sometimes people say things when they're hurting. Things they don't mean."

Taylor looked away. "Or maybe he really is the man I saw today."

"I doubt that." Nana's voice was quiet but firm. "I can't believe you'd have agreed to marry someone who didn't have a good heart."

Taylor's breath hitched. "Nick's a good guy."

The words slipped out before she could stop them.

"Then don't make any quick decisions." Nana slipped an arm around Taylor's shoulders, giving her a squeeze. "Mull it over. Pray about it. Don't throw it all away unless you're sure."

Taylor's throat tightened. She could feel the love radiating from her grandmother—a love that had never wavered, never asked for anything in return.

The kind of love she wanted with Nick.

A tear slipped down her cheek, and she whispered, "I love you, Nana."

"I love you too, honey."

Taylor let herself sink into her grandmother's embrace, pressing her face against the soft familiarity of her shoulder.

For the first time in hours, she felt warm. Safe.

She closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath.

"It's going to be okay, isn't it?" Her voice was muffled against Nana's chest.

Her grandmother held her tighter, the certainty in her voice soothing her aching heart. "It will be fine."

Then, softly, "You'll see."



Nick waited until Bill was out of sight before rising from the bench and heading toward his car. His body felt leaden, as if all the energy had been drained from him. What the hell was he doing?

His cell phone rang just as he slid behind the wheel. "Lanagan."

"Nick, it's Erik. I've got great news." His friend's voice bubbled with excitement. "We've come to a resolution on that final snag in the merger negotiations, and I think we're going to be ready to sign before you can say, 'How much money will we make on this deal?'"

It was what Nick had been working toward for four years. What he'd dreamed of. What he'd sacrificed for.

So why did it suddenly feel... empty?

If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got.

Well, he'd done exactly that. And this time, what he got was losing Taylor.

A tight band wrapped around his chest.

"Nick? Are you there?"

"I'm here," he said, rubbing a weary hand across his forehead.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I did." He forced enthusiasm into his voice. It wasn't Erik's fault he didn't feel like celebrating. "It's great news. Good work."

"I'll let you know when the papers are ready," Erik continued, clearly not picking up on his mood. "We need to get these signed as soon as possible. Henry's too much of a powder keg. I won't feel good until his signature is on that contract."

An image of Claire, smiling like a cat with a canary in its mouth, flashed through his mind. She'd struck the match before—who was to say she wouldn't do it again?

"Call or text when they're ready," Nick said.

"Will do," Erik replied. "And, Nick..."

"Yeah?"

"Tell Taylor hello for me."

Nick ended the call without replying and fired up the engine. He pulled away from the curb, but despair seeped into every pore.

He wasn't even sure where he was going, just that he needed to go. He drove automatically, one hand on the wheel, his mind stuck in an endless loop of Taylor, Taylor, Taylor.

How had he screwed this up so badly?

"Get that piece of junk off the street!" an angry voice bellowed, jarring him from his thoughts.

Nick's gaze jerked ahead. Traffic had slowed to a stop, but he'd barely noticed. Now he saw the reason.

An all-too-familiar Civic with its hood up blocked the right lane.

Tom. The kid from the premarital counseling class.

He stood beside the car, looking young, lost, and in over his head.

A horn blared behind Nick. Another driver leaned out their window, yelling.

Tom raked his fingers through his hair and ducked beneath the hood, clearly at a loss.

Without thinking, Nick put his car in park and stepped out.

"Put the hood down," he called as he moved toward Tom. "I'll help you push it off to the side."

Relief flashed across the kid's face. He didn't argue. The hood slammed shut.

"Roll down the window and get in." Nick assessed the distance to a small shoulder area up ahead. "You steer, I'll push."

Tom nodded and slid behind the wheel.

Nick braced himself and leaned into the car. It didn't budge. He stifled a curse.

"Put it in neutral," he ordered.

Slowly, the clunky old Civic crept forward. "Cramp the wheel to the right."

With one final effort, Nick muscled the car off the road.

"Grab your keys and come with me," he said, not even looking back as he strode toward his Jag.

Tom barely hesitated before following.

As soon as the kid was inside, Nick pulled away from the curb. "What happened? Out of gas?"

"I wish," Tom muttered. "It just died."

Nick gestured toward his phone. "Want me to call a tow truck? Or I can drop you somewhere."

"Mandy's at the church for some meeting." Tom hesitated. "She has a car. If it's not too much trouble..."

Nick exhaled. It was the first time today he had a reason to do something that wasn't about himself.

"I'll take you there."

The church wasn't far, and before Nick knew it, he was pulling into the lot.

"I think that's her mom's Buick," Tom pointed to a navy-blue sedan.

"I don't want to leave you without a ride. Make sure it's hers."

"I will." Tom started to climb out, then hesitated. "Could you, uh, come in with me?"

Nick blinked. "Come in?"

"It's a *women's* thing," Tom muttered. "I don't want to be the only guy."

Nick could have pointed out that Pastor Schmidt would probably be there. Or that there was really nothing to fear from a group of women. Instead, he got out of the car.

Inside, the foyer bustled with energy.

Nick caught snippets of conversation—Halloween decorations, bake sales, Sunday School plans. He almost smiled.

Taylor would have loved this.

His stomach twisted at the thought.

"Nick, man. Thanks so much." Tom dug into his worn-out wallet. "What do I owe you?"

Nick shook his head. "Not a thing."

"But—"

"What are friends for?"

The words came out before he even realized what he was saying. Friends.

The phrase settled in his chest, strangely right.

"Nick Lanagan."

The deep voice made him turn.

Pastor Schmidt stood in the doorway of his office, looking directly at him.

Nick forced a smile. *Please don't let this be about the wedding that's not happening.*

“I thought I heard your voice,” the pastor said. “Do you have a minute?”

Nick hesitated. Then, surprising even himself, he nodded.

“I just got through reviewing the questionnaire you and Taylor completed.”

Nick’s stomach twisted. That night had been a disaster.

“Did I pass?” he joked, trying to lighten the mood.

The pastor hesitated.

Nick’s chest tightened. “Don’t tell me I failed?”

“Failed isn’t the right word.” The pastor lifted a coffee pot, stalling.

Unease settled in Nick’s gut. He remembered well the pop quiz. He’d thought the evening was over when the pastor had surprised them with the survey. Not only did each couple get no chance to discuss the questions, he’d separated the men and women while they’d filled out the form. Nick had tried his best to anticipate Taylor’s answers when he’d written his own.

“You think Taylor and I aren’t compatible.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” the minister said. “But there are areas of potential conflict.”

Nick raised a brow.

“Children, for example. You said you wanted six,” the pastor continued. “Taylor, on the other hand, isn’t sure she wants any.”

Nick sat up straighter. That had to be wrong.

“I see it is a surprise.” The pastor let out a long, audible breath. “The fact that you two haven’t discussed it adds to my concern.”

Taylor must have thought he’d answer honestly. The minister had stressed that in his instructions. “Above all, be honest,” he’d said.

Nick cleared his throat. “We have discussed it, Pastor. What surprised me is that I thought Taylor had agreed to a big family.”

“She can’t simply agree.” The minister leaned forward. “Taylor needs to really *want* those children, not just go along because that’s what you want.”

Nick swallowed hard.

He had been so sure of her answer. So sure he knew her.

“I think Taylor is concerned that with work and everything else, she might not have time for children,” the pastor added. “What was your response to that?”

Nick hesitated.

Then, something shifted.

He heard Taylor’s voice in his head. *Isn’t coming home at night to someone who loves you what really matters?*

He exhaled.

“I told her...” He met the pastor’s gaze. “That if you put God and family first, you can’t go wrong.”

The words weren’t a lie.

The real question was, was it too late for him to prove it?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Nick!”

Surprise flickered across his mother’s face, quickly followed by a rush of warmth.

