

The DNA of Love
BOOK 1

NOT OFFICIAL COVER



The
Houdlini
Trait



S. MARIE JONES

*The Houdini
Trait Excerpt 1*

ADVANCE PREVIEW - NOT FOR
DISTRIBUTION

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TO MY BELOVED ANCESTORS

You show up ever more in my life, bestowing solace and inspiration, and I thank you from the very depths of me. I deeply trust that one joyous day, we shall meet more fully.

This is in honor of you.

Is déjà voodoo a thing?

Because one terse letter threatening to shutter City Sandbox just hexed me back in time. My daycare center's saboteur is clear. Nicholas Barrett. Why is clear, too. Payback. But no matter what the loaded, land-grabbing property developer tosses my way, or what I have to do, or how stupid hot he is, I am not taking this lying down. Unless

...

NO. Lord no.

Is this a recurrent nightmare?

Ivy Hart needs my help. Again. I didn't cook up her latest train wreck, but after the stunt she pulled, I'm damn sure gonna milk it. Four years ago, her beauty and ferocious community spirit mesmerized me. This time? Not so much. Besides, I have my own needs. One, to solve a family mystery. Two, to uncover her secret. So, Ivy Hart gets what she wants only if I get what I want. And I want ...

NO. Hell no.

Contents

Acknowledgements	VI
Prologue	1
1. The Letter Bomb	8
2. The Family Mystery	16
3. The Head-on Collision	27
4. The Bright Idea	43
About S. Marie	60
How to Find S. Marie	62

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Prologue

14 YEARS AGO

IVY

Wait until BJ hears this.

I sprint down the hallway, dodging kids like a line-backer. Only two minutes until next period.

There he is. At his locker. I eat the next few yards, screech to a halt, and tap his shoulder. “You’re not gonna believe what Nola just told me.”

BJ turns and flashes a sexy smile. The one that gets every high school girl’s drawers in a dewy twist. He steals a kiss, and my panties double knot.

BJ aka *‘Da Bomb’* is my boyfriend.

Me—Ivy Hart, most likely to be voted class nerd. I’m waiting for the night I shoot upright in bed and find I’ve been dreaming.

Varsity quarterback. Senior class president. Advanced Placement student. And so damn hot.

Plus he's mine. For almost two years now. In dog years, we'd be halfway to our silver anniversary.

"*Me* not believe Nola? Gee, I wonder why." BJ rolls his green eyes. "Maybe because when she prays, heaven puts fact checkers on overtime."

I punch his rock-hard bicep. "Hey, that's my cousin."

BJ shrugs, then drapes an arm over my shoulder and steers us to class. "Just saying. Nola never met gossip she didn't make friends with. She introduces every tidbit to one and all, and she's none too picky about their backgrounds."

BJ's not wrong. Some people hustle drugs, some stolen goods, and others designer knockoffs. Nola? She trades in information. "Yeah, well this gossip's wack," I say.

"Okay, so what's today's breaking news?"

I stop short. I don't wanna miss his reaction. It'll be priceless. "Cassidy Miller's telling the whole school you asked her to the senior prom. The girl must smoking something good."

We're late. Classes have begun, and the hall stands quiet as a morgue. But something's off. BJ should be doubled over laughing.

Any second. Waiting. Waiting.

He shifts from foot to foot. Bites his bottom lip like it's dinner. What's wrong with him?

My scalp starts to prickle. Soon, the sensation migrates, spreading to my arms and legs. "BJ..." I say, grabbing his arm. "Isn't that insane?"

Red-faced and eyes blazing, he pivots and slams a random locker with his fist. "Shit. Fucking shit. She promised not to say anything yet."

My body goes rigid, like a wet-dry vac has completely siphoned off my water content. I'd swear rigor mortis has

set in. Except for my right leg. It's jitterbugging to a tune only it can hear. Shaking like crazy.

What's wrong with BJ? He should be howling...like bent over, cramped stomach howling.

And what's going on with me? Phantom boulders crush my brain and chest. My heart's racing in a 100-meter sprint. Am I stroking out?

I don't know who to worry about more...him or me.

"Ivy, please," BJ pleads, grabbing my hand. "It's not what you think. I-I didn't ask her...I mean I did, but it's not what you think."

His voice sounds remote, piped in from a far-off galaxy. He softly rubs my hand, and gradually, the touch soothes me. Warmth seeps back into my body. My jittery leg stills. And the pressure lifts from my head and chest.

Not what I think? Sure sounds like it.

Then, it comes to me. How could I have forgotten BJ's other school title? Class clown. His pranks are legendary. I draw in a relieved breath and let it out.

Still, this prank borders on nasty.

Then again, Cassidy doesn't border on nasty. She owns it. Along with its adjoining lots—cruel and devious. Not to mention controlling shares in entitled and stuck-up. Nola calls her Bwitchy Barbie.

Cassidy thinks BJ should be hers. And I'm in her way. Sadly, the tall, willowy blonde doesn't suffer roadblocks happily. Or at all. She runs over them. Then, she backs up and burns tread over the pancaked body again.

BJ knows all this. He must be punking her.

A smile curves my lips. Not that I approve. Ca-ASS-idy—another Nola nickname—has kinda earned a BJ prank. She tortures me any chance she gets. Like accidentally on purpose tripping me in the hall. Pointing and

laughing with her friends when I pass by. Making funny faces because of my braces. Dissing my clothes. My glasses. My anything.

BJ always says she'll pay for it one day. Still, a bogus prom invite? It's savage.

"You fake-asked her to the prom, BJ?" Chuckling, I shake my head and kiss his cheek. "You're terrible. And terribly sweet."

