



Dirty Nasty Billionaire: Part 4

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Description: "My name is Delaney Masterson. I graduated from New England College, right here in Boston. And I've never had an org*sm."

When I admit this awful truth about myself to my co-workers, the worst possible thing happens. It gets back to my boss — Nixon Blake, the six feet tall, ripped, chiseled founder of the internet's biggest search engine.

He's a man with a jaw that could cut glass, the perfect amount of stubble, and ice blue eyes that could cause your blood to freeze in your veins. And then there's his dark, wavy hair that looks like it would be heaven to run your fingers through.

He's also a tech billionaire.

When I go to apologize, Nixon Blake isn't having any of it. I think he's for sure going to fire me, but then he does something completely unexpected.

He rises from his chair and comes toward me. His feet fall heavy on the floor, and I'm surprised the room doesn't shake with the force of his gait. Everything about him says he knows how big and powerful he is.

He stops right in front of me, so close that I have to look up to keep eye contact.

"You want to know something about me that would surprise you?" His voice is low, forcing me to be completely still. I can barely breathe, and so instead of a response, I just nod.

There's the tiniest spark of fire behind his icy eyes. "I've spent nearly every second since your little declaration," he says, his tongue rolling over the word, "thinking about all the different ways I could make you come."

I am in big, big trouble...

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Chapter 1

GizmoGossip - A Statement from Nixon Blake

Nina March, staff reporter

Well guys, we've had a good run, but it appears it's all over now. We should all blow through our bank accounts, tell our families we love them, and wait for the end. The apocalypse is coming. Because Nixon Blake, the uber-private founder and CEO of Scour, has released a statement concerning his affair with the intern.

Buckle up, folks. Here it is.

I deeply regret taking advantage of Ms. Masterson and her position as an intern with the Business Lab Program. As her supervisor, I should have maintained a strictly professional relationship. The abuse of power was reprehensible, and I take full responsibility. Ms. Masterson was nothing but professional and capable who more than earned her spot with the BLP, and my deepest regret is that her bright future may have been marred by my actions.

I will be taking a brief hiatus from the day-to-day at Scour, leaving the company in the capable hands of my VP of Operations, Randi Powers. When I return, I will not be speaking again on the matter, or any personal matter. My focus is, and always has been, the future of Scour.

So apparently he's taking the #MeToo line, and saying there was no relationship, but that he abused his power. I can't help but wonder what Ms. Masterson would say

about that, as we've heard from leaky Scour employees that she's no longer an intern with the company. Was it light workplace harassment, or something more?

"You've gotto leave this apartment."

It's been a week since I officially quit Scour. A week since Nixon released the statement. The rest of America moved on pretty quickly, though I did spend several days turning down interview requests. We're still the talk of the tech blogs, of course, and I imagine that'll probably continue until, oh, I don't know ... forever? This is probably some of the juiciest gossip they've ever had. I heard the reporter who's been covering the Nixon Blake beat actually got a promotion out of it.

Good for her. At least one of us got a job out of me sleeping with my boss.

Elise let me wallow for the first two days, but by the third she was starting to prod me to put down the Ben & Jerry's and get off the couch.

So I did that, but I still couldn't bring myself to leave the apartment. I didn't know where I'd go. It's not like I can afford to go shopping or hit the bars. I'm out of a job, remember?

But as the days ticked by, I slowly started to formulate a plan.

"I'm leaving the house today, I swear," I say, aiming the remote at the TV to turn off my Grey's Anatomy binge. In a week I made it through eight seasons. I was starting to feel like maybe I should apply to medical school (eight seasons of Grey's and I felt qualified to perform an appendectomy already), but then I remembered that blood makes me squeamish. So instead, I'd come up with another plan.

“I’m going to campus to pick up transcripts and meet with a couple professors to talk about recommendations,” I tell her. “I think I’m going to apply to grad school.”

Elise arches an eyebrow at me. I’ve never expressed any interest in graduate school before.

“What are you going to study?” She asks.

“I don’t know, I’m thinking maybe informatics? I could get a PhD and be a professor. By the time I worked through the degree and the dissertation, hopefully everyone will have forgotten about me. Besides, college campuses are much more forgiving of sexual indiscretions.” I shrug. It seems like a good enough plan, I don’t think about the tens of thousands of dollars in student loans it will require.

“Stop it. You didn’t do anything wrong,” Elise says. “I mean, it’s a fine plan, and I’ll support you in whatever you choose. But I don’t think things are as one as you think they are. I mean, Nixon’s statement seemed to really help.”

“Yeah, great. Now I’m a victim of harassment, which seems to have worked out really well for all the other women who were actually harassed. I bet if you asked them they’d say it was a career highlight,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Just don’t count yourself out yet, ok?”

“Oh, I haven’t. I’ve got an interview at the pub down the street for a waitressing gig,” I tell her.

“You didn’t.”

“Hey, I can’t apply to grad school until the fall. I’ve gotta earn a living somehow until then, right?”

* * *

On my way to campus, I engage in my secret shame: checking the gossip blogs for any news about Nixon. He made good on his promise and took a hiatus from Scour. The company stock took a slight dip for the first two days, but it quickly recovered as they prepared for the launch of a new generation of the Scour tablet.

But no one has said a word about where Nixon's gone. He hasn't been seen anywhere, so maybe he's holed up in his apartment, just like me. Only at least I have soapy medical dramas, ice cream, and a roommate to keep me from going insane. I don't think Nixon even has a television in his apartment, and though he could obviously stream something on any one of his devices, he doesn't seem like a binge watcher.

No, if he's at home, he's sitting alone in his empty apartment, staring at a wall, a thought that makes me nauseous every single time.

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With no job and no Nixon to distract me, I have oceans of time to think about Nixon. Which sounds like a paradox, but trust me, it's not. Because when we were having wild sex every single day and night, I didn't have time to wonder why his apartment was devoid of furniture or why his office was like a big blank sheet of paper. I didn't have time to dwell on his lack of assistants or the way he ran from that crowd at the gala. In my web searching shame spiral, I'd read up on all the various updates about Nixon ducking out of various speaking engagements. According to my research, he hadn't spoken to a crowd outside of Scour world headquarters in almost five years.

That coupled with his intractability when it came to any part of his private life becoming public, and I was really starting to worry about him. There's clearly something very wrong there, maybe even something broken. But of course, there's nothing I can do about that now.

I don't even know where he is.

* * *

New England Collegelies on approximately 300 acres just to the west of Boston, along the banks of the Charles River. I remember the first time I visited, as a junior in high school who was busting her ass to qualify for a spot. My parents pulled our old Toyota Corolla up in front of the iron and stone gates, and there was a moment where I was scared I wouldn't be able to walk in. Surely everyone there would see that I didn't belong.

But my dad booted my mom and I out of the car while he went to find parking, and I found myself on the sidewalk staring up. And surprisingly, I wasn't scared.

I was ready.