Nick shifted from one foot to the other. He shouldn’t be here. He’d spent the past two years avoiding this house, keeping his distance. But after his conversation with the pastor about family, he knew it was time to mend some fences.

“I probably should have called,” he said gruffly. Or maybe he shouldn’t have come at all. “If I’m interrupting...”

Sylvia, however, didn’t give him a chance to back out. “Nonsense.” She reached for his arm, her grip surprisingly firm as she practically yanked him over the threshold.

“I was just putting around. Charlie’s out golfing—can you believe it? In this weather?” She chattered as she led him into the living room, not even pausing for breath. Like she was afraid if she did, he’d change his mind and leave.

Nick wasn’t sure if it was sad or reassuring that she knew him so well.

“Can I get you some iced tea? Or I can brew coffee?”

“Mother.” His hand found her arm, stopping her mid-motion. “Can we just talk?”

She stilled.

A shadow passed over her face, and guilt gnawed at him. How many times had he dismissed her? Let his resentment fester instead of trying to understand?

“I need your help,” he admitted.

Sylvia’s brows lifted. “Is it the company?”

It made sense that she’d assume that. The business had been his world for so long.

“No,” he said, his throat tight. “It’s not about work.”

Something flickered in her expression—hope, maybe. Worry. She gestured for him to take a seat, and for a moment, Nick almost believed she’d sit next to him.

But instead, she lowered herself into the overstuffed chair across from him, the distance between them feeling too vast for comfort. Her flushed excitement had faded, replaced by wary expectation.

“What’s the matter, Nick?”

He took a breath. There was no easy way to ask.

“Were you and Dad happy together?”

Her reaction was almost imperceptible. A slight stiffening of her shoulders. A momentary flicker of surprise.

“Happy?” she echoed, as if she hadn’t expected the question. “What a strange thing to ask.”

His gut twisted. “Are you and Charlie happy?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then why is it so odd for me to ask about you and Dad?”

She smoothed a wrinkle from her slacks. A nervous gesture.

Nick clenched his jaw.

How much of his life had been built around an illusion?

Sylvia sighed. “Your father was a wonderful man with many fine qualities.”

“Mother, please,” he said, frustration creeping into his voice. “The truth.”

She hesitated. Then, softly, “I always loved your father, Nick.” A pause. “But toward the end, I didn’t always like him that much.”

His heart clenched.

“That couldn’t have something to do with the spending, could it?” he asked, unable to keep the cynicism from his voice.

Surprisingly, she didn’t react.

“To some extent, yes.” She met his gaze, her own eyes dark with memories. “But it was more than that.” A shadow crossed her face. “When we were first married, we were happy. But as the business grew, he began to spend more and more time at the office. We wanted different things.”

Nick swallowed hard. He knew this story all too well.

“Especially that last year.” Her voice lowered. “He felt it was important to keep up appearances.”

Nick froze. “Appearances?”

“You remember how he was.” A sad, knowing smile tugged at her lips. “Such a private man. When he started staying home because he didn’t have the energy to go to work, he worried about the rumors. To counter the speculation that the business was in trouble, he increased his spending rather than scaling back. He insisted we be seen at all the best parties.”

Nick’s stomach dropped.

He’d always believed it was her.

Her greed. Her extravagance. Her reckless disregard for his company’s future.

But it hadn’t been her at all.

“Are you saying all that spending was his idea?”

His mother looked just as confused. “Of course. You know that.” She let out a short, humorless laugh. “Take the Jag, for instance. He ordered it before he was diagnosed and wouldn’t hear of canceling. ‘My dear,’ he said, ‘what would people think?’” She shook her head, a trace of bitterness coloring her voice. “He didn’t seem to understand that his extravagant spending was putting the entire company at risk.”

Nick sat there, stunned.

He had spent years resenting his mother. Believing she was the reason his father’s legacy had nearly crumbled. That she had cared more about status than stability.

And he had been wrong.

All these years. Wrong.

His fingers curled into fists.

He buried his face in his hands. If he was wrong about this, what else had he been wrong about?

“Nick.”

Her voice was soft. Concerned.

A hand settled lightly on his arm.

For the first time in years, he didn’t flinch away.

He looked up and met her eyes—blue, just like his. And for the first time, he saw her.

Not as the woman he’d made into a villain.

Not as a symbol of misplaced blame.

But as his mother.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” she pleaded.

Nick exhaled.

Everything.

The weight of his own mistakes pressed down on him, suffocating.

He had let his father’s last words define him. Shape him. And in doing so, he had turned into the very man he had resented.

He had let his company rule his life.

He had pushed away the people who loved him.

He had let pride cost him Taylor.

And he was so darn tired of it all.

His throat felt tight. His voice raw.

“Mother,” he said, reaching for her hand. “I know I haven’t been the son you deserved.”

Her lips parted, as if to protest, but he shook his head.

“No,” he said firmly. “I’ve been stubborn. And blind. And for too long, I let my own resentment get in the way of seeing the truth.”

A tremor ran through her fingers as she squeezed his hand. “You’re here now.”

He nodded.

And for the first time in years, it felt like enough.

But this wasn’t the only fence he needed to mend.

It was time to fight for Taylor.



Tony forced a laugh, though Claire’s words sent a chill crawling up his spine. He had always known she was manipulative, but this? This was a new level.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, pulling back slightly. “You want me to seduce Taylor—who, by the way, is completely in love with Nick and not the kind of woman to cheat—and if I can’t, you just want me to lie about it?”

Claire arched a perfectly sculpted brow. "Is that a problem?"

Yeah, it was a problem. A big one. Taylor wasn't just some random woman. She was his friend. And though he had agreed to stir the pot, this was something else entirely.

"This isn't what we discussed," Tony said carefully.

Claire sighed, exasperated. "Tony, you agreed to help me break them up. You knew from the start that wouldn't happen by playing fair. Nick is already on the edge. He's drowning in his own jealousy. We just need to give him a little *push*."

Tony clenched his jaw. "And what happens when Taylor finds out? Because she *will*."

Claire waved a dismissive hand. "She'll be heartbroken, but she'll recover. Women always do."

The casual cruelty in her voice made his stomach twist. She really didn't care who she hurt, as long as she got what she wanted.

"You don't understand Taylor," Tony said. "She's not the type to take this lying down. She'll fight for Nick."

Claire's smile didn't falter. "Not if he doesn't give her a chance. Trust me, once Nick thinks she's been unfaithful, he'll be *done* with her. She'll be out of his life, and he'll come running right back to me."

Tony exhaled sharply. He wanted the money, but this? This was *low*. He might have agreed to play along in the beginning, but this was crossing a line he wasn't sure he could come back from.

Claire leaned in again, her voice soft and coaxing. "Come on, Tony. Think about it. You get paid, I get Nick, and Taylor? She'll be better off. She deserves a guy who actually wants her. Who wouldn't rather be married to his *company*?"

Tony hesitated. He had no loyalty to Nick. The guy had it all—money, power, the perfect life. *And yet...* something about this didn't sit right.

"Just think about it," Claire purred, running a finger down his chest before pulling away. "You're a smart man. You'll make the right choice."

As she walked away, Tony let out a slow breath.

Yeah, he *would* make the right choice.

And it probably wasn't going to be the one Claire wanted.



Taylor yanked on the mower cord, her arm aching from the repeated effort. Sweat dripped down her temple, her ponytail clinging to the damp skin at the back of her neck. The mower sputtered, coughed, and died again.

"Come on, you stupid thing," she muttered, tightening her grip and pulling harder. Nothing. The machine remained stubbornly silent, mocking her.

As if this day couldn't get any worse.

A warm breeze stirred the humid air, but it did nothing to ease the heat pressing against her skin. Her thoughts churned as relentlessly as the mower should have been. Nick. Their fight. The words they'd exchanged. She yanked the cord again, as if sheer force might will it to start, might will everything in her life to make sense.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Tony's voice cut through the sticky air, light with amusement, and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

Startled, she glanced up, pushing stray hair from her face. Tony stood at the edge of the driveway, arms crossed, looking effortlessly cool in a crisp shirt and jeans. Meanwhile, she was red-faced, sweaty, and about one pull away from throwing the mower into the street.