But his face crumbles like a stale saltine, and the boulders roll back on my head and chest.

He tugs my arm, draws me into the third-floor stairwell and down a few steps. "No, Ivy. I *did* ask her."

Okay, is he pranking me now? I can't tell.

"Dad made me."

His father? No way. His father's so sweet to me. I shake off his hand. "Don't lie, BJ. Your parents like me."

"I know. A lot." His eyes fall to the floor, and he scrubs a palm over his face. "Ivy, it's not you, especially since we're only teenagers. It's your dad. And his clients."

Now, I'm completely lost. "What about them?"

His mouth opens, and his lips flap like tiny bird wings. But his larynx holds actual words hostage.

"BJ, take a breath," I snap.

He inhales deeply, lets it out. "It's your dad's cases. And all the protests and controversy around them. They make my dad and his business partners uncomfortable."

"You mean Cassidy's dad," I say, putting two and two together. BJ's and Cassidy's fathers are business partners in a top accounting firm.

BJ dips his head sideways. "Yeah, but not only them."

And I know he's not lying. This private school is full of trust-fund babies whose parents are his dad's business contacts and clients. People who don't like boats that rock.

Or those rocking them. I'm not stupid. I know why some kids here don't speak to me. Or Nola.

"And going to the prom with Robert Hart's daughter is just a little too public? Is that it, BJ?"

He shakes his head. But his darting eyes blab on him.

"Funny thing. You know what makes my dad uncomfortable? Cops murdering unarmed Black men. Beating handcuffed Black men," I toss back.

Just thinking of my father's work as a civil rights lawyer, my chest swells with pride. How he cares about his clients and their families, about our community. "And I'm pretty sure it's even more uncomfortable for the victims. Tell me, which do you think's more important?" I add.

Again, his lips flap like a drunk Donald Duck, and whatever hurt I feel at his father's opinions fritters away. Now, my blood's boiling.

"Don't even bother, BJ. I get it. Black lives don't matter." I fling the words at him like darts. "And I don't either. You and Cassidy enjoy the prom."

BJ rakes his fingers through his thick, dark-blond hair that I love playing with. Loved. Now I could yank every strand from its roots, attach them to a stuffed doll, and stick pins in it. I turn and walk up the stairs.

"Ivy, please! It's just the prom. We can still see each other."

I turn in amazement. He totally thinks he can take another girl to the prom—a suitably unmelanated, uncontroversial one—and I'll be waiting with dinner and slippers.

He's not dumbstruck. He's plain dumb. A witch's brew of laughter rises up in me and bubbles into the air as I swivel round and open the stairwell door.

Still, something nags at the edges of my mind. Something he said.

I stop, close my eyes, and replay our conversation. Then, turn back to him. “You said it’s got nothing to do with me now...we’re teenagers. What’d you mean?”

“Well, my dad says it’s alright for us to date now, but...”

And one of the boulders, the one on my chest, crushes my heart. All this time we’ve dated, how didn’t I spot it? The coward in him. A gasp tears from my lungs, and I raise a palm to stop the rest of his words I know are coming.

My right leg knows, too, as a tremor dashes up it. It sometimes shakes when I’m anxious, but never like this. Still, I turn to run. To escape his words. One step, then another.

But while I managed to shut him up, his imagined words swirl in my head like demons. Round and round they go, making me dizzy, sick to my stomach. With my next step, my right leg gives out. I collapse on the stairwell landing.

“Ivy!” BJ wails. Climbing the stairs two at a time, he stoops down and reaches for me.

I shove him away and try to stand. But I can’t. What’s happening to me? Fear engulfs me like a raging fire. I know it’s nerves and anxiety, but it’s never gone this far.

BJ reaches out once more. I open my mouth to scream. To tell him don’t ever touch me again. But now, I’m lip-flapping, too. I can’t get out a single word. Still, terrified as I am—can’t talk, can’t walk—I shove him away.

“Ivy, you need help.” With fear-stricken eyes, he reaches for me yet again.

This time, I shove him with both hands and he rears back, his green eyes clouded with worry. Then, all at once, they brighten.

“Nola!” he says. “I’ll get Nola.”

And he stands and runs like the wind.

The Letter Bomb

14 YEARS LATER

IVY

“Oh, Sweet Baby Jesus, do you taste good,” I murmur to my chai cappuccino. “Mm-mm-mm.”

Eyes closed, I take another sip. A sharp rat-a-tat startles me, and I jump, swinging my head around.

What’s she doing up so early? Normally, she toddles home at midnight and is still snoring when I head for work.

Nola stands in the kitchen entryway, hand frozen in knocking position. Straight from bed, barefoot, and wearing a violet satin camisole with matching shorts, she twists her lips into a smirk intricate as a fisherman’s knot. “Is it safe to enter or do you two need a private moment?”

I love the cozy quiet of this lower-floor kitchen. Situated in the rear of the historic Bed-Stuy brownstone our parents gifted us, it affords peace from the busy Brooklyn

streets. The perfect place to flip through the Daily News in the morning or get lost in a good book after a long day.

Or like me now, to dive into the deep waters of a family history website and pore over documents, hoping to hook a whopper discovery.

And always, sipping something hot.

I lift my mug in one hand, and jab an index finger at its message. “Read and take the hint,” I lob back.

Without her glasses, Nola squints. Then, edges closer.

Genealogist at Work — Get Lost.

When comprehension hits, she snorts and swats a hand at my mug before sauntering over to the ceiling-to-floor mug rack. Made of iron and distressed oak, it holds my cup collection, all bearing genealogy quotes. She plucks a cup off its iron hook and swivels around. “Ya know what this one says?” she asks, holding it high. “Life Exists Outside Galaxy Genealogy. Get One.”