I was hungry.

I knew I belonged.

Because I was smart, and I'd worked hard. I knew that in 18 months I'd be walking through the gates as a freshman.

NEC was exactly what I hoped it would be: a school full of smart, ambitious students, brilliant faculty, and opportunities for me to reach new heights. Everything I wanted, I got out of it. I absolutely loved the four years I spent on that campus and everything it gave it me.

So walking through those same gates now, I can't help but feel as if I let it down. It lived up to its bargain, giving me the best education and opportunities, leading me all the way to a top internship at a world-renowned company. And what did I do?

I fucked it all up. Literally.

The last time I was here was back in early May, for graduation. It was cold, but sunny, so everyone sat in the audience shivering while pretending it was a beautiful spring day. My parents were out there, my dad taking pictures with his iPad like a grade A dork. Elise and I stood in line in our caps and gowns, waiting to cross the stage and accept our diplomas from President Levi (or, in Elise's case, an empty red leather folder with a listing of her library fines inside). Everything felt so exciting, like we were on the edge of something great. I hadn't yet had my disastrous first day at Scour, or made any of the terrible decisions that would follow. When Elise and I stood next to the Lawrence Fountain and had our picture taken holding up our New England College diploma folders, I felt like I'd walk out of here and take on the world.

But now here I am, just two months later, skulking back onto campus, my future foggy and murky. Part of me hoped that maybe stepping onto campus would help me come out of it a little, so see some hope. Maybe feel a little bit of that mojo I felt back when I first visited NEC. But nope, I still feel completely lost.

I have a stack of transcripts waiting for me at the registrar, stamped and sealed for my future (hypothetic) graduate school applications. I should probably see if I can still take advantage of on-campus career counseling as a recent grad. Lord knows I'm going to need it.

The registrar's office is in the old administration building, a gothic stone beauty with arched windows, creaky old wood floors, and brass nameplates. It looks like the kind of place a Hollywood location scout chooses when the scene calls for something that "looks like college." I go in and hand the secretary my ID, and I wait while she goes to the back to get my transcripts. I wonder, as I do with every interaction I've had since the story broke, from my Scour coworkers all the way down to the cashier at Starbucks, if she's heard my story. She's got my name, so maybe it's ringing a bell to her right now, she just can't remember how to place it.

I hope eventually these horrible thought spirals will stop. Elise tells me the more I get out, and the more time passes, the better it will get. I sure hope so, because this feels so shitty I can't even.

"Delaney?"

My heart drops into my stomach at the sound of my own name. I turn and see Dr. Costanovich, the New England College Dean of Students, standing in the doorway. Shit. I completely forgot that his office is just down the hall.

Dr. Costanovich conducted my scholarship interview for NEC back when I was a lowly high school senior. Right away I could tell I liked him, and when I arrived on

campus, I made it a point to sign up for a class with him. Though he spends most of his time overseeing departments and counseling students as Dean, he does take time to teach a class or two each year. He's well known journalism professor, with a specialty in science and technology reporting.

Oh, the irony.

"Hi, Dr. Costanovich," I say, trying to arrange my face into some semblance of a smile.

"What are you doing on campus?"

"Just picking up some transcripts," I said, pointing to the secretary, who's making her way (very very slowly) back to the front desk, a manila envelope in hand. "I'm thinking about grad school, so I need to get my applications together."

"Is that so?" He says, though I can hear the skepticism in his voice. He knows I'm full of shit, thinking about grad school. We had a talk about it during the fall of my senior year, during which I told him I was ready to get out of school and the confines of the classroom and actually do things.

Oh, I did things, all right. I did someone. And look where it got me.

"Why don't you stop by my office when you're done here?" He says with a smile that seems full of pity.

"Oh, I couldn't take up your time," I say. I really don't want to find myself sitting across from him at his desk, just like I did during advising meetings. It would be too painful. "I'm sure you're very busy."

"It's summer, Delaney. You know I've got nothing going on. Just stop by, ok?" He

poses it as a question, but I know his tone well enough to know it's hardly a request. And even though a little part of me thinks that I don't owe him anything, I know that there's no way I'm going to ditch out on Dr. Costanovich.

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I accept my transcripts and sign for them, and when I make my way two doors down to the Dean of Students office, I'm sweating like I just ran the marathon. Is he going to lecture me? There's nothing he could say that I haven't already thought a million times. Maybe he's got some advice for me? That would be ok, though it would mean acknowledging that he knows what happened to me. Oh god, I can't believe Dr. Costanovich knows about my sex life. That's almost worse than my parents finding out.

His secretary, a kindly older woman with graying hair named Ms. Coyne, who still takes notes in shorthand, is at her post. In my four years at NEC, I never walked into this office to find her desk empty. Dr. Costanovich, at least, doesn't mind people in his shit.

"Hello dear," she says, a warm smile on her face. I have to work overtime to beat back the thought that she knows, because that would probably cause a hole to open up in the floor and swallow me whole (which, honestly, would be a mercy). "You can go on in."

"Thank you," I tell her, and then hurry through the wide, mahogany door leading in his office.

His office has the strange characteristic of being neat and cluttered at the same time. I remember him remarking once that the hardest part of his job was keeping his gorgeous office in order for the parents and visiting dignitaries who inevitably showed up. If left to his own devices, he'd do the stereotypical professor thing of being surrounded by dangerously teetering stacks of books, papers strewn everywhere. As it stands, there are plenty of stacks of papers, and books on shelves

that aren't quite as orderly and neat as they should be, like the room is just pulsing with life, ready to burst open. I spent so many wonderful hours here talking about books and philosophy and plans for the future.

Dr. Costanovich is sitting behind his desk, shuffling papers, when he looks up to see me come in the room.

"It's good to see you, Delaney," he says, gesturing to one of the leather wingback chairs across from his desk, the ones where the leather is worn and smooth like butter. "How are you doing?"

I drop into the chair and lean back. I contemplate just letting my body go limp and sliding off the chair into a puddle on the floor. Because that's how I'm doing, if he really wants to know.

"I'm ok," I say. And then I decide to rip off the Band-Aid. "I mean, I assume you know things haven't really been going according to plan."

He purses his lips, taking in a deep breath, then blowing it all out. He nods. "Yes, I was disappointed to see that you had such a negative experience at Scour. I know you had high hopes for the program."

I nod. High hopes seem like ancient history at this point.

"That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. Because we here at NEC take these matters very seriously. To hear that you were the victim of workplace harassment as part of a program that we endorse so wholeheartedly, and that the perpetrator was an alum with whom we have deep ties, well, to say that we're troubled doesn't begin to cover it."