"It looks like I'm attempting murder," she grumbled, nudging the mower with the toe of her sneaker. "I'm just not sure yet if it's the grass or this worthless hunk of metal."

Tony's lips twitched, but there was something else in his gaze, something that made Taylor uneasy.

"I'd say it's time for a break," he suggested, crooking a finger at her. "Before you kill it. Or it kills you."

She exhaled sharply, giving the mower one last glare before stomping toward him.

"I've missed you," he said quietly, his dark eyes sweeping over her face. There was a weight in his voice that hadn't been there before. "Is everything okay?"

Taylor hesitated, feeling suddenly exposed beneath his probing stare. She wanted to brush off his concern, but her heart wasn't in it. Not today.

"I'm hot and extremely frustrated." She attempted a laugh, though it sounded hollow. "Want some tea?"

Tony smiled, but the concern in his eyes didn't waver. "I'd love some."

She led him inside, hyper-aware of the silence stretching between them. In the kitchen, she filled two tumblers with ice, the clinking sound sharp in the stillness. As she poured, she could feel his gaze on her, waiting.

She slid his drink across the table and sank into the chair opposite him. "Alright, spill it. What's up?"

Tony hesitated, running a hand through his hair before meeting her gaze. "Can't a guy just stop by and check in on his friend?"

Taylor gave him a look. "Not when that guy is you, and not when he has that look on his face."

He exhaled, leaning forward. "I wanted to talk to you about Nick."

Taylor stiffened, her fingers tightening around her glass. "What about us?"

Had Nick already told people they'd broken up? The very idea sent a sharp, unexpected pain through her chest.

"Be honest with me," Tony said, his voice steady. "Are you sure you want to marry him?"

The words landed like a slap, rattling through her. She blinked, caught off guard. "What kind of question is that?"

"An honest one," Tony said, his expression unreadable. "I know you, Taylor. And I know when you're holding back."

Her pulse pounded in her ears. She opened her mouth, ready to shut this conversation down, but the hesitation in her own heart betrayed her. Was she sure?

She forced a laugh, even as her stomach clenched. "Of course, I'm sure. Why would you even ask?"

Tony's gaze didn't waver. "Because from everything I've heard, Lanagan is a guy whose only real love is that company of his."

A chill trickled down her spine. She set her glass down with more force than necessary. "That's ridiculous."

A flicker of something—hurt, maybe—passed through Tony's eyes. He started to push back from the table. "Forget I said anything."

Without thinking, she reached for him, her fingers curling around his wrist, stopping him.

"Tony, I didn't mean—" She swallowed, softening her voice. "I just know Nick isn't like that."

His jaw tightened. "I hope you're right."

"I am," she said, more firmly this time.

Tony studied her, his gaze lingering on her face. Then he shook his head, a small, incredulous smile forming on his lips.

"You love him."

The certainty in his voice sent her heart slamming against her ribs. "What?"

"You love him," he repeated, leaning back, the amazement clear on his face. "I mean, you've said it before, but I never saw it in your eyes. Until now."

Her breath caught in her throat. She wanted to deny it, to challenge him, but the truth was, he was right.

She did love Nick.

And it terrified her.

Tony reached across the table, his hand covering hers, warm and familiar. "If he's the right one, then I'm happy for you. I just don't know if he is."

She held his gaze for a long moment. He was handsome, kind, the kind of man who would be so easy to love.

But not for her.

"You'll always be special to me, Tony," she said softly.

"And you to me." But his smile was forced, his eyes shadowed. Abruptly, he shoved back his chair and rose. "I should get going."

The sudden ring of her phone jolted them both. Taylor jumped. Before she could react, Tony grabbed it.

"Hello?"

His expression stilled, the color draining from his face. His fingers tightened around the phone.

Taylor's pulse kicked up. "Is it Nick?"

"No." He exhaled slowly, his dark eyes full of something that made her stomach drop.

He held out the phone.

"It's about your grandfather."

Taylor's fingers trembled as she took the phone, dread settling heavy in her chest.

"This is Taylor," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Miss Rollins?" The voice on the other end was steady but laced with urgency. "This is Dr. Pierce from Cedar Ridge General. Your grandfather was brought in a little while ago. He collapsed at home."

Collapsed.

The word sliced through her like a knife.

She gripped the phone tighter. "Is he—how is he? Is he awake? Can I—"

"He's stable for now," Dr. Pierce assured her, though his voice held the careful neutrality of someone trying not to make promises. "But we need you to come in as soon as possible."

"I—I'm on my way."

She barely heard the doctor's parting words before she lowered the phone.

Tony was already grabbing his keys. "Let's go."

"No." Taylor shook her head. "I—I need to drive myself."

"Taylor—"

"Please." She swallowed hard, struggling to keep it together. "I just need to—" She broke off, unable to finish.

Tony shook his head. “You’re in no condition to drive.”

She didn’t have the energy to argue.

Her grandfather—her rock, her guide, the man who had always been there—had collapsed.

The very idea was unthinkable.

She needed to get to him. Now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Where is he?" Taylor's voice cut through the hushed, sterile waiting room, sharp with desperation. Her heart pounded as her eyes darted around, searching for a familiar face, for a nurse, a doctor—anyone who could tell her something.

But there was no one.

No one except Nick.

Her stomach tightened at the sight of him rising from the stiff vinyl chair, his expression careful, measured. He pointed to the set of heavy double doors at the far end of the hall. "Back there. The doctor is with him now."

The air felt thick, suffocating. Taylor hated hospitals—the stifling sterility, the cloying scent of antiseptic that burned her nose, the way every overhead page of a Code Blue sent a bolt of terror through her spine.

She couldn't be here. She needed to be back there. With him.

Her feet were already moving, her breath coming in short, shallow bursts. "What room is he in?"

She didn't wait for an answer. She wouldn't.

Nick's hand shot out, closing around her wrist just as she reached the doors.

"Taylor, wait."

She yanked, trying to shake him off. "Let me go."

"Listen to me—"

"Not now, Nick. We can talk later." Panic clawed at her throat, made her voice sharp, shaky. "I need to see my grandfather."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you." His grip was firm, steady, and the gentleness in his voice only made her heart pound harder. "Only one person can be with him right now. Your grandmother just went back."

Her stomach plummeted.

Nana.

Taylor swallowed hard, her pulse a drumbeat in her ears. She needed to see him—she needed to tell him she loved him, just in case—

No.

She refused to let herself finish the thought.

He was going to make it.

He had to.

Her knees wobbled beneath her. She couldn't fall apart. Not here. Not now.

Nick must have seen it—felt the way her body trembled beneath his touch. "Let's sit down," he murmured, his voice low and steady, like an anchor in a storm.

She gave a jerky nod, letting him guide her toward the faded green vinyl couch hugging the waiting room wall. As soon as she sat, she realized just how weak her legs had become.

"Tell me what happened." The words came out breathless, barely above a whisper.

Nick's jaw tightened. "He started having chest pains. Your grandmother called 911. She said she tried to reach you, but no one answered."

Her gut twisted. The mower. She'd been outside, pulling on that stupid, stubborn mower cord, cursing at it, while her grandfather had been struggling to breathe.

"She called me," Nick continued. "I met her here at the hospital. She thought you might be with me."

Nana, ever the optimist. Ever hopeful.

Taylor's fingers curled into fists in her lap.

"Your grandfather will be fine," Nick said.

She snapped her head up. "You don't know that."

His lips pressed together, but he nodded. "No. But I've certainly bent God's ear since I've been here." He attempted a small smile, but his blue eyes remained clouded with worry. "I'm betting He'll make Bill well just to shut me up."

A shaky breath escaped her. "I hope you're right."