I stifle the laugh bubbling inside me and stick my tongue out.

“That tongue’s wasted on me, girl.” She strolls over and juts her chin at my mug. “Tea ain’t the new dick,” she says. Then, her chin targets my laptop. “And neither is all that genealogy stuff. If you’re orgasming over a cuppa chai, might be time to find yourself a man and get you a real piece.”

Amused at her own joke, Nola’s cackle fills the kitchen as she turns back to the coffee machine and chooses her brew selection.

Tea...the New Dick.

I try hard, but I can’t hold back the chuckle fighting for life outside my body. Maybe that should inspire the next addition to my bespoke mug collection.

Genealogy...the New Dick. Lord knows I get off on it.

“I’m serious, Ivy.” My cousin sits down at the table with her cappuccino. “Your dry spell done turned into a dry Ice Age.”

I bat the air like Nola’s a pesky gnat. We might be cousins and both thirty years old, but our approaches to men are worlds apart. Nola’s method—swap them like a day trader flips stocks.

Not that I’m judgy. Not much anyway. More power to her, if she’s happy. Kind of hard to see how though.

Me? I’m done with relationships. Either they’re a bad fit and end before getting started. Or they get serious and feel like a fairy tale—like with BJ. And with...

No, Ivy. That one’s over, too.

Because my fairy tales have their own genre. I call them Fairy Fails. Always ending with an epic happily-ever-disaster. So, I’m done.

“I’ve got all the *piece* I need. Peace of mind. “I pineapple my long, corkscrew curls high on my head, securing the mass with the satin scrunchy on my wrist. “And some of us could do with a dry spell, Miss Thang.”

Nola dips her chin and lobs me a sidelong glance. “Listen, working parts seize up if they ain’t greased. I’m just following the instructions that come with any appliance.”

“Ever heard of parts giving out from overuse?”

Nola claps a hand over her mouth to hold back a cappuccino sprinkler. She swallows, then stands and heads to the mug rack. “I’m starting my own collection. None of this nerdy genealogy BS.” She grabs a cup. “Pretend this one says *Kiss My Dark-Chocolate Ass.*”

I roll my eyes up to the vintage pressed-tin ceiling and notice the clock. Darn. Already six o’clock. “Girl, I have no time for your simpleness. I gotta get to work.”

A few minutes later, while brushing my teeth, another rat-a-tat sounds on my bedroom door. I stick my head out, toothbrush hanging from my mouth.

“I forgot to give you yesterday’s mail,” Nola says as she tosses envelopes on my bed.

Normally, I’d leave it until this evening. Mostly junk anyway. But one envelope catches my eye.

Laraby Property Management? I definitely paid City Sandbox’s rent this month. On time. I’d let the bills here go unpaid before I’d miss daycare bills. So, what do they want?

My fingers hesitate. Good luck doesn’t know my name, but bad luck has all my deets. Still, whatever’s inside won’t magically change, so I rip open the envelope.

With each word, icy heat gathers at the base of my spine. It whips itself into a storm and races to my throat, then explodes in a lung-splitting yowl. I tear the letter in two. Then, in fours. And again, for good measure.

Footsteps stalk down the hallway and Nola barrels into my room, her stance a cross between a linebacker plowing through the defensive line and a toe-bouncing boxer ready to erupt. “W-what happened? What’s wrong?”

“It...I...he...!” My brain tries to form coherent speech, but on the way to my lips, it sputters like an old car battery.

“Deep breaths, cuz,” Nola says. “Then, talk.”

I inhale and point to the floor on the exhale. Nola’s eyes follow. She stoops down, and like a red-breasted robin scooping up breadcrumbs, she gathers the paper scraps littering the rug. Laying them on the bed, she reassembles the letter, then reads.

And I wait. And wait. Dang, is *her* brain sputtering, too?

Finally, her eyes meet mine. Her mouth hangs slack jawed. “Raising the daycare rent? You can’t afford that.

Not without raising your fees. A lot. And most of your parents can't afford it."

"No kidding!" I pace the floor, trying to think. "But how? We had an agreement."

"In writing?"

I let out something between a sigh and a growl. "Of course, Nola. I'm not a complete numbnut."

Plus, I had a lawyer review it. All that legal mumbo jumbo crossed my eyes and curdled my brain.

"Do you have the lease here?"

I shake my head. "It's at City Sandbox. But I *know* what it says. No rent increase for ten years."

"Okay, maybe it's just a clerical error. Call this Laraby Property Management later. Until then, don't get yourself all worked up."

Too late. My insides are squirming like worms in nutrient-rich soil. I grab the scraps of reconstructed letter and ball them up. "Screw the property manager. I want this straight from the horse's mouth."

More like the horse's butt right now. I don't know exactly why, but something tells me this is no mistake. I launch the letter across the room, aiming for the trashcan by my desk. Slam dunk.

Slam dunk or not, my insides still quake. City Sandbox means everything to me. The kids keep me going. If I lose them...

Don't go there, Ivy. Just don't.

Heeding my inner voice, I stuff down my fears and march out of the bedroom.

"Where you going?" Nola asks.

"I need a cookie."

Nola's chin dips a few notches. "This early in the morning, Ms. Healthy Living?"

This letter just clouded up and took a whizz on my entire day. Maybe my entire life. I need a cookie. Probably several.

“They’re Paleo. Healthy enough,” I say, heading to the kitchen.

STILL IVY

Forty minutes later, I pull into my parking space and snuff out the engine. Taking a deep breath, I sit for a few seconds munching on a carrot-cake cookie and peering through the glass doors of my second home.

City Sandbox.