"Oh, well, uh—" I start, but then trail off, because I'm not sure what to say. Nixon

released the statement without consulting me, and though it certainly took a little bit of the heat off me (though half the internet is still delighting in calling me every synonym for slut they can imagine), it didn't make me feel much better. Because I'm not a victim of harassment, and parading around like I am feels disrespectful to all the women who really do suffer that kind of treatment. I don't want to co-opt their stories and experiences just so I can shake free of my own terrible decisions. I wanted to sleep with Nixon, despite the fact that he was my boss. He never forced me. I was more than willing. He never made me feel uncomfortable or pushed me further than I wanted to go. If anyone wanted an example of enthusiastic consent, it was me.

But telling my college mentor and advisor, a distinguished older male faculty member, at that, that I was happily having sex all over my workplace, a workplace for which he wrote me a glowing recommendation? Well, I'll be honest, I'm thoroughly chickening out on that one right now.

When I don't say anything else, Dr. Costanovich charges on.

"I want you to know that New England College has severed all ties with Nixon Blake and with Scour. He won't be welcome back on campus, and we won't be accepting any more donations from him or his company. That's how much we value equity and respect in the workplace."

Holy crap, seriously? I mean, it's one thing to make Nixon persona non grata, but to decline any of that sweet sweet Scour money? Those checks are why the dorms now have air conditioning, and why the computer labs have state of the art equipment, updated with each new generation of hardware and software. That's got to be a huge financial loss, not just for the college, but for the students who were the beneficiaries of that money. Hell, Scour funded hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of scholarships, scholarships that I myself needed to go to school here.

This has gotten way out of hand.

“Dr. Costanovich, as much as it pains me to say it, I need you to know the truth,” I tell him, my heart beating like there’s a marching band playing in my chest. “Nixon Blake didn’t harass me or take advantage of me. While our relationship was definitely against company policy, and ill-advised on both our parts, it was completely consensual.”

His eyes widen as he takes in what I’m saying. It’s in direct contradiction to the media narrative that’s been going on for days, which is that Nixon Blake is a disgusting, creepy cad who screwed an intern and should be banished to the outskirts of society. I never should have let that statement stand.

“This is really uncomfortable for me to say, so that’s how you know I’m telling the truth. I can’t bear to think of all the ways the college will suffer from acting on a lie, though. There’s too much at stake. Too many needy students like me who benefit from that money.”

I take a deep breath and let it out, feeling calm for the first time since the story broke. Because for the first time since I saw that push notification on my phone and realized my world was coming crashing down on my head, I know exactly what I need to do. The fog is lifting, and I see the way forward. I know this is the right thing.

“I’m going to make sure the story is set straight, so the NEC doesn’t see any fallout from maintaining their relationship with Scour. I understand, of course, if you feel you can’t work with Nixon Blake personally, but I want to make sure you have a clear path to accept fiscal support from Scour and its subsidiaries.”

Dr. Costanovich sits back in his chair, which creaks under his weight. He crosses his arms over his chest and stares down at his desk for a moment. I can tell this is a lot of information, and this is probably going to make his summer a little less relaxed than he’s normally used to. But after a moment, he nods.

“I always knew you were special, Delaney,” he says. “It takes a lot to tell the truth and own your actions in the face of the kind of scrutiny you’re under. And I’m impressed that you’re willing to fall on that grenade for NEC and its students.”

I shrug. I’m not doing it for praise. I’m doing it because it’s right.

“I want you to know that this doesn’t in any way affect any future recommendations you may need from me, either for jobs or graduate school. Though I think you know my advice would be to keep grad school on the back burner and climb back on the proverbial horse.”

I smile.

“And the horse is not Nixon Blake, in case you were wondering where I stand on that particular issue.” He arches an eyebrow at me.

I bark out a laugh at the same time that my cheeks turn red as tomatoes. Because holy shit, my college mentor just made a sex joke in front of me.

“I don’t think that’s going to be an issues, Dr. C,” I assure him.

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Chapter 2

GizmoGossip - Exclusive Comment from Delaney Masterson, aka “The Intern

Nina March, editor at large

I didn’t believe it either, when I got the call. I thought Delaney Masterson would have gone so far underground at this point that she’d be surfing on the magma in the Earth’s core. But no, she’s just sitting over in her apartment in Cambridge, unemployed and wanting to set the record straight.

That’s right, GizmoGossip readers. Delaney has a story to tell, and it turns out it doesn’t quite line up with the statement Nixon Blake released. Are you ready?

During my time at Scour, as an intern with the Business Lab Program, I engaged in a relationship with Nixon Blake. As my boss, this relationship was inadvisable and against company policy. We were both aware of the risks, but entered into the relationship consensually. We hoped to keep it a secret so that it wouldn’t affect our work at Scour. Unfortunately, that wasn’t possible.

In an effort to mitigate some of the negative press attention that I was already receiving, Nixon Blake put out a statement saying that he somehow abused his power, and that my participation in the relationship wasn’t 100% my choice. This statement was false.

Every day, women are the victims of workplace harassment. To co-opt their very real lived experiences to make my life somehow easier feels cheap, wrong, and

disrespectful to them. While I appreciate what Mr. Blake was attempting to do, I cannot allow that to happen.

I also can't ignore that his statement had unintended consequences, including the need for New England College to distance themselves from Scour. While I applaud their commitment to supporting and believing victims of harassment, I can't allow them to take the fall for me.

I happily and enthusiastically entered a relationship with Nixon Blake. While that relationship is over, I don't regret it. I am, however, very sorry to everyone who was hurt by the fallout.

Holy shit,you guys. HOLY. SHIT. Girlfriend fell on the sword. Well, Nixon Blake must have a helluva sword, is all I have to say—because girl keeps happily jumping on it, one way or the other. What do you think? Stockholm syndrome? Lovelorn intern? Or is she just (gasp) telling the truth? Chat it up in the comments. This is one I'm dying to parse.

“I swear to god,if you don't smile in these photos I'll have you killed, and no one will ever find your body.” Miranda delivers this declaration through clenched teeth, still smiling so wide you could see her professionally whitened teeth from space.

I didn't realize I wasn't smiling, but that's been happening to me a lot over the last week or so. I'll drift off, my mind reeling as I think about the smoldering remains of my life and career. And amidst all that, I'm still wondering where Nixon is and what he's doing. I'm still wondering if he's thinking of me.

Goddammit.

And of course, when my mind falls down these Nixon Blake-inspired rabbit holes, I adopt what Elise calls “Resting No Fucks Face.”

“It’s like resting bitch face, except instead of being aggressive, it’s just noticeable disinterested.”

Apparently, Miranda is not super excited to have her maid of honor give Resting No Fucks Face in her wedding photos.

“Sorry,” I whisper, and arrange my face into a wide smile. I’m thinking about how happy Miranda looked walking down the aisle just an hour ago, and that helps the smile brighten up a little bit. Miranda was beaming in her off the shoulder white dress with delicate lace overlay. Her blonde hair was in loose waves and gathered into a low ponytail at the nap of her neck, from which a delicate, lace-trimmed veil flowed down to the floor and floated ethereally across the floor. She’s a knockout bride, that’s for sure.