"I know I am."

Her fingers dug into her purse, searching for a tissue, but her hands were trembling too much to grasp one. A few stray tears slipped free, trailing down her cheeks before she could stop them.

Nick reached for her hand, his grip warm, solid. "If they don't come out in five minutes, I'll go check."

Taylor glanced at her phone, her knuckles white. "If someone's not here in two minutes, I'll check."

Nick exhaled a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "You're one determined woman."

She barely heard him, her mind locked on the door, on the seconds ticking down.

"Taylor?"

She tore her gaze from the clock. "Yes?"

Nick hesitated, then locked eyes with her, his blue gaze shining under the fluorescent lights. "I'm sorry about this morning."

The words hit her like a shock of ice water.

Her chest ached, but she shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

"It does." His voice was rough, weighted. "I should have told you about the job the moment I found out. I was wrong to keep it from you, and I hope you can forgive me."

The pain of his betrayal resurfaced, cutting fresh, raw. She wanted to say something, to tell him how much it hurt.

But this wasn't the time.

She opened her mouth—to tell him so—but the sharp ring of his phone interrupted her.

Nick sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. "Lanagan." His voice was clipped, professional. Taylor barely paid attention, her eyes flicking back to the hallway.

Thirty seconds.

His expression darkened. "Now? Erik, you'll have to reschedule. Yes, I understand the risk. Anytime tomorrow would be fine."

Taylor pushed to her feet. "You can go, Nick. I'm sure you have a lot of work to do."

She wasn't being cold. She just couldn't handle one more thing right now.

Nick slipped his phone back into his pocket and stood. "I'm not going anywhere."

She stared at him.

"We're going to check on Bill," he said firmly.

Something inside her cracked. She didn't want to do this alone.

Nick must have seen it because he lifted a hand, brushing his fingers lightly over her lips. "Family is more important."

Something flickered inside her. Something deep and terrifying.

But she didn't have time to think about what it meant.

Not when a familiar voice suddenly called her name.

"Ms. Rollins?"

Her head jerked toward the hallway.

Dr. Pierce.

The sight of him sent a bolt of ice through her veins. His white coat. The stethoscope draped around his neck. That same calm, clinical expression he'd worn when he'd told her—

Her stomach twisted.

He had been the one to tell her about her father.

Now he was here. Telling her about her grandfather.

Nick's arm slipped around her waist, a silent, grounding presence.

She forced her voice not to shake. "How is he?"

Dr. Pierce hesitated. The same way he had before.

Her chest tightened.

No. Please. Not again.

"He's stable."

Her knees nearly buckled.

"However—"

Her stomach dropped again.

The doctor met her gaze. "His heart is in atrial fibrillation. We're preparing to perform a cardioversion. The consent forms are being signed now."

Taylor's breath caught. "Shock his heart?"

"It sounds dangerous, but it's the best course of action. He's strong otherwise. I'm optimistic."

Nick squeezed her hand, grounding her.

Taylor nodded, even as the lump in her throat grew. "Please... just do everything you can."

Dr. Pierce gave a brief nod. "We will."

“Thank you. He and my grandmother are all I have.” Taylor exhaled shakily, struggling to keep herself together. Nick’s voice was low against her ear. “What you told the doctor wasn’t entirely true.”

She turned to him.

His gaze was intense, unwavering.

“You also have me,” he murmured.

Her throat constricted.

She wanted to believe him.

For now, she thought.

But for how long?



Tony took a slow sip of coffee, his gaze fixed on the restaurant’s glass doors. Claire was late. As usual.

The silence inside the nearly empty restaurant stretched around him. The clink of silverware and low murmurs of conversation drifted from a small group of businessmen at a table near the back, but otherwise, the place felt hollow. He had chosen a window seat, wanting space, wanting clarity—two things that had eluded him for weeks.

Tomorrow, at ten a.m., he’d be on a plane, leaving all of this behind. Cedar Ridge. Claire. Taylor.

He swallowed the last bitter dregs of his coffee just as Claire swept through the entrance, her arrival as dramatic as ever.

“I thought I said to wait in the lobby.” She barely glanced at him, instead pulling off her designer sunglasses and slipping them into her handbag. Her lips, painted a shade too deep for daylight, curved into a smug smile as she brushed an absent kiss against his cheek before sinking gracefully into the chair across from him.

Tony didn’t return the smile. He simply set his cup down, the ceramic clinking softly against the saucer. “You also said we’d meet at three.”

Claire lifted a perfectly manicured brow as she flipped open the menu. “You’re such a clock-watcher.”

He didn’t bother replying. She wouldn’t apologize. She never did.

A waiter appeared beside their table, young, tanned, ridiculously eager. His sun-streaked hair and toned arms gave him the look of someone who belonged more on a surfboard than serving iced tea.

“What can I get for you?” The kid’s attention was all on Claire, his smile a little too friendly.

Claire, of course, basked in it. She tilted her head, her dark lashes sweeping down in a well-practiced move that Tony had seen her use a thousand times before. “I’ll have a glass of strawberry apricot iced tea.”

The waiter’s grin widened. “Will that be all?”

Claire let her gaze linger, full of practiced charm. “For now.”

Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes—or gag.

Claire’s gaze followed the waiter until he disappeared into the kitchen.

“You’d be robbing the cradle with that one,” Tony said dryly.

“He’s cute.” Her smile was slow, indulgent. “Did you notice?”

“I’ll make sure to check him out when he comes back,” Tony deadpanned.

Her amusement flickered. Then, just as quickly, her expression cooled. A knowing gleam sparked in her dark eyes as she reached across the table, resting her hand over his.

“Don’t be jealous.”

Tony laughed, short and sharp. “Jealous? As if.”

For a split second, something flashed across her face—hurt, maybe. But then, just as fast, it vanished behind the steel of her well-rehearsed indifference. She pulled her hand back.

Tony sighed. “Claire, I’m sorry.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Let’s get down to business.” The flirtation disappeared, replaced by something sharper. “Did you succeed in your mission?”

Tony glanced toward the kitchen just as the waiter reappeared, moving with annoying efficiency. He took his time setting Claire’s iced tea on the table, his movements deliberate, his eyes lingering on her a beat too long.

“Thank you,” Tony said flatly, cutting the moment short. “That’ll be all for now.”

The kid hesitated, clearly waiting for Claire to object, but when she didn’t, he turned and walked away.

Tony leaned forward, his fingers laced together on the table. His voice dropped to a low, warning tone. “And what if I had succeeded, Claire? Were you planning to broadcast it to the world?”

She sat up straighter, her eyes gleaming. “You did it!”

The raw, gleeful excitement in her voice made Tony’s stomach turn. How had he ever found her attractive?

A slow smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. He let the moment stretch, let her bask in her victory. Then he took a breath and shattered it.

"I didn't even try."

The change was immediate. The sparkle in her eyes darkened into something cold and unreadable.

Her voice, when it came, was dangerously smooth. "What kind of game are you playing?"

He had to give her credit. No screaming, no throwing things. Claire was smarter than that.

"No game," Tony said simply, leaning back. And for the first time in weeks, he felt a strange, unfamiliar sensation—peace.

"Taylor is my friend," he continued, "She's in love with Nick. End of story."

Claire didn't move. Didn't blink.

Then, slowly, deliberately, she leaned forward, her dark eyes burning with something furious, something lethal. "No, it's not the end."

Her voice was quiet, controlled, but Tony could hear the venom curling beneath the surface.

"I paid you a lot of money—"

"I'll pay you back." He said it without hesitation. He'd made the decision the moment he dropped Taylor off at the hospital.

Claire's lip curled. "With what?" She let out a cold, humorless laugh. "Your good looks?"

Tony absorbed the insult without flinching. He knew what she saw when she looked at him—the same shallow, easy-going man he'd pretended to be. A man willing to take money to manipulate an old friend.

But that wasn't him. Not anymore.