It’s kind of my life now. Sure, I used to have another more exciting one, but who am I kidding? That fairy tale couldn’t last for someone like me. Even a fortune teller staring into a golf ball would’ve predicted a fairy fail. So, when everything exploded in my face, City Sandbox saved me. And whenever I pull up to these doors, peace settles over me.

We take turns coming in to the daycare center early—that’s early, as in the birds already pried open one eye, said hell nah, and started sawing logs again. Preferably, not the ones they’re perched on.

Today, Denise drew the Early Bird Special. I watch as she hangs the daily sign-in sheet for the parents. She’s already arranged the kids’ breakfast area. Time to go help.

As I gather my things, a sharp rap on the car window sends my heart searching for my throat. Are folks *trying* to

give me a heart attack today? I turn, see Rhonda, and sigh in relief. I smile and get out of the car.

Mouth breathing like she just ran the New York Marathon, Rhonda's dark-brown eyes teem with worry. "The t-temp agency called with a j-job," she stammers between breaths. "Do you have a spot for Nicola today?"

Looking into the baby carriage, I tickle little Nicola's neck, and she kicks her feet excitedly.

Even if I didn't, I'd conjure a spot from thin air for this little munchkin. For any of my kids. Good daycare is such a prized commodity these days, and City Sandbox provides top-notch childcare to Bed-Stuy families.

Families like Rhonda—a young mother who lost her boyfriend, takes college courses, and works temp jobs. There are so many like her, I could empty the New York Public Library and stack the shelves with their stories. So, I never turn a parent away without a darn good reason.

"Let's hope so," I say, patting Rhonda's shoulder and praying we're fully staffed today.

Yeah, it might jam up my optimum staff-to-kids ratio. Which in turn, could scuttle my leaving to solve this rent thing. My heart relaxes at the possibility of a reprieve.

Bwok, bwok, bwok!

I curse the squawking in my head as we enter City Sandbox.

Damn it, I am *not* chicken. My last name is Hart. Not Perdue, not Tyson, not Hormel. I'm not chicken, just relieved to maybe have another day to strategize. That's all.

Desperate to silence the clucking, I look at Rhonda. "Where's your temp job today?" I ask.

"Wall Street, so not too far."

I nod, then turn to Denise. "Good morning. How's the day looking so far? Anyone called in?"

“Two kids sick, but full staff. So, we’re good,” she reports.

Which means I *can* go to Manhattan and sort this rent thing out.

Bwok, bwok...

For crying out loud, I’m not chicken. I just wanted a bit more time. Like a year or two. And maybe I shouldn’t have pooh-poohed Nola’s offer to tag along. Just for moral support, not her kickass attitude. Because I can be kickass, too.

Or kicked in the arse.

Bwok, bwok...

“Ivy?” Rhonda says, interrupting my squawking chicken. “So, Nicola can stay?”

“Oh, sorry.” I shake my head and nudge myself back. “Of course. Let’s get her settled.”

Rhonda’s brown eyes soften, and her shoulders relax. “Perfect!”

Well, so much for my reprieve. Guess I’m headed to Manhattan later.

Bwok, bwok...

The Family Mystery

NICHOLAS

And that's why they invented The Weather Channel.

But who'd think leaving home a half-hour ago under bright blue skies, I'd come up from the bowels of hell—aka the Manhattan subway—and be greeted by churlish gray skies unleashing angry tears?

Maybe the lady and her little boy scuttling down Mulberry Street in front of me. Huddled under an oversize umbrella, his small hand nestles in her protective one.

My heart flinches at their closeness. But I ignore it, instead swerving my eyes to the matching neon rain jackets they sport on this freakishly cool, late August morning. These two obviously got the memo.

My eyes dip to neon rain boots—one tiny pair, the other adult size—plodding like ducks down the sidewalk. When Al Roker spoke, they listened.

Flippity-flop, flippity-flop. Down the street the two race with fat raindrops splashing up from their heels like a sprinkler system.

A sweet mother-son photo that I have hundreds like already. Really, only a fool would try to capture the scene in this weather.

I unzip my backpack, because while I'm nobody's fool in business, I sometimes play one in my free time. Especially, if photography's involved.

Before I can extract the camera, chilly raindrops gather steam, pelting my face like arrows. Many thanks, God. I can cancel my next facial. And the Kodak moment.

I lift the collar of my suit jacket and button up. If I don't get a move on and find the restaurant, I'll be surfing down Mulberry.

Le Sorelle Gemelle—the Twin Sisters. Eli swears it's open for breakfast. After braving the elements to get there, my cousin had better be right.

Zeus turns on the waterworks full blast, and a burst of rainwater splashes up from the little chap's neon boots, like a waterfall shifted into reverse.

Damn, another photo-op missed.

Caving like a cardboard house in a hurricane, I shrug off my one-shoulder backpack and pluck out the camera. Still walking, I program it to continuous-shot function. No easy feat, but I've had practice. That done, I fall into a semi-motionless glide and lift the camera, catching Mama Bear and her cub in the LCD screen.

Just as I click, the two disappear on me. Poof. Gone. What the...?

My eyes jerk up. Mama Bear has hung a right, dragging Baby Bear along. Uh oh, did she catch me in the act and flee?

Cripes, it's just a picture. And only of their feet. From behind. Doesn't make me a Peeping Tom, does it? But maybe I should apologize.

As I rehearse my *mea culpa*, the pair screech to a halt under an awning, seeking refuge. From the rain, not me and my camera.

A puff of laughter passes my lips. Another great shot just shot to hell. But hey, my guilty pleasure's safe, so I'm good.

I glance up and read the awning's large, curlicue lettering. *Le Sorelle Gemelle*.