And I can’t even hate her for her bridesmaids’ dress selection, because even if I am feeling pretty shitty, I look fucking amazing. My dress is a deep sapphire blue lace with a fifties party dress silhouette, fitted through the waist with a flared skirt that falls to just below my knees. It features a sheer top with a boat-neck and delicate sleeves that feels very Audrey Hepburn. My own blonde hair is also curled in loose waves, gathered behind my right ear and fastened with a delicate pearl hair clip.

“Good, great smiles! You look fantastic!” The photographer calls, snapping away. We’re squeezing the photos in before we have to hurry to the reception, because Miranda was adamant that Brad not see her before the wedding.

“Look, years of tradition saying that’s bad luck is not nothing. I’m not doing it,” Miranda spat when my mother tried to persuade her to do a “first look” photo shoot before the ceremony. “I’m going to be married forever, and I’m not going to let

wedding photos get in the way of that.”

Yeah, my sister was a bit of a bridezilla.

But it all paid off, because the wedding was gorgeous, and the reception looks to be poised to go off without a hitch.

If only I could throw myself fully into the festivities and forget about Nixon.

I’ve gotten a little bit better, of course. I even managed to sleep last night without having wild sex dreams about him. That was a win (although, maybe also a little bit of a loss, because those dreams were hot). At this rate I’ll be done thinking about Nixon Blake in oh ... about sixty-seven years.

Awesome.

“Ok, I think that’s the last shot. You guys can head on over to the limos, and I’ll snap some candid as we go, ok?” The photographer gathers up her cameras, slinging them over her shoulders and around her neck. I transfer my bouquet of white hydrangea and peonies, all gathered together in white satin ribbon with delicate pearls sewn into it, to my other hand. Who knew bouquets were so heavy? I feel like if I swung this thing hard enough, I could give someone a concussion.

Miranda shoots me one last warning look that I know means I better enjoy the reception that she worked so hard to plan or she’s going to pull out my fingernails that she had manicured just this morning. And so I spend the walk to the limo trailing behind Miranda’s sorority sisters and the guys from the fire station as we head to the limo that’s bound for the reception. Our families are already there waiting for us to arrive to cheers, to eat, drink, dance, and be merry.

Be merry, goddammit.

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The will be no empty seat beside me at the reception, though, because I did manage to scrounge up a plus one. Elise was more than happy to be my date to the wedding, especially when she found out all the groomsmen would be single firefighters.

“Um, hello, it’s always been a fantasy of mine,” she said. I’m pretty sure she spent the entire ceremony eyeing the groomsmen from her pew, trying to decide which one would be her target for the night.

The one thing that brings genuine joy to my face is the thought of the job offers that began arriving as soon as the statement released on GizmoGossip. I had been under the assumption that releasing it would only pour cold water onto the dying embers of my career, but it actually had the opposite effect. Though I think I have Dr. C to thank for that. He got busy calling around and telling people that I was a person full of integrity, putting my name in the ear of quite a lot of his contacts. Thanks to him, I’m now considering a job in tech journalism, thanks to an offer from The Globe. That plus a few others is making me feel like maybe things might just turn out ok, even if I’ll probably never see Nixon again.

It’s not perfect, but it’s getting a little. There’s a path forward. All I have to do is start taking steps.

Even if my heart is still broken, my life isn’t totally in ruins.

* * *

“So here’s to many years of happiness, Brad and Miranda!” Brad’s best man raises his glass, only slightly slurring his words, as the rest of the crowd toasts to the bride

and groom.

“Thank you Liam,” the DJ says. “Now let’s hear from the Maid of Honor, Delaney, sister of the bride!”

The crowd applauds, there are few whoops in the crowd, as I make my way to the microphone. My champagne glass is clutched in my hand. My goal is to get up there, say a few words without embarrassing myself, and then sit down before everyone can start whispering about what happened. The last thing I want is my gossip to upstage Miranda’s wedding reception. I want to give a stealth toast: get in, get out, leave no trace.

“Hi everyone,” I say, my voice causing the microphone to screech. Ok, not a great opener. I quickly step back and try again. “I’m so glad to be here tonight to support my awesome big sister Miranda, who taught me so much about life and love as we shared that tiny bedroom in Southie for all those years. I also learned that Miranda snores if she sleeps on her back, so Brad, I’m gifting that information to you to help with the whole happy marriage thing.”

A titter of laughter rises from the crowd. Good, ok, now bring it all home, and then sit down before you pass out from this many pairs of eyes on you.

“Anyway, I won’t keep you all with embarrassing, yet hilarious, stories of Miranda’s life. You can always come see me at table two if you want to hear those. I just want to take this moment to say —“

And that’s when I see him. He’s standing in the back of the room, having just come through the door. He’s wearing a black v-neck sweater. His hair is wavy and a little bit wild, and I can see his blue eyes from all the way up here. His muscular arms are crossed over his chest. The sight of him causes my knees to go weak, and I wobble just enough on my heels to make my champagne slosh over the edge of my glass. I

nearly lose my breath at the sight of him, tall and powerful back there, but I quickly remember that there are a couple hundred people waiting for me to finish so they can toast my sister and her new husband.

“I just want to say I love you and best wishes,” I say, the words pouring out of me all at once. I toss back the glass of champagne and practically bolt from the mic. But I don’t rush towards Nixon. Instead, I find myself racing for my seat, where Elise is waiting.

“Um, did you enter a fugue state there for a moment?” Elise asks as I drop down into the empty seat next to her.

“He’s here,” I say, my chest heaving as the breath really starts to leave me. Oh god, am I going to hyperventilate? Because if I’m going to hyperventilate, I need to get out of here before I draw too much attention.

“Who’s here?” Elise asks, but before I can answer, a tall, muscular shadow falls over us. Elise looks up and sees him, and though they’ve never met, she knows immediately who he is. “Oh my god.”

“Delaney, can we talk?” He asks. The sound of his voice, all steel and gravel, takes me right back to those days in his office, the nights in his apartment. My body responds automatically, and I feel the lace of my panties grow damp.

“Uh, yeah,” I say, rising from my seat so quickly that it nearly topples over backwards. Thank god for Elise and her quick reflexes, because she catches it before it can clatter to the parquet floor and attract attention. I turn and start for the door, expecting him to follow me, but instead he grabs my hand.

I feel a bolt of electricity shoot up my arm and straight into my heart.

I spin around to face him. He doesn't drop my hand. Instead, he reaches for it with both of his, clasping it warmly between his palms.

"What are you doing?" I whisper. I'm aware that people at nearby tables are starting to look. I don't blame them. Even if they don't know who Nixon Blake is, the man himself just draws attention. He's by far the most attractive man in the room, and at well over six feet tall, you can't just look past him.

And besides, most of them probably know who he is thanks to, you know, him practically being the face of the internet and all...

"I'd rather stay here," is all he says.