Seeing Taylor again had been a wake-up call. A reminder of who he used to be. Who he wanted to be.

And for the first time in years, Tony had hope.

Claire must have sensed the shift because her expression changed, suspicion flickering across her face.

Tony smiled. A real one. The kind that had nothing to do with deception.

"You'll get your money, Claire."

Then he stood, tossing a few bills on the table for the coffee.

"But this conversation?" His gaze locked onto hers. "It's over."

And with that, he turned and walked away.

For good.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Taylor eased the hospital room door shut behind her, exhaling softly as she turned to find Nick waiting for her. His broad frame looked tense, his sharp blue eyes flickering with concern the moment he saw her face.

"He wants to speak with you," she murmured.

She lifted a hand to brush a stray strand of hair from her face, her limbs weighted with exhaustion. The sterile hospital air felt thick around her, and the events of the past twenty-four hours pressed against her shoulders like an unbearable weight. She should have been relieved—Grandpa Bill looked better than she'd feared—but the emotional toll of it all had drained her to the bone.

Nick studied her, his expression tightening. "Are you okay?"

The warmth in his voice nearly unraveled her. She forced a smile, one she hoped would convince him she was fine, even if she wasn't.

"I'm fine." The words felt hollow in her mouth.

She'd expected him to be gone by now. She'd asked him to come into the room with her, but he had refused, saying that the family needed their time alone. And yet, here he was, still standing outside the door, waiting for her.

"Would you mind staying with him for a few minutes?" she asked softly.

Nick hesitated. The slight flicker in his expression was so fleeting she almost missed it.

"I'm sure your grandmother—"

"--Is going to take a walk with me to the cafeteria," Taylor interjected. "Believe me, it took a lot to convince her. But she won't leave him alone."

She studied him, puzzled by his unease. Over the past few months, he and Grandpa had formed an easy friendship. She would have thought he'd be happy to sit with him. Instead, he shifted uncomfortably, his jaw tight.

Taylor reached out and placed a hand lightly on his arm. "Please, Nick."

His gaze met hers, and for a moment, something flashed across his face—something that made her breath hitch.

"Even if you won't do it for me," she continued, her voice barely above a whisper, "Nana needs to get some food in her."

Nick held her stare for a long moment before finally nodding. "I'll be happy to stay with him."

Relief flooded through her, and yet, her composure wavered. Her voice shook as she whispered, "Thank you."

Nick caught it. His sharp eyes softened, and before she could step away, he tilted her chin up with a single finger.

"Hey," he murmured, his touch sending warmth through her. "Don't go getting all weepy on me."

Taylor stiffened, blinking back the moisture burning behind her lids. "I'm not."

The spark of amusement in his gaze deepened, and she caught the twitch of his lips.

He was teasing her.

She let out a breathy laugh, shaking her head. "What am I going to do with you?"

His expression shifted, something deeper creeping into his eyes—something that made her stomach tighten. His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "I don't know. Maybe keep me around a while longer? Maybe—"

"Nana."

Taylor stepped back quickly, clearing her throat as her grandmother approached.

"Nick will stay with Grandpa while we get some food."

Nana hesitated. "I'm really not hungry."

Taylor slipped her arm around her grandmother's frail shoulders. "You told me you haven't eaten all day. Even if you're not hungry, I'm starving."

Nana opened her mouth to argue, but before she could, Nick stepped forward.

"Kaye, go ahead and keep Taylor company," he said smoothly. "It'll give me a chance to talk to Bill. There's something I want to discuss with him."

Taylor lifted a brow at his easy delivery, impressed despite herself.

"Are you sure?" Nana frowned. "I'm sure you have work to do."

Nick's voice was firm, brooking no argument. "Nothing that can't wait."

Still, Nana wavered. "What if they need to reach me? Sometimes you can't hear those overhead pages."

Taylor glanced at Nick in silent plea.

His lips quirked, and before she could protest, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, offering it to her grandmother.

"Take mine."

Nana shook her head. "I couldn't possibly—"

"With all the monitoring equipment, I can't take it in there anyway," he said easily. "It'll be safer with you."

Taylor took the phone and slipped it into her purse, her gaze lingering on Nick. "Thank you."

He smiled. "Take your time. Bill and I will be just fine."

To Taylor's surprise, Nana reached up and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek.

Nick, looking momentarily taken aback, recovered quickly and enveloped her grandmother in a warm hug. His voice dropped as he whispered against her ear, "It will all be okay."

Taylor felt something tighten in her chest.

Who was this man?

Her grandmother straightened, appearing stronger than she had all day. "A bowl of soup might be a good idea, after all."

They had barely made their way through the cafeteria line and settled at a table when Nick's phone rang.

Taylor's hand froze around her spoon.

Nana, mid-bite into her grilled cheese, paled slightly.

Taylor exchanged a quick, worried glance with her before lifting the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

The cafeteria hummed with noise, the clatter of trays, the low murmur of conversation. Taylor pressed a hand against her other ear, straining to hear.

"Hello?"

The static crackled.

"Nick, it's Erik. We've got a bad connection. I can barely hear you."

Taylor froze.

It's for Nick. She mouthed the words to Nana.

Her grandmother exhaled, visibly relaxing.

Taylor turned back to the call, but before she could correct Erik, his voice pushed through the interference.

"Okay, you listen. I'll talk. I rescheduled that meeting with Henry. You owe me big, buddy. The old barracuda wanted to know why you wouldn't take time to sign the papers. Asked if you really wanted his company. I improvised. Told him you'd been kidnapped by space aliens. He laughed, but I don't think he was convinced. So, two p.m. tomorrow. No excuses. Ciao."

The call ended.

Taylor sat motionless, her heart hammering against her ribs.

Nick had canceled the meeting.

She barely noticed as she set the phone down, her mind racing. That merger—he'd spent years working for it. She knew how much it meant to him.

And yet...

He had stayed.

For her. For her grandparents.

Her throat tightened. None of this made sense.

"Who was it?" Nana asked, cutting her sandwich into careful fourths.

Taylor hesitated, her voice oddly unsteady. "Nick's lawyer."

Her grandmother lifted a brow. "And?"

Taylor's fingers curled against the tabletop. "Apparently, Nick canceled an important meeting today. A very important meeting."

She shook her head, whispering more to herself than anyone else. "Why would he have done that?"

Nana's soft laugh broke the silence, light and airy—a silver tinkle of a laugh, like the chime of wind bells.

Taylor blinked at her in confusion.

Her grandmother's smile was knowing.

"Why, my dear, I should think that would be perfectly obvious."

Taylor's pulse pounded in her ears as Nana set down her sandwich and met her gaze.

"The man loves you."



Once they returned to the hospital room, Nana gently placed Nick's phone into his hand. "Thank you, sweetheart. For everything."

Her voice was warm with gratitude, and she squeezed his hand before moving back to Grandpa Bill's bedside, her love for her husband evident in the way she brushed a stray wisp of hair from his forehead.

Taylor watched the quiet exchange, a lump forming in her throat.

She caught Nick's eye and gave him a small, grateful smile. Then, with a subtle tilt of her head, she motioned toward the door.

They slipped out unnoticed, the hush of the hospital hallway pressing around them.

Once they reached the quiet of the corridor, Taylor turned to him, fingers tightening around his hand. "Thanks for staying with him."

Nick shrugged, as if it hadn't mattered. "It was nothing."

But it wasn't nothing.

She could feel the weight of what he'd done—the choice he'd made to be here instead of in a boardroom signing the most important deal of his career.

Taylor took a deep breath, steeling herself for what had to be said. "We need to talk."

Nick's gaze darkened, as if he knew what was coming.

"Yes, we do." His voice was a husky rasp. "But not here."

Taylor hesitated. The cafeteria was too noisy, the walls too thin for the words they needed to say.

"The park across the street," she murmured. "It's quiet there."

"Fine with me."