I almost blew right past the restaurant. One day, this picture-snapping obsession will end badly for me.

Like bumping into someone and nearly knocking them over. Oops, been there.

Or walking into traffic and almost being flattened? Done that.

How about running with the bulls and getting skewered by a burly beast's horn? Not yet. But knowing me, one July in Pamplona with my camera and I could end up a *Nick kebab*.

All for a snapshot. And not a particularly artistic one. Just a mom and her little boy. She wraps an arm around him, holds him close, shielding him from the rain. And likely anything else that might hurt him. My heart clutches. The boy doesn't know how lucky he is.

I approach the door and greet my would-be photo subjects with a smile on my way into the restaurant. An unexpected brightness greets me from the glass-and-iron chandeliers hanging above and I let my eyes adjust.

Actually, the entire space proves unexpected. Bright and airy with a mix of exposed- and white-brick walls. Above are white ceiling rafters—faux but authentic feel. And as Eli promised, not a checkered tablecloth in sight.

A woman approaches.

“Mr. Barrett?” she says with a sweet Italian accent and a half smile. I nod, and the smile broadens. She stretches out a delicate hand. “Welcome to *Le Sorelle Gemelle*. I’m Isabella. Eli told me to take good care of you or he’d fire me.”

Aha, one of the twin-sister owners. Long black hair, glimmering gray-green eyes, a playful smile, and a sense of humor about Eli. Wonder if these two...

No way. Maybe in our college days, but not now. The new Eli—version 2.0—bears no resemblance to the inveterate player of our youth. Not since the love of his life came along. Even now, more than three years after Sela’s death, my cousin hasn’t really let his wife go. Damn unhealthy, if you ask me.

First, no one asked you. Second, letting go isn’t one size fits all. And third, look who’s talking *unhealthy*. You’re practically on life support with the way all roads in your mind circle back to—

I wrestle the busybody in my head to the ground, duct tape its mouth shut, and wrench my attention back to Isabella. “I’m sure your job’s safe. Eli couldn’t sack potatoes.”

Like shy lovers, her eyebrows inch together, signaling my little joke just crashed and burned. I could try explaining.

And dig an even deeper hole?

“Forget it,” I say with a hand wave. “An embarrassingly dumb joke.”

“Well, now I’m curious. I’ll make you tell me one day,” she says with a throaty chuckle as she grabs two menus from the host stand. “Your friend is already here. Shall we?”

She leads me to a quiet space in the rear. A perfect spot for old college friends to catch up. The second I see him, an amused snort erupts from me. “There’s the Lincoln Wells I know and love. Glasses half falling off, his nose deep enough in a book to sniff the pages. Some things never change.”

Linc lifts his head and adjusts the round, black-rimmed glasses that haven’t changed since college. Trapped in a time warp, his bookwormy air and preppy style linger. Same chinos, Oxford shirt, and cardigan with sleeves tied over his shoulders. A broad smile eases across Linc’s deep-brown face as he rises from his chair and wraps me in a bear hug.

Stepping back, he points to my camera. “You’re right, bro. Nothing’s changed. So, delete any unauthorized pictures you snapped of me, you hear, Nikon?”

I let out a harrumph but smile at my college nickname. Nikon Nick—famous for embarrassing shots that leave you alive but wishing you weren’t. “Mirror, mirror on the wall, my friend,” I say.

At that, Linc shakes his head slightly, and his dark honey-hazel eyes crinkle inquisitively.

“Take a look in one sometime, buddy.” I point to the wall of mirrors in the restaurant. “That’s a face only Mom, and *maybe* Pop Wells, could love. Believe me, nobody’s darting behind trees to get a shot of that mug.”

Linc punches my forearm, and we bust out laughing. Honestly, as photo subjects go, Linc has it all—tall, lean physique, striking eyes, and symmetrical facial features. Plus, the lucky bastard hasn’t aged since college, looking more in his twenties than our mid-thirties.

Black Guy Magic must be a thing, too. Too bad he hides his good looks behind Coke-bottle glasses, outdated clothes. And books.

We sit, accepting menus from a patient Isabella. She takes our drink order and leaves us to catch up.

“So, how’s California treating you, man? Been a long time,” I say.

“If you’d ever accepted one of my many invitations, you might know.” Linc lifts his water glass and takes a sip. “LA is great. Got some of everything and everybody.”

“Anybody special?”

He cocks his head from side to side, considering his response. “Yeah, I’m seeing someone,” he admits. “Gina, a surgical resident at Cedar-Mount Sinai.”

“Is it serious?”

“We’re both too busy for serious,” he says, before aiming a finger at me. “What about you, man? Anybody?”

“Nah, free as a bird, and loving it.” I mentally duck. Do half lies mean only half a lightning bolt?

“So, there’s no one? The great Nicholas Barrett spends his nights doing the five-knuckle shuffle?”

“I said free, not hard-up, smartass.”

Linc throws his head back and laughs. But then, his smile shrinks, the amused crinkle of his eyes disappears. “So, you haven’t...you don’t,” he begins, stumbling over his words. He takes a breath.

For chrissakes, don’t let him say it. Just don’t. I bite the inside of my jaw. Ouch. The space between my ears catches fire, building until my eyes almost melt in their sockets.

“No word from—” Linc’s words come to a screeching halt, like someone pulled a train emergency brake.

I can’t blame him. I’m pretty sure my eyes are doing a damn good impression of Tweety Bird.

“Sorry, bro, I didn’t mean to...” Reaching for his eye-glasses, he presses at the bridge. A useless move, unless he’s trying to plant them in his skull.