I glance around and see that now a lot of people are looking. We're starting to become the center of attention, as the only two people in the room who are standing. Everyone else is finishing up their dinner and waiting for the cake to be cut.

"Nixon, people are looking," I say, and only partly for my benefit. I know how he feels about crowds. I know how he feels about people knowing his business. This is not going to be a good situation for him if we don't get out of here soon.

"I don't care," he replies, and his voice is growing louder, more confident. There's no trace of his previous qualms about crowds or publicity. The only part of him that betrays any nerves at all is his hands, which are clutching mine fairly tightly. "I came here because I needed to tell you something, something I should have told you a long time ago."

And then that fucking DJ lowers the music. Now everyone is paying attention. Like we're the main event.

His eyes are steady as he looks at me, unblinking and unwavering. "Delaney, I love

you. I love you because you're smart, and fierce, and beautiful. I love you because even though I put you through hell, you've somehow managed to keep a backbone of steel. You never give up, and you never duck out. And you never let me get away with anything. You make me better. I know I didn't do a good job of showing it. Our relationship meant a lot more to me than I wanted to let on, or maybe I didn't even realize it myself until it was gone. But being without you has been a living hell. And I've come here to tell you that I don't want it to go on like this. I love you, and I need you. Please come back to me."

My mouth drops open. I'm totally speechless.

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Which is fine, because apparently, he's not done.

Nixon Blake drops to one knee in front of me, looking up at me with those piercing blue eyes from beneath his dark lashes. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small, black velvet box. He pops it open, revealing a vintage diamond ring. And even though I know he's got enough money to buy the Hope Diamond, he was clearly thinking of me when he picked this ring out. It's sizable, but still appears delicate, with platinum filigree and little tiny diamonds flanking the center stone. It's gorgeous, and it's so very me.

"Please say you'll marry me. I can't imagine my life without you, Delaney Masterson."

"Holy shit," is all I can say at first. Because of all the things I imagined Nixon Blake saying if I ever saw him again, a proposal was not among them. And especially not a public proposal.

And speaking of, this is totally upstaging my sister's wedding right now, which is not cool. I quickly glance over to the head table, where Miranda and Brad are perched side by side. But she doesn't look mad. Instead, she's beaming. And then she quickly nods and mouths say yes.

I look back down at Nixon, who's still kneeling on the floor in front of me, a beautiful, perfect ring in his hand and the promise of forever on his lips.

"Yes," I say, the smile on my face growing wider by the second. "Yes, I'll marry you."

The words are barely out of my mouth before Nixon is on his feet, his arms wrapped around my waist as he lifts me to him, his lips covering mine. It's perfect and familiar and like we never parted. And all around us, people are applauding and cheering, my sister and her new husband included.

I'm marrying Nixon Blake.

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Chapter 3

We spend the rest of the reception dancing and drinking and pretending there isn't anyone else in the room, though of course there is. We get interrupted constantly by people who want to congratulate us or see the ring. And I'm surprised to find that as long as Nixon is holding onto my hand, or has his arm around my waist, gripping my hip, he manages ok with the crowd. Still, when I finally rise up on my tiptoes and whisper into ear, "Wanna get out of here?" I feel him physically unwind.

"Yes please," he practically purrs back to me.

Nixon takes me by the hand and leads me out to the parking lot and to his black Tesla.

"Oh shit," I mutter.

"What is it?" he asks.

I sigh. "I'm sharing a hotel room with two of the other bridesmaids," I say, thinking about how Diana and Audrey are probably already back there, potentially passed out, but definitely not enough to sleep through what I know I want to do with Nixon tonight.

"Don't worry about it," he says, opening the passenger door for me. I slide in and onto the softest leather seats I've ever felt. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a keycard. He flashes me a devilish grin. "I got a suite."

“Of course you did,” I say, barely able to hide the giddy feeling bubbling up inside me.

We drive at a breakneck pace on roads that border the ocean. Seeing him command the speeding car with authority and ease, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on my thigh (and slowly creeping up). It’s seriously turning me on.

By the time we make it to his room, I can’t even be bothered to take in the luxury, which includes a wide balcony that overlooks the ocean and an enormous claw foot tub in the bathroom. All I can think about is getting out of this dress and getting him inside me.

As soon as the door closes behind us, I reach for the hem of his sweater, tugging it over his head until I see his bare chest. I run my hands down his abs, clenching my fingers until my nails leave red streaks in his tan skin. He hisses, his eyes locked on mine, and he grins.

I step back from him and turn, gazing over my shoulder as I sweep my hair to the size. “Get this fucking dress off me,” I say with a devious wink, and he practically lunges for the zipper. Soon my dress is in a puddle at my feet, and while he’s at it, he snaps his fingers on the hooks of my strapless bra.

“Goddamn you have the most gorgeous ass,” he says, gazing down at the black lace thong I’m wearing.

“Well you can follow this gorgeous ass right this way,” I tell him as I tuck a finger into the waistband of his pants, pulling him across the floor to the bed. As soon as we get there, I turn and push him down onto it, so that he’s perched right on the edge. I drop to my knees and unbutton his jeans, tugging at them until they’re off. Then I go for his boxers too. All nine inches of him are hard and ready for me, and as I lower his boxer briefs I let my tongue trail along the underside of his cock.

“Goddammit, Delaney, you’re killing me,” he moans.

“Oh, I’m not done yet,” I tell him.

And then I rise and step back and turn around, so once again he has a perfect view of my ass. Then I slowly bend over, my thumbs hooked in the waistband of lace, as I peel it slowly down my legs for him.

“Holy fuck,” he groans.

I stand up and turn slowly, one hand caressing my breast, the other migrating south until my fingers brush lightly against my clit.

“And to think, all this is yours,” I say, dipping a finger inside and then reaching up to offer it to him. He parts his lips and sucks it inside, moaning as his tongue works across it. “Forever.”

Those ice blue eyes are locked in on mine again, and I search him quickly to see if there’s any hesitation, any regret. But all I see is desire.

And something else.

Love.

I grin and bend down, my lips brushing his ear as I whisper, “I love you, Nixon Blake. You’re mine.”

A deep growl rolls in his chest, working its way up. He grabs my hips and lifts me into his lap and straight down onto his rock hard cock.

“And now you’re mine,” he says, as he begins thrusting hard up into me. Our little

striptease had me soaking wet and ready for him, and I throw my head back, mouth agape, as I enjoy the feeling of his warmth and hardness. It's like I can feel everything, every ridge and curve of him along the slickness of my pussy. I feel myself stretch around his shaft as he pounds deeper and deeper inside of me, sending me into fits of ecstasy I never thought possible. I come quickly, and then feel my orgasm start to rise again.

"I'm going to come," he groans, and when I open my eyes and look at him, I see that he's let go in a way I've never seen before. Every other time we've been together, he's been in control. But this time, he's relinquished that to me. It threads a connection between us that goes deeper than his cock driving into my pussy.