He turned toward the elevator, but before he could press the button, Taylor touched his arm.

"Wait."

She peeked into the room and spoke softly. "Nick and I are going to take a little walk. Maybe go over to the park and get some fresh air. Will you two be okay?"

Grandpa Bill gave her a knowing smile and reached for Nana's hand. "We've managed just fine for almost fifty years. I think we can handle a half hour or so."

Taylor smiled, closing the door behind her.

Even though the day was bright and golden, the park was eerily quiet, as if the world had paused just for them. The leaves rustled in the warm breeze, the late afternoon sunlight dappling through the thick branches of a massive elm. She led the way to an old wooden picnic table, the surface worn smooth from years of use.

She sat across from him, her heart thudding.

"Erik called for you." The words came out before she could stop them. It wasn't what she'd planned to say first, but they sat heavy on her mind.

Nick arched a brow. "Yeah? What did he say?"

"We had a bad connection. He thought I was you."

A ghost of a smile tugged at his lips. "Must have been a really bad connection. Erik doesn't usually have trouble telling men from women."

She didn't smile.

"He told me your meeting to sign the merger papers is rescheduled for tomorrow."

Nick nodded, unconcerned. "Good."

Taylor swallowed. "Why didn't you sign them today?"

He leaned back against the bench, his gaze steady. "I was busy."

Her chest tightened. "You could have lost everything, Nick. You know how Henry is—he could have pulled the deal. Why would you risk that?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Because you needed me."

The breath rushed from her lungs. "You should have told me."

Nick exhaled slowly, dragging a hand through his hair. "The point is, I didn't want you to be alone." His voice was raw, stripped of all pretense. "I wanted to be here for you."

Her vision blurred. She had misread him so many times, doubted his intentions, pushed him away. But now...

"Thank you," she whispered, meaning it with every fiber of her being.

But the weight of reality settled heavily between them.

Their contract was almost up.

"Nick..." she hesitated, feeling the ache of impending loss. "Once those papers are signed, we're done."

His jaw tightened. A flash of something—anger, frustration, maybe even regret—crossed his face.

Then, quietly, he said, "This whole fake engagement thing was a stupid idea."

Taylor's stomach twisted.

"It was?"

Nick's gaze locked onto hers, intense and unwavering. "I don't like being engaged."

Her heart clenched. She tried to force a smile, to joke, to lighten the moment. "I'm sure you'll change your mind when you find someone you actually want to marry."

He reached across the table, capturing her hand in his. His touch was warm, steady.

"I already have."

The air rushed from her lungs.

For a second, she just stared at him, stunned. Then something sharp cracked inside her, and the words tumbled out before she could stop them.

"Who is it? No—don't tell me. I don't want to know." She yanked her hand back, heat burning her cheeks. "What an idiot I've been."

She stood abruptly, her heart slamming against her ribs.

Nick shot up from the bench, moving swiftly to block her escape.

"Wait." His voice was urgent, his hands firm but gentle as he caught her arms. "This is coming out all wrong."

"You don't need to explain." Taylor blinked furiously, fighting the tears burning her eyes. "You've said enough."

"No, I haven't."

With careful fingers, he tipped her chin up, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"Have I said it's you I want to marry?" His voice was low, deep, shaking. "Have I said it's you I love?"

She swallowed, heart hammering. Slowly, she shook her head.

His lips quirked, but his eyes were dark with emotion. "See? I didn't say it all."

His fingers slid to the side of her face, tucking back a loose strand of hair.

"I love you, Taylor." His voice was thick with conviction. "It took me longer than it should have, but I finally got it. I finally know what's important."

A sob caught in her throat. "What about the company?"

Nick exhaled, shaking his head. "It matters to me. I won't lie about that. But I was wrong to put it first. You were right—God and family deserve top billing."

She searched his face, her heart raw and vulnerable. "Are you sure?"

He gave a small, crooked smile. "I'm positive."

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb tracing over her skin. "Will you marry me, Taylor? I'm asking for real this time."

She longed to throw her arms around him, to cry out her yes to the sky.

But something held her back. One last thing.

"Nick, remember when you said no more lies?"

His expression sobered. "I meant it."

She pressed a trembling finger to his lips. "You've been honest with me. Now I need to be honest with you."

Praying for strength, she took a steadying breath and told him everything—her father's gambling debts, the choices she'd made to protect his reputation. Her voice wavered, but she got it all out.

Somewhere in the middle of her confession, Nick laced his fingers through hers. When she finished, he lifted a hand to brush away the stray tears slipping down her cheek.

"You must have felt so alone." His arms came around her, holding her close. "I wish I'd known sooner."

Warmth spread through her.

"I'm just glad you're here now," she whispered.

Nick pulled back just enough to look into her eyes.

"You never did answer my question."

She smiled, her heart swelling. "Maybe I need a little reminder."

Nick grinned. "Of the question?"

She laughed softly. "No. Of how much you love me."

A thrill of anticipation shot through her as he lowered his head.

"Will this do?" he murmured against her lips.

She melted into him, her arms sliding around his neck.

"For now," she whispered, kissing him back.

And for now, it was more than enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The nurse handed Bill the last of the paperwork, her voice warm and cheerful. “You’re doing great. Your heart has stayed in normal sinus rhythm, and once we get your meds up from the pharmacy, you’ll be ready for discharge.”

Bill exhaled a relieved sigh and rubbed his hands together. “Hear that, Kaye? Sounds like everything’s going to be just fine.” His voice held its usual strength, but beneath it, there was something more—a quiet gratitude, an unspoken understanding of just how close today had come to being something else entirely.

Nana didn’t answer.

Standing by the window, she barely noticed the papers, the nurse, or even Bill’s reassuring words. Her gaze was riveted on the world outside, her heart pulled toward something beyond the hospital walls.

A soft, knowing smile played on her lips.

Outside, in the park across the street, beneath the shade of a towering elm, Taylor and Nick sat at an old wooden picnic table.

Even from this distance, Nana could see the way they leaned toward each other, heads close, hands intertwined as if neither could bear to let go.

She watched as Nick tucked a strand of Taylor’s hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering against her cheek. Taylor tilted her face up, eyes shining, lips curving in a way Nana hadn’t seen in years—no, maybe ever. It was the look of a woman who had finally found where she belonged.

Tears pricked at the corners of Nana’s eyes. Today had been filled with blessings—some expected, some surprising, and some, like the love story unfolding before her, absolutely perfect.

“Kaye?”

Bill’s voice pulled her back inside the room.

She turned to him, her eyes still glistening, her heart impossibly full.

“What did you say, sweetheart?”

“I said everything has worked out just fine.”

Nana smiled, crossing the room to him, taking his weathered hand in hers.

“Yes,” she murmured, pressing a kiss to his palm. “Yes, it has.”



Taylor’s gaze drifted toward her grandparents, who sat at a nearby table engaged in an animated conversation with Nick’s mother. Their laughter was light, their eyes crinkled with warmth, and for a moment, she simply let herself soak in the sight. A family, whole and happy. Something she’d once feared she’d never have again.

She turned back to Nick, her voice a whisper meant just for him. “I can’t believe they knew all along about my father’s debts.”

Nick reached for her hand beneath the table, his thumb tracing slow, reassuring circles over her skin. “I’m sure your father would have eventually told you, too.” His voice was gentle, steady. “But if you hadn’t been so desperate for money, you wouldn’t have agreed to be my fiancée... and we wouldn’t be here now.”

Taylor tilted her face to him, her fingers feather-light as they brushed against his cheek. The diamond on her left hand caught the light, sending tiny rainbows shimmering across the tablecloth. “I believe God would have found a way to bring us together.”

The unmistakable chime of silver tapping against crystal goblets echoed through the ballroom of the Heritage Hotel, signaling the moment every guest had been waiting for.

Nick grinned, turning to his bride. “Shall we?”

Taylor let out a dramatic sigh, her eyes twinkling. “It is tradition,” she murmured in mock resignation.