I lean back in my chair and puff out a calming sigh. “No worries, man. I get it,” I say, wrenching my stubborn lips into a half smile. “No, haven’t heard a single word. It’s like Houdini. Gone up in smoke.”

And can we not do this now? Or ever?

“So strange, bouncing like that. Have you tried contacting her?”

Guess we’re doing it.

“Fuck, no,” I snap, and immediately regret it. Of course, Linc’s curious. And concerned. “Sorry, man. But what would be the point?”

Before he answers, our waiter appears like a fairy god-brother. My muscles untie themselves. “Could you ask Isabella to surprise me?” I ask my savior, not bothering with the menu. “Today’s breakfast special, or her favorite dish. I’m easy.”

“The same,” Linc says, then raises a hand. “Just nothing with peanuts or fish. Allergies.”

Before he picks up our conversation, I jump in. “So, you’re job interviewing here. What’s up with that? Not that I’m not stoked. Be great having you back in the city.”

“Really, it’s for my parents. My nephew’s getting to be too much for them.”

Ah, yes. Linc’s sister’s boy. Sad story. Lisa got hooked on drugs, so Linc’s parents have custody.

“Long story short, I’m hoping to come home and get him straight. Which is kinda why I asked to see you without the other guys.” He hesitates, his eyes pensive, as if considering his next words. “I need a favor, Nikon.”

“Anything, man. Shoot,” I say reflexively. Still, my next breath clots in my chest. As best I can remember, Linc’s never asked me—or anyone—for anything. Which isn’t normal. Or good. Everybody needs help sometime. Except Linc. At least, not so’s you’d notice.

But holy hell, please let it be something uncomplicated. Like a loan, a place to crash. A kidney.

Linc is my guy, thick or thin. But if words resembling *got a fantastic business proposition for you* come out of his mouth, I might blast a full-grown cow out of my ass.

It’s nothing to do with trust. I trust Linc with my life. But friends and business? A rock hard no-go.

So, please make it easy, because I don’t think I have it in me to deny Linc anything. Even if it could be the death knell of our friendship. My muscles cramp at the possibility, as I wait. Linc clears his throat, adjusts his glasses again. He’s nervous.

“It’s my nephew Damien. He’s cutting school, running with the wrong crowd, and got caught shoplifting,” he says without taking a breath, his voice almost a whisper.

“And?” I say with a shrug. “Compared to some in my teenage years, he sounds like a candidate for sainthood.”

Linc quirks an eyebrow upward. “Yeah, well Damien’s a Black kid, so you know how that goes. Instead of the system cutting him a break like other kids, it’s more like them’s the breaks.”

My gut tightens. I wish I didn’t know. But everybody does. They just don’t admit it.

Still, I relax. It doesn’t sound so bad. Maybe he just needs a loan or a lawyer referral. “Anything, Linc. How can I help?”

“Well, I got him a good lawyer...”

Okay, not a lawyer referral. Please, make it money.

“She thinks if Daim doesn’t cut school again and keeps his nose clean, the prosecutor will recommend restitution, maybe community service. And dropping the charges,” Linc says, his voice a little stronger. “I thought a part-time job might keep him out of trouble and show him responsibility. Plus it can’t hurt his case.”

“Uh huh,” I murmur, wondering where he’s headed.

Linc’s eyes dart here, there, every-damn-where. Looking down at the table, he settles on stroking his silverware. And talking to it. “Well, maybe you could help with the job part?”

My muscles self-soothe and relax themselves. The day’s looking up. I won’t be butt-birthing a cow this morning.

But still, a job for a teenager? And from the sounds of it, a teenager like the ones I avoided at all costs when I was one. Smartasses.

Yeah, I’m a grown-ass man, but some things linger. Teenagers. Ugh. “So, like what kind of job were you thinking?”

“Anything,” Linc replies. “Mailroom, copy machine, courier. I don’t know. Anything.” He fiddles with his glasses again. “But I understand if you can’t. He’s not the easiest.”

Poor Linc. This ask is killing him. And agreeing to it might torture me, but I have no choice. What’s the point of having my own company if I can’t help a friend?

“Like I said, man. Anything,” I jump in and say. “We’ll figure something out.”

Just then, our breakfast comes. We tuck into it and a lively debate on football, even as I wonder what the frig to do with a teen at Barrett Enterprises.

“Damn! You can’t trust anybody,” comes a familiar voice a while later. My cousin Eli towers over us, his eyes

squeezed shut, a hand clapped over his heart. “Cheated on by my cousin and my college roommate.”

Such a drama queen.

“Hey, roomie. It’s great to see you,” Linc says, standing and hugging Eli. “Don’t blame Nikon. I asked to see him alone. For a favor.”

Eli claps his heart again. “Linc the Lionhearted asking for a favor? Has Planet Earth tilted on its axis?”

“Yeah, yeah, smartass,” Linc says. He glances at his watch, then at me. “Nikon, will you fill this butthead in on the favor? I’ve got an interview to prep for.” Gathering his things, he heads out, then stops. “See you both for poker night, if not before. And breakfast is on me, Nick.”

Eli sits and orders a cappuccino. “Actually, you saved me a trip. I was headed to your office.”

I lift a what-for eyebrow.

My cousin and mincing words are natural-born enemies. So, when he hesitates, the hair on my neck stands erect as a hard dick.

Reaching into his messenger bag, Eli pulls out a book. “You’ll be happy to hear I finally started sifting through Mom’s things.”

He’s not wrong. Aunt Julia died over a year ago, and her home remains intact as the day she passed.

Not unlike your penthouse since—

I shove two socks down the throat of my mind’s busybody. “Who am I to judge? I know you’re dealing with a lot. “

“Yeah, and this might add to it,” he says. Opening the book to where a bookmark peeks out, he hands it to me. “I’ve been reading Mom’s diaries, and this part concerns you.”