"Yes," I moan, now riding him, hard and deep. I reach back and grab a fistful of his hair, bringing him back to me, his eyes locked in on mine. "I want you to let go. I want it to feel so good, you can't hold back."

And then I press my lips into his, parting his lips with my tongue until we're connected everywhere, at every space. We move together, me rising and falling on top of him, as I feel him start to tense. And just before he truly lets go, he reaches down and presses his thumb onto my clit, and we come together, connected and crying out. I feel him fill me up with the warmth of his orgasm, his breath shuddering beneath me.

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We ride our shared orgasm all the way to the end, each clutching the other like we're going to save each other from drowning. And as we began to come down, our breaths heaving in tandem, we rest our foreheads against each other as we revel in our shared pleasure.

"Delaney Masterson, you're my everything," he whispers.

I plant soft kisses along the line of his jaw, relishing the brush of stubble against my lips.

"That's the future Mrs. Blake, to you," I reply.

* * *

"So I guess this means I should meet your family," I tell him, after we've had sex twice more and are now collapsed in a heap in the bed, surrounded by pillows. I fiddle with the ring on my finger, admiring the way it catches the light from the candles on the bedside table, sending it refracting across the ceiling in the beautiful hotel room. "Or, you know, at least hear something about your family."

He instinctively tenses beside me, and I reach over to lay my hand firmly on his chest. "Hey," I say in a soothing voice. "It's ok. It can wait. We don't have to do this right now."

He clenches his lips, his jaw twitching, as he sucks in a quick breath through his nose. Then he lets it out, long and slow. By the time he's done, I can feel the tension start to melt away.

“It’s no secret, at least to you, that I don’t really like crowds,” he says. His voice sounds raw, ragged, and wrung-out. It’s like he’s reached up and opened a vein for me, ready to pour out all the pain he’s been holding inside. I curl into him, resting my head on his warm chest, where I can feel and hear the sound of his beating heart. It’s like I need reassurance that it’s still beating while he tells me what he’s about to tell me.

And then it all comes pouring out.

Nixon is the only child of two very smart people. In another life, they could have been college professors, likely well-known academics and intellectuals. They’d met at New England College as undergraduates, his father studying philosophy, his mother studying physics. They had promising futures.

Until they didn’t.

His father’s family lost everything in a bad stock deal, and he was forced to withdraw from NEC in the middle of his junior year. His mother, who Mr. Blake was already dating at the time, discovered she was pregnant soon after. Life became hard, and their dreams were put on the back burner. They ended up finishing their degrees at a community college and both became public school teachers. It should have been a triumph, that two struggling young parents were able to make something of themselves.

Unfortunately, all they felt was bitterness.

Their lives had spun out of control, or so they thought, and they zeroed in on Nixon as the moment that all started.

“And for all the control they felt they’d lost, I think they decided to regain some of it through me,” Nixon says. He delivers the words like he’s reading aloud from a book

with a not very exciting plot. But hearing him tell it, I can barely breathe. “I know now that they were clearly very sick,” he muses. “But back then, it just seemed like what parents did.”

Children don’t always cooperate, you see. Sometimes they don’t follow directions, or fall in line with your plans. That infuriated the Blakes, and so every time Nixon would defy them, they would shut him off.

“What does that mean?” I ask, imagining Nixon as a child, under the thumb of these people who are already coalescing into an image in my mind that scares me.

“It means that any time I did something they didn’t like, they’d simply ignore me. Only, they’d ignore me for days, treating me like a ghost in my own house. They never hit me or spanked me. They simply pretended I didn’t exist.”

“Nixon, that’s terrible,” I whisper into the warmth of his chest.

“Well, of course it only made me desperate for attention, which I’d try to get any way I could,” he explains. “And that’s when the punishment changed.”

I’m practically holding my breath.

By the time he was in grade school, Nixon’s parents had constructed a “quiet room” in the basement of their small, New England cracker box house in Worcester. It was essentially solitary confinement where Nixon would be placed on time out any time he did anything that they deemed “bad behavior.” Only to them, being alive and a child was all it took. Soon, everything was considered bad behavior. Drop a pencil? To the quiet room. Sneeze at the dinner table? To the quiet room. Drop something in a trash can too loudly? To the quiet room.

Soon he was spending more time in the quiet room than out, until eventually he came

home from school and reported directly there. He'd sleep there at night, wake up in the morning, and go to school. And when he got home, the cycle began again.

"The quiet room was empty," he says, and he doesn't have to describe it further. I know exactly what he means. No furniture. Nothing to amuse himself. No color or life.

Like his apartment.

Like Scour's headquarters.

"I know it sounds awful, but it just became reality for me. To the point where I needed that kind of quiet, non-sensory environment just to think. Just to be."

"And so you made your world into a quiet room," I whisper, the tears starting to roll down my cheeks. I prop myself up on my elbows and look up at him. He looks stoic, but when he sees the tears falling, he reaches up with his thumb to wipe them from my cheek.

"Until you," he says. "Suddenly I didn't need a quiet room. You became the place I needed to go to unwind, to relax, to calm down. You became my comfort. I needed you."

As soon as he says the words out loud, it's like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. He's poured out his pain, and I've collected it all. I'm probably the first person to ever pick up this burden and carry it for him. I know that this doesn't make it all better. I know that he's going to have more work to do. But knowing that I can be that comfort to him makes me fall even more in love with him. And I know that no matter what, I'm going to spend the rest of my life trying to protect him from the demons that have been chasing him his whole life.

Chapter 4

It's strange being on the other side of it. We spent so long hiding, it was like we didn't know how to be together outside of his apartment, not at first.

As soon as we got back to Boston, Nixon had his PR person at Scour release the statement about our impending nuptials. What with the very public proposal, we figured it wouldn't be long before it got out, so we wanted to get ahead of the story.

Once it hit, we were officially free. There was nothing keeping us from going out to dinner or seeing a movie. We could travel, or just go for a walk. And we did it all. We ate out at all the restaurants where Nixon usually ordered in from. We went to the theater. I joined him on his runs along the Esplanade. He even had Chinese takeout at my old apartment, where Elise finally got the chance to interrogate him.

It was great, except for one small detail. There was one place we hadn't been. One place we'd been avoiding.

But now, as we speed down the Mass Pike, Nixon clutching my hand as he steered the Tesla, I wondered if maybe this was one we should have left undone.

"Are you sure about this?" I ask.

He flips the turn signal and steers us off the Pike onto the exit ramp for Worcester.

"I need to do it," he says. "I think I also need you to see it. To really understand."

Nixon's childhood home is nothing like the world he inhabits now. Where his apartment is spacious and grand (if sparsely furnished), gazing out over the wide expanse of the city, this house is small and inconsequential, like it's trying to hide itself from view. The little yellow house, one story with a pitched roof, practically disappears behind overgrown bushes that flank the front door. When we get out of the car and approach, I see that the paint is faded and peeling.