He pushed back his chair and stood, extending his hand toward her. The moment her fingers slid into his, warm and familiar, his chest tightened. How had he ever lived without this?

She turned in his arms, draping her hands lightly over his shoulders, her upturned face full of anticipation. Waiting. For him.

Nick took in every exquisite detail—the way her eyes shimmered in the golden glow of the chandeliers, the delicate rise and fall of her breath, the slight tremor of excitement that ran through her body.

She was breathtaking.

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of his mother and stepfather, their smiles full of quiet pride. And then—

“Are you going to kiss her or just stand there looking like a love-struck fool?” Henry’s voice boomed from across the room.

Laughter rippled through the guests, but Nick barely noticed. His world had narrowed to one person.

He cupped Taylor’s face, his thumb grazing her cheek, and leaned in, pressing his lips softly, reverently against hers. The kiss was brief, but full of promise. A vow without words.

As applause rang out, he reluctantly pulled away, his forehead resting lightly against hers.

“We’ll finish that later,” he whispered.

Her breath hitched, a small, secret smile curving her lips. “I’m counting on it.”

Nick barely had time to settle back into his chair before Erik pushed his back with a dramatic flourish, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“As the best man, I believe a toast is in order.”

Lifting his champagne flute high, Erik turned toward them, his grin unwavering. “I’ve known Nick for a long time, and he’s made some smart moves—hiring me as his attorney comes to mind—” a few chuckles rolled through the crowd, “—but hanging on to Taylor? That wasn’t just a smart move. That was sheer brilliance.”

He turned to the guests, shaking his head with mock seriousness. “Seeing how happy they are almost makes me want to get married. Almost.”

More laughter.

“But in all seriousness, I wish Nick and Taylor a lifetime of love, laughter, and—” Erik wagged his brows “—lots and lots of babies. Go forth and multiply.”

A roar of laughter and applause followed as Erik took his seat, looking entirely pleased with himself.

Nick stood, raising his own glass, the mirth still in his eyes but something deeper running beneath it. A quiet intensity. A truth he’d only recently come to understand.

“To my wife,” he began, and the room fell silent.

His gaze found hers, locking on like a steady anchor.

“To the woman who taught me that a man can have all the riches in the world but still be the poorest soul without love. To my best friend, my heart, my home. Taylor, I am truly blessed.”

By the time he finished, Taylor’s emerald eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Nick swallowed past the lump in his own throat, overwhelmed by the depth of what they had built together, how far they had come.

Without thinking, he bent and pressed a lingering kiss against her lips, needing her to feel every word he had just spoken.

“I love you, Mrs. Lanagan.”

Her fingers curled around his cheek, soft, certain. “I love you too, Mr. Lanagan.”

“Break it up, you two,” Grandpa Bill’s voice rang out, the picture of health and vitality. “There’s plenty of time for that later.”

Nick grinned, glancing back at Erik. “We’re just getting warmed up. After all, Erik did tell us to be fruitful and multiply.”

Another round of laughter rippled through the guests.

Erik raised his hands in surrender. “For once, someone in this family actually listens to me.” He turned toward Nick, shaking his head. “But really, six kids? You’re serious about this?”

Nick’s gaze swept across the room. Past the tiny ring bearer in his tuxedo, spinning the giggling flower girl in dizzy circles. Past the other children nestled between parents, stealing frosting off the wedding cake plates with delighted grins.

He looked back at Taylor, her fingers laced with his, her eyes full of laughter and love, and knew his answer without hesitation.

His grin widened as he tightened his grip on the woman he loved. “Call me crazy. I really do.”



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SNEAK PEEK OF A LOVE THAT'S TRUE

Chapter 1

“Can’t you tell him to shut up?”

Claire Waters resisted the urge to cover her ears with her hands. She’d never been overly fond of children, and the red-faced baby in front of her—shrieking like someone had stolen his rattle and his will to live—only confirmed her good sense.

“If only it could be that easy.” Taylor Lanagan laughed and shoved an identical version of the howling child into Claire’s arms. “Here, you take this one.”

Claire stared at the dark-haired infant as if he were a live grenade. She’d stopped by to get Tony’s address, and now suddenly she’d been drafted as Mary Poppins? Absolutely not.

Her eyes scanned the room for an appropriate place to dispose of the bundle. She gingerly peeled his chubby fingers from the front of her silver-blue linen shirt, wincing at the wrinkles left behind. The little boy sucked on his pacifier and stared at her with wide, unblinking green eyes fringed with lashes that belonged in a mascara ad.

If she ever had a baby—and that was a very big *if*—she’d order one like this: silent, low-maintenance, and preferably stain-resistant.

Not like his brother, the tiny banshee still screaming despite being cradled in his mother’s arms.

“Claire, I’m sorry. Robbie’s usually not this fussy. I think he’s cutting teeth.”

Claire swallowed the urge to snap back that teething wasn’t an excuse for public torture. No doubt Taylor would just smile sympathetically and start quoting parenting books. The woman seemed genuinely enamored with her twin sons. As was her husband, Nick—the man Claire had once imagined walking down the aisle with. Both of them were baby crazy. And despite her father’s constant disappointment, never had Claire been so glad things with Nick hadn’t worked out.

Tony was more her speed. A fun-loving guy who enjoyed spending money almost as much as she did.

“The address?” Claire prompted.

“I just got a letter from him. Now where did I put it?” Taylor pulled open a drawer and began rifling through a stack of envelopes, bouncing Robbie on her hip like a weary circus performer trying to keep all the plates spinning. “Did I tell you he moved to Iowa?”

“Yes.” Claire gritted her teeth, holding her temper on a short leash. She wouldn’t lose it—not when Taylor was her only link to Tony Karelli. “But knowing the state doesn’t do me much good.”

“No, this isn’t it,” Taylor muttered, tossing one envelope aside and grabbing another.

Claire’s patience thinned by the second. My God, how long did it take to find a single address?

“Found it,” Taylor said finally.

Claire could barely hear her over Robbie’s ear-piercing wails, but she caught the triumphant look on Taylor’s face and the envelope she waved like a prize. Excitement sparked in Claire’s chest.

Her mind sped ahead, already planning her strategy and her wardrobe. Perhaps if she wore one of the new eye-catching outfits she’d picked up last weekend... Or offered to double whatever Tony was making at his job... Or maybe just hinted at a little skin—his eyes had always gleamed at that.

Yes, this was going to work out just fine.

Once her father was pacified, Tony could crawl back to Hicksville, Iowa, or wherever he was hiding these days, and she could return to doing what she did best—spending her father’s money and enjoying herself.

“Claire.” The panic in Taylor’s voice sliced through the air. “Ryan is spitting up!”

Too late.

Something hot and sour-smelling splattered across Claire’s chest. She gasped, her stomach lurching. The infant’s lips curled into a gummy grin, remnants of what looked like mashed bananas clinging to his face.

Taylor set Robbie in the playpen and rushed to take Ryan from Claire’s rigid arms. She moved with the instinct of someone who knew just how close Claire was to committing baby-related manslaughter.

“I’m *so* sorry, Claire.” Taylor grabbed a cloth diaper from a neat stack on the desk. “You know how babies can be.”

Claire snatched the pristine square and dabbed at her now-ruined blouse. Yes, she knew how babies could be—and that was exactly why she didn’t have one.

“Of course.” She forced a smile, her jaw tight. “Could I have that address? I really need to get going.”

Taylor scribbled on a notepad and handed over the scrap of paper. “Did I tell you what he’s doing now? You’ll never believe it—”

Claire began backing toward the door, address in hand like it was the last bottle of champagne on New Year’s Eve. There was no reason to linger. Not one.

“He’d just finished—”

The *Flight of the Bumblebee* ringtone blared from Taylor’s phone, halting her sentence—and setting both babies off again like sirens.