The dread in Eli's eyes travels to my chest. My hand shivers as I take the book. I don't want to read it.

But my busybody does, so we read.

The Head-on Collision

IVY

A foghorn makes less noise than the woman's sigh.

"Once again, Ms. Hart, he is not here," she says. "And you don't have an appointment."

Did evolution take its own giant leap for mankind and secretly cross the late Queen Elizabeth with a wild animal? If so, I've found its handiwork. The hairs on my arms prickle as I eye his secretary.

So prim and proper in her cotton-candy pink cardigan and pearls. With her perfectly coiffed bob, barely-there makeup save a pop of coral-pink lipstick, and a faint rose-water scent perfuming the air, she's positively regal.

Yet, oddly feral.

She hovers above her seat. Half sitting, half standing. Her eyes narrow, sizing me up like a jackal on the prowl for today's lunch. She deserves her own genealogy mug.

NYKW Species Shouldn't Mix—Now You Know Why Species Shouldn't Mix.

Her concrete jaw screams danger. One wrong move, and this cross between Wile E. Coyote and Queen Elizabeth I or II—take your pick—might reach into a concealed drawer and pull out a revolver. It's probably encrusted with bubblegum-pink Swarovski crystals to match her outfit.

Okay, Ivy, reel it in.

Perspiration gathers on my upper lip as I curse myself for refusing Nola's offer to come work her Black Girl Magic. Or, in her case, Voodoo. But I need to handle this—him—by myself. Except so far, I can't even get past Her Wild-eyed Majesty here.

Geez, I'm only asking for a few minutes. I take a deep breath and square my shoulders, determined to try again.

"I really do understand, Ms..." I peek at her nameplate. "Ms. Carroll. I can wait, and I promise to be quick."

"How many times and ways can I say it? He doesn't see anyone without an appointment."

Whoa, she's nothing like Cynthia. Not that his previous secretary played tiddlywinks with strangers, but at least her DNA stuck to one species. And she wasn't so dismissive.

I want to sink into the ground and disappear. To be anywhere else in the world. But I can't give up.

Right now, my kids are romping around City Sandbox. Darius and Lamont. Laura and sweet baby Nicola. My heart squeezes just picturing them. They need me to fix this mess.

Flipping the switch on my expression, I turn on a smile so bright my cheeks hurt. "Yes, I completely understand, Ms. Carroll, but this is terribly important—"

Her groan cuts through my words like a buzz saw.

“Just one nickel for every time I’ve heard that, and I’d be on my private island sipping margaritas.” She swivels to her computer screen, then looks back up. “And now, I have work to do.”

Dismissal delivered, she starts clacking on the keyboard.

And a furious heat races up my spine, exploding in my brain. Who in Dante’s nine circles of hell does she think she is? We all have jobs. Girlfriend needs to put a lid on the attitude. Before someone does it for her.

Unfortunately, I nixed Nola coming. So, tag. I’m it.

Even as I quake in my shoes, I straighten to my full five-foot-six height. Leaning over, I flatten my hands on her glass-top desk. “Ms. Carroll, I don’t give a rat’s tail if you’d like to get back to work or blast off to the moon.”

Actually, sending this sourpuss to the moon sounds great—flight provided courtesy of my foot. I lean in closer, our faces inches apart. “Just like I don’t care if he doesn’t return until next Juvember. I’m not leaving without seeing him.”

Badass as my challenge sounds, my insides toss and turn like laundry in a washer. Still, something in the air shifts.

Ms. Carroll sinks back onto her seat. A smile, counterfeit as a red dime, splits her lips. “Perhaps, I could fit you in. Maybe next week, if you tell me what this concerns.”

That was fast. Too fast. Still, I give her props for really smooth gear-shifting.

Her likely plan? Humor the pest, dribble me out the door like a basketball, and hope an open manhole swallows me whole between now and her mythical appointment.

“C’mon,” I say, matching her fake smile. “Because we both know, I’ll be on the lobby Wanted Poster next time I show up.”

Miss Priss lifts her nose another notch. Sly eyes positively gleam as her hand edges toward the phone. "Security. What a fabulous idea."

And my mouth dries up as my heart beats in double time.

Security guards. For me?

Normally, I could appreciate hotties in uniform. Just not ones at either elbow, dragging me out like a petty thief. Geez, I need Nola.

My cousin's face rises before me. If I go home in defeat, she'll skewer me. Or fry me to a crisp. Either way, my goose is cooked. I need to see him. Get him to leash his management company's pitbulls. But how, if I can't see him?

Here's a novel idea, Baby Girl. Just tell her who you are.

No flipping way.

If I manage to get her to buzz him, there's every chance he'll have her kick me out without ever showing his face. Embarrassing, for sure. But not as utterly soul-draining as Her Feral Majesty knowing exactly who I am when she does it.

Tippity-tap, tippity-tap.

My eyes swerve to the desk. Ms. Carroll's pearl-pink nails flick on the glass top. Her other hand rests on the phone receiver. Perspiration sprouts on my forehead and underarms.

What would Nola do?

Tippity-tap, tippity-tap. The infernal sound pecks at my brain like a woodpecker. I can't think. Finally, out of options, I raise my hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. I'm going."

Walking toward the door, the sound of silence sinks in. No more tippity-tap to put me off my game. Honestly, I have no game, but at least, my brain fires up again.

Think, Ivy. Think.

Nola's face materializes once more. This time with stereo speakers.

GO. FOR. BROKE.

That's it? That's all imaginary Nola's got? I did that just coming here. Shaking my head in disgust, my eyes land on my target's office door. Closed.