We stand there on the crumbling front stoop for a moment, both of us just staring at the door.

"Really, we can go," I tell him. I worry that he's doing this just for me, and I want him to know I don't need it. From what he's told me, his parents have no place in his life, nor should they. So it really doesn't matter to me if I ever meet them. But he's adamant.

He reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing tightly.

"No," he says. "We're doing this." And then he uses his free hand to knock firmly, loudly on the door.

It feels like an eternity before I hear the slide of a deadbolt. The door creaks open. A tall, gray-haired man stands there, his shoulders hunched like the world has beaten down upon his head for far too long. He looks first at Nixon, then at me. Then he sighs.

"Come in," he says, like he's resigned to this fate. Then he turns and walks back into the house, not even waiting or beckoning us inside.

"How long has it been since they've seen you?" I whisper to him.

"Thirteen years," Nixon replies.

Inside, the house is dark and dusty, the beige carpet taking on a sort of grayish hue where decades of steps have worn it down. The walls are covered in a fading striped wallpaper, but like Nixon's apartment, there are no photos on the wall. Nothing to prove that an entire generation of life happened here. No baby Nixon, no Nixon playing tee ball or graduating from high school.

I follow Nixon into the living room, where his father is now sitting on the couch beside a gray-haired woman who I know is Nixon's mother. Though hers are faded and dull, she has the same blue eyes. His mother has a cannula in her nose, the long plastic tubing snaking down to a wheezing oxygen tank placed at her feet.

For a long time, no one says anything. Nixon and I are standing in the middle of their living room. They haven't seen their son in over a decade, and he's here to introduce his fiancé. But they have nothing to say. They just glare at him, like they're affronted that he's bothering them by taking up space in their house. And in that instant, I can perfectly picture what it was like for Nixon to grow up in this house, one where he was loathed for daring to take up space. To exist.

Beside me, I can feel Nixon starting to tense, so I squeeze his hand. I can be what he needs right now. I can try to make this ok.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. And Mrs. Blake," I tell them, trying to put an approximation of a smile on my face.

"And you are?" His mother croaks.

"I'm Delaney Masterson," I tell them. I reach out a hand to shake, but Mrs. Blake just stares at it like I've offered her a bag of dog shit.

"She's my fiancé, Mom," he says, the word sounding foreign on his lips.

“Oh,” his mother says. And that’s it. That’s all she has for the news that her only child is engaged to be married.

“We already had lunch,” his dad says, as if we asked for them to feed us.

“It’s ok, we ate on the way,” I tell them. At this point, I just want to smooth this over and get the out of here. I don’t know what Nixon was hoping to get out of this experience, but I hope he’s gotten it. Because I’m ready to leave here forever.

“Actually, I was just here to show Delaney where I grew up,” Nixon says, his voice full of anger and resentment. It strikes me as odd, the way he makes it seem like the house was the important thing, not the parents who raised him. “I’ll just show her around, if you don’t mind.”

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He's already pulling me from the living room as I hear his mother struggle to her feet behind us.

"What are you doing? You don't have permission to just traipse around this house like you own the place," she says, indignant.

But Nixon ignores her, taking me through the dining room and into the kitchen, where he stops in front of a closed door.

"Don't you go down there," his mother snaps, shuffling into the kitchen behind us. "You have no right. No right!"

"Like hell I don't," he mutters, reaching for the knob. It sticks at first, the wood swollen, the dingy white paint sticking. But Nixon gives it a quick tug, and it shrieks open. There are steps down, but it's dark below.

The basement. The quiet room.

Oh my god.

"Nixon, maybe this isn't—" I say, pulling him close to me.

"You're not going down there!" His mother cries, growing hysterical.

Nixon wheels around on her, until he's towering over her, his fists clenched. "Yes. I. Am." He seethes, and then he takes me by the hand and pulls me down into the darkness.

He flips a switch as we make our way down the stairs, the action a complete reflex pulled up from his youth spent in this nightmare house and how many trips down these stairs he made over the years. The fluorescent lights buzz to life, casting a sickly yellow glow over the room.

Which is completely empty.

The floor is concrete, and though it was probably once polished, it's now dull and dusty. The walls are cinder block, and completely bare. There's a bathroom in one corner, though it has no walls. Just a sink set into the wall, a toilet waiting beside it. There's a threadbare mattress on the floor in the middle of the room, no sheets, and there are aged water spots staining the top.

It looks like a prison.

It's so much worse than what I imagined when he described it to me. And that's when thinking of an adult, powerful, strong Nixon in there. Thinking about Nixon as a defenseless child has my eyes welling up. Before I know it, the tears are spilling over and rolling down my cheeks.

Nixon, still clutching my hand, surveying the room, says nothing. His mother is hobbling down the stairs, her oxygen tank clutched in one hand, still screeching about how he has no right. And before I know what I'm doing, I spin around and point a finger at her.

"How could you have done this to him? He was just a little boy!"

"You don't get to judge my parenting, you ... whoever you are," she snaps.

I point at the dirty, bare mattress. "This isn't parenting. This is abuse."

“We never laid a hand on him!” She cries, as if it makes a difference.

I’m seething, my shoulders rising and falling visibly with each breath, the tears rolling freely down my cheeks.

Nixon pulls me to him, his arms wrapped tightly around me, like he’s shielding me from having to see any more. He rests his chin on the top of my head. “It’s ok, Delaney. It’s ok,” he says, over and over.

“It’s not ok,” I sob into his chest. “This should never have happened to you.”

We stand there like that for a long time, until I feel wrung out. There are no more tears. And when he finally releases me, neither of us looks around the room again. We look only at each other.

“Let’s get out of here,” he says. “Ok?”

I nod.

We push past his mother, still standing there glaring at us, as if we’re the ones who did something wrong. And as we make our way back through the house, I’m careful not to take in any of it. As soon as I leave this house, I want it gone.

Forever.

* * *

We’re halfway back to Boston before he finally speaks. First, he reaches across the center console of the car to take my hand in his. I’m surprised to find that there’s no tension there. And when I study him, I don’t see a clenched jaw, or a furrowed brow. There are none of the telltale signs of his usual panic. He’s utterly at ease.

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“Thank you,” he says, his eyes firmly on the road in front of us. “And I’m sorry. That you had to see that.”

I rub my thumb in small circles on his palm. “It’s ok, Nixon. You don’t have to apologize to me for any of that. None of it was your fault. It was all them. They are sobroken.”

He nods. “I know. Seeing them like that, how sick they are, hearing her scream like that, made me realize that they truly have no idea what they did.”

“Don’t excuse them,” I say.

“I’m not. And I’ll never be able to forgive them. I’ll probably never even see them again. But having you there by my side to witness it, and watching you stand up for me...” he sighs, but it’s a sigh of release. “I feel like I can start to let go of the anger I had. And the resentment. I feel like I can start to move forward.”