Claire nearly jumped out of her skin. Was this a house or a testing facility for noise-cancellation headphones?

“I’d love to chat, but I’ve got to go,” she said, jerking the door open in one swift motion.

Taylor opened her mouth, but Claire didn’t give her the chance.

With a jaunty wave, she slammed the door shut behind her and exhaled.

Mission accomplished.

+

Tony Karelli heaved a breath of relief, wiping his hands on the front of his jeans. It had been tight, but he’d managed to cram all his essentials into the attic apartment he was renting until the parsonage was ready. He’d been up since dawn, running on purpose alone. But now that everything was unpacked and put away, all he had left was a hollow ache in his stomach and the grumble of protest echoing through his gut.

A hot meal sounded like heaven.

And what better way to reward a morning of hard work than by accepting his new landlady’s offer of lunch? When he’d signed the lease for Darlene Sandy’s studio apartment, she’d let him know that lunch was served daily from eleven to one in the downstairs dining room. Last night, she’d reminded him again, her voice syrupy with suggestion—it would be *nice* if he joined her.

He’d seen the interest in her eyes when he rolled in late. The mild disappointment when he pleaded exhaustion. She had questions.

He didn’t mind. In fact, he looked forward to answering them. He’d chosen this small town for the very reasons many of his classmates avoided them. His father had bounced from military post to political office, and Tony had never really settled anywhere. But now, at twenty-eight, he was done drifting.

He didn’t want to just preach from the pulpit—he wanted to *belong*. He wanted to know his congregation by name, not by pew number.

The seminary had prepared him to lead. But *this*—building a life in a place like Millville—this was the dream.

He stepped into the hallway, the apartment door clicking shut behind him. The lock clicked into place, a small detail that still made him smile. Mrs. Sandy had been almost apologetic about it. Too many out-of-towners coming and going, she’d said.

It was funny. Back in D.C., you locked your doors and set the alarm without a second thought. But here, locking up felt like an oddity. One more sign he’d made the right choice.

As he descended the two flights, the scent of freshly baked bread drifted upward, warm and inviting. His pace quickened. He paused at the first landing to glance at his watch—ten minutes until one. He’d cut it close.

By the time his feet hit the hardwood floor of the foyer, the scent had intensified, mingling with something savory that made his stomach growl in anticipation. But when he caught sight of the empty dining room, his steps slowed.

The room was sunlit and beautiful, rainbows of color scattered by the leaded glass window. And empty.

Disappointment sank in. A day late and a dollar short.

Story of his life.

Not anymore, he reminded himself.

The kitchen door swung open with a bang, and Tony turned. A plump woman with tight curls and a face as friendly as an open door breezed in, stopping short when she saw him.

“Pastor Karelli! I didn’t know you were here.”

“I just came down for lunch,” Tony said, gesturing toward the deserted table with a sheepish smile. “Looks like I missed the boat.”

“Nonsense.” Mrs. Sandy waved a hand. “April—that’s my daughter—and I were just about to eat in the kitchen. Come join us. We’d love the company.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“How can you intrude?” she laughed. “We’re all living under one roof. That makes you family now. C’mon, the soup’s getting cold.”

The tension that had been sitting between his shoulder blades all morning began to ease. He followed her down the hallway and into a kitchen filled with the aroma of home cooking and quiet comfort.

At the table sat a striking blonde with long lashes and perfectly applied makeup. She straightened the moment she saw him. “Pastor Karelli, this is my daughter April.”

Tony blinked. “I thought you said your daughter was in high school?”

April’s face lit with pleasure. Her laugh rolled out, low and sultry, not even pretending to be innocent. She wrapped her fingers around his and didn’t let go.

“I may not look seventeen, but you don’t look like a pastor either.”

“We all have our cross to bear,” he said dryly, extricating his hand and taking the seat across from her.

Mrs. Sandy chuckled and ladled steaming soup into his bowl. “April, don’t forget to make those beds before you head to work.”

April didn’t respond. Her attention remained locked on Tony. “I could call in sick. Show you around town.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but Mrs. Sandy didn’t give him the chance. Her gaze sharpened like a paring knife. “You begged me for that job. I agreed, even though it left me short-handed. You’re going.”

April’s pretty mouth twisted in a pout. In that instant, the makeup slipped, and he glimpsed the teenager beneath it all.

“I’m not hungry after all.” Her chair scraped back, sharp and deliberate. She smiled at Tony with practiced sweetness. “Maybe another time.”

“Sure,” he said evenly.

Mrs. Sandy filled her own bowl and shook her head with a sigh. “Teenagers.”

Tony said nothing, slicing into a thick slab of oat bread and letting the silence settle.

“Were you like that when you were her age? Always in a rush? Out with your friends?”

The question caught him off guard. The memories surfaced—braces, thick glasses, the awkward weight of being too smart and not cool enough to hide it.

If it hadn’t been for Taylor...

He pushed the thought aside. She had a family now. A life of her own.

“Pastor?”

He blinked. She was still waiting. “Not really,” he said quietly.

Mrs. Sandy arched a skeptical brow but didn’t press. “Did you and your fiancée meet in high school or college?”

He almost laughed—but then paused. Fiancée?

He took a sip of cola to buy time. “When I was in high school, I had friends who were girls, but nothing serious.”

She nodded approvingly. “That’s what I try to tell April. There’s time.”

He nodded, reaching for another slice of bread.

“So how long have you and your fiancée known each other?”

He choked on the bread.

Reaching for his drink again, he cleared his throat. “Mrs. Sandy,” he began, choosing his words with care, “I think there’s been a mix-up—”

The phone rang.

She answered quickly. “Yes, he’s here.” She covered the receiver and whispered, “It’s Harold Clarke.”

Tony’s stomach dropped. Harold was the elder who’d made the final call between the two finalists. The man who could end this before it ever began.

“No, his fiancée isn’t here yet.” Her smile returned, directed straight at Tony. Panic tightened his chest.

“I’m not sure if she’ll be here before the wedding or not. We haven’t gotten that far.”

She hung up and turned back to him, cheerful as ever. “Now, where were we?”

Tony deflected. “Is Mr. Clarke stopping by?”

“He said he’d try. Wants to be one of the first to welcome you to Millville. He’s a busy man—three teenagers and the bank to run.”

She poured herself some coffee and offered him the pot.

He shook his head.

“I probably shouldn’t say this,” she went on, lowering her voice conspiratorially, “but Harold is all about family. The fact that you were engaged—that really helped. The other guy seemed fine, but single? Harold had reservations.”

Tony managed a smile, but his pulse was racing. They thought he was someone else. Thought he was engaged. He’d given up his apartment, his savings, everything. Would they fire him when they found out?

He needed to talk to Harold. Explain. He could do this job—he *wanted* it.

“I remember what we were talking about,” Mrs. Sandy said with a twinkle in her eye. “Your fiancée. Andrea, right?”

Tony froze, his brain scrambling for a response. Before he could speak, the doorbell rang.

Mrs. Sandy stood, smoothing her apron before tossing it over the back of the chair. She fluffed her curls with practiced

fingers and bustled toward the front.

Tony stood too, each step toward the foyer feeling heavier than the last. He tried to remind himself he hadn't done anything wrong. He was honest. He'd come here to serve. Surely, that had to count for something.

He slowed as he rounded the corner. It sounded like Mrs. Sandy was greeting a woman. The voice was low, sultry... familiar in a way that made his spine stiffen.

“Yes, he's here. We're just finishing lunch. We'd love for you to join us.”

The door swung wider, and Tony stepped into the foyer.

He froze, heart hammering in his chest. Claire Waters. The last woman he ever expected to see—especially here, in Millville, on the doorstep of the life he was trying to build.

For a second, he thought he might be hallucinating. But no, that curve of her smile, the defiant tilt of her chin, the flash of something unreadable in her dark eyes—it was unmistakably her. And if experience had taught him anything, it was that Claire never showed up without a reason.

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