I let out a breath I didn’t even know I was holding, that I’d been holding perhaps since Nixon first proposed. Even though we’d overcome the hurdles, it still felt somehow fragile. But hearing him say this, hearing him release what he’d been keeping inside for so many years, makes me feel like we’re going to be ok.

And then his blinker is on, the car exiting the Mass Pike. We cruise through the shady, lush streets of Wellesley, until he pulls into a parking spot near the quaint downtown. He undoes his seatbelt and turns so that he’s practically facing me, taking both my hands in his.

“I love you, baby,” he says, a genuine smile lighting him up from the inside. “And I’ll spend the rest of my life fighting for you the way you fought for me back there. You’re mine.”

He leans in and our lips meet, his fingers tangling in my hair at the nape of my neck. We pull back, our foreheads resting against each other.

“And you’re mine,” I tell him.

GizmoGossip: Blake and Masterson Tie the Knot

Nina March, editor at large

It was America’s version of a royal wedding this weekend, when billionaire CEO married his little commoner (intern) plucked from nowhere (his own company). Nixon Blake and Delaney Masterson, well, make that Delaney Blake, were married outside Kennebunkport, on a private compound Blake purchased for the occasion. And because suddenly the reclusive CEO is the effusive CEO, we know all about the affair.

The new Mrs. Blake wore custom Vera Wang, the groom custom Tom Ford. They danced to a swing band, they toasted with Dom Perignon, and they feasted on lobster cooked ten ways from Sunday by three-time Michelin star chef Wylie McKay. Oh, and the cake was made with three hundred cannoli flown in specially from Mike’s Pastry in the North End.

Don’t you wish you were invited?

The couple will honeymoon all over the fucking planet, as they crisscross the world

in Blake's private jet.

Honestly, who'd want to be a princess when you could be Mrs. Nixon Blake?

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Epilogue

“Ok, keep your eyes closed,” Nixon says as I shuffle through the door, my hands out to keep from knocking into a wall. “Are they closed?”

“They’re closed,” I assure him.

“Ok, open,” he says.

The walls are a soft butter yellow. Against one wall is a gorgeous, handmade white wood crib, with wide, modern slats. The polished concrete floor has mostly disappeared beneath an expansive gray and white striped rug. Soft gray drapes hang from either side of the floor-to-ceiling windows, ready to be pulled across to plunge the room into darkness. There’s a wire basket in one corner overflowing with stuffed animals. A white bookcase is nearly exploding with picture books and board books and a first edition hardcover set of the Harry Potter books. There are framed black and white photos covering the wall, of our wedding up at the Cabin in Maine, and of Nixon’s hands resting on my pregnant belly.

I turn and see Nixon standing in the doorway, holding Noah, who is fast asleep in his arms.

“I can’t believe you did all this,” I tell him as I wander the room, running my fingers over an enormous stuffed giraffe that takes up residence in one corner.

“Well, you decorated the rest of the house, so I had to do something for you,” he says, his voice low so as not to disturb our three-day-old son. When I’d left the

apartment just the other day, my contractions picking up in speed and intensity, I still hadn't seen the nursery Nixon promised me. He'd kept the door shut, adamant it be a surprise. I never imagined it would be quite this perfect.

I stop and glance at a black and white photo taken during our rehearsal dinner. Nixon and I are standing up on a small stage. The photo was taken from the back. You can see his arm around my waist, his hand resting on my hip. I've got my head tilted onto his shoulder. We're both raising champagne glasses to the crowd laid out before us, of family and friends (and a few business associates who had to be invited, of course). The photo is clear, and you can see how relaxed Nixon is. There's not a tense muscle in his body as he gazes out on the crowd there to celebrate our love.

Shortly after that first disastrous visit to his parents' house, Nixon agreed to get help. We found him an amazing psychologist, who worked with a psychiatrist to prescribe him medication to manage his anxiety. He'll still get nervous in big crowds, mostly for things related to Scour (the bigger the financial outcome of the event, the bigger the burden), but for the most part he's managed to keep his PTSD in check.

And with that, came his ability to let go of his need for solitude and silence. His apartment no longer needed to be a prison to protect him from the world.

I started ordering furniture. I bought groceries and started cooking in his kitchen. I hung art on the walls, and laid rugs over the floors. I had bookcases delivered and filled them with our favorite books. It turned out Nixon was a great reader, he'd always just kept his library confined to his tablet. I took great pleasure in surprising him with a physical library of all his favorite books.

And as a final testament to all the ways he'd opened up in the last year, now we were welcoming a new little life into this home we'd created. Noah was born on a perfectly sunny, warm July day, with Nixon holding my hand and coaching me through the entire delivery.

And now we were three.

The door buzzes.

“Who are we expecting?” I ask, my eyes on Noah. But he doesn’t stir.

“Oh, Elise and Colin asked if they could stop by and bring dinner for our first night home,” Nixon says. He passes the baby to me, then heads for the door.

Colin and Elise met at our engagement party, and they’ve been together ever since. Elise doesn’t know, but I went ring shopping with Colin just last week to help him pick out the perfect thing. Elise is starting law school at Harvard this fall, and Colin is at Scour full-time, developing apps with the code team. I can’t wait to help her plan her wedding.

As for me, I’m on maternity leave from my job with the Governor’s office. Turns out my passion for research and baller organizational skills are a perfect match for legislative affairs. I love my job, and as much as I’m looking forward to my six months home with Noah, I know I’ll be itching to get back.

“We brought lasagna from that little hole in the wall Italian bistro in Beacon Hill,” Elise says, coming in with shopping bags over both arms. “Plus cannoli from Mike’s pastry, and wine for the mama who can finally imbibe.”

“We also brought another baby gift, because that shop on Charles Street is like kryptonite this one,” Colin says, nodding at Elise as he holds out a pale blue gift bag.

“I can’t help it!” She cries, depositing the food onto the white marble island. “All that teeny tiny little clothing. It’s too much!”

I smile as I watch my friends bustle around our house, now bursting with color and life, as I hold my warm, snoozy baby in my arms. I glance up at Nixon, who’s

standing just behind me, and then lean back into his firm chest.

He kisses me, murmuring his love for me in my ear as I hold our child and murmur it back to the man of my dreams.

As I watch my friends chattering away, I feel a surge of hope and love and happiness that I never even thought was possible. All those difficult days of fighting against Jenna and Amber, feeling like those girls meant something to me—could somehow hurt me—those days feel positively ancient now.

I actually don't know or care what happened to those two girls. They mean less than nothing to me, because I found my life and my place in this world.

And that's when it hits me.

I'm home. Truly home in a way I never could have envisioned.

What's even more amazing, is that Nixon is home too. A man who never truly had comfort in this world found it with me.

Tears are in my eyes, but never has a woman cried tears more joyful than these.

For a brief moment, the love overwhelms me, and then I'm laughing, wiping my eyes and settling down for a simple meal with friends and loved ones.

The End