But he's in there. I can feel it, feel him.

Just yards away, down the hallway. Sitting high above the city, plotting his next property development project. Moving people around like pawns on a chessboard. People like me and my kids.

Bile rises in my throat. I'm not just gonna turn tail and run.

Before my brain casts a vote, my feet pirouette, and like one of my kids' favorite nursery rhymes, my little piggies take off. A thrill races through me as I double back past Ms. Carroll.

Her eyes blink like a broken traffic light. "W-what...? Where...? N-n-no!" the secretary screeches. "Y-you can't!"

But I do, sprinting down the hallway, my gaze laser-focused on my bull's-eye. Those great wood double doors.

Ms. Carroll's heels tip-tap right behind mine, helping to compose a strange symphony on the polished wood floor. I speed up. I'm actually doing this.

Going for broke. Exactly like four years ago.

Anxiety cramps my stomach. Along with...excitement maybe. Anticipation?

No, definitely not.

Twisting the door handle, I jam the disturbing thought back into whatever compartment of my brain set it loose. This is business, nothing more. I push open the door's great wooden bulk.

"S-sir, I'm s-sorry. I told her you w-were out," Ms. Carroll twitters from behind. "I tried to stop her, b-but...she's quick."

I only half listen, chaotic thoughts whirring like bees in a hive.

I was right. He's here.

But I didn't reckon with an audience.

Ms. Carroll should consider politics with those lying skills.

Okay, I did it. Went for broke. Now what, Nola?

As thoughts ricochet off one another, my eyes follow suit, chaotically roving the totally occupied conference table. Finally, my gaze settles on him.

His raven hair is longer, curling slightly. Are those silver strands at the temples? Distinguished, inviting a lover's touch. My hands tingle, and I close them like clams, digging my nails into my palms.

I force my eyes to move on, and they land on perfectly formed lips. Masters at tantalizing a woman, whether roughhousing their way over her body or planting tender kisses along sensitized skin. Either way, that mouth can ignite a bonfire of desire.

His equally accomplished hands rest on the conference table. Really, someone should alert the DEA of a glaring omission in its list of controlled substances. He needs a warning label slapped on his head. Both heads. Lethally addictive, even in small quantities.

My gaze jerks upward, desperate to squelch my train of thought. My eyes meet his. Dark blue eyes, shot through with glinting flecks of silver. Though normally warm as a

bright summer day, a cold snap has set in, thwarting every syllable my throat has lined up.

And all the other eyes, gawking at me like I just popped out of my mother with one too many heads? Well, they don't help either.

A tingling sensation skips along my right leg. Please, not now. Ignoring me, the tingling becomes a flutter. Then, an outright tremor gathering steam. Within seconds, my leg shakes like a vibrator. No, a massager. Which I use strictly for achy muscles.

I ease a hand down my thigh, surreptitiously kneading the area to calm the jerkiness. A useless gesture. My leg has already blasted off. And I'm terrified of what might happen.

If I could just say something. Anything. It might break the cycle of hysteria. I part my lips, but another wave of panic bubbles in my throat, encasing my vocal chords in plaster.

Every instinct tells me to haul it out of here. But my shaky leg says we'll never make it out alive. Tears of frustration gather at the back of my eyes. What should I do?

Pull yourself together or find your face in Merriam-Webster. Listed under Village Idiot.

Phantom Nola makes a good point, and it works, snapping me out of a mix of anxiety and desire only this man stirs in me. Thankfully, a pretty apology forms on the tip of my tongue, ready for liftoff.

But just as I'm about to deliver it, the man I've come looking for—all lean-muscled six foot two of him—unfurls himself from his chair and stands.

Nicholas Barrett.

NICHOLAS

Open your eyes, dude. Wake the fuck up.

But I am. Wide awake. Broad daylight streams through the panoramic windows. And like ducklings waddling behind their mama duck, my colleagues just trailed Emily Carroll and my right-hand Jessica Fowler to the company dining room for lunch.

And Ivy *is* standing right across from me.

Isn't she?

I could be dreaming. I've had so many just like this in the past eighteen months. Still, none has ever felt so real. I squeeze my eyes shut. Hoping—and dreading—she'll go up in a puff of smoke. I reopen them. She's still here. Along with an eerie rush of *déjà vu*.

The darkroom of my brain develops rapid-fire images of our first meeting four years ago. Her—the Warrior Goddess storming my office, her unruly mass of corkscrew curls bouncing with every movement and deep chocolate eyes spitting fiery golden sparks. Me—a mere mortal, instantly bewitched, even as she called me every name but my own. Till today, the phrases corporate bully, bloodsucking vampire, and predatory gentrifier ring in my ears.

First, came the accusation. That my proposed Brooklyn development project would shutter her daycare center, leaving neighborhood parents and their preschoolers out in the cold.

Then, came the threat. City Sandbox would not go down without a fight. I'd come to work one day and

find parents and toddlers camped out on the sidewalk with picket signs, bullhorns, and wienies to roast, because they'd be in it for the long haul. Surely a PR nightmare for me, she promised.

My first impulse? Count me in. I know a man who'll give us a great deal on picket signs. And hotdogs? Do you prefer beef, pork, or chicken?

Like a force of nature, she blew into this office, mesmerizing me. And damned if I wasn't tempted to picket my own company on her say-so.

Now, it's more than a year since she disappeared, but she hasn't changed. Same glorious corkscrew curls. Same fiery eyes. Same pert nose and luscious lips. Same silky, honey-russet skin. Definitely, the same perfect body, even if slightly slimmer. Still, enough curves for a dead man, along with all his appendages, to rise again.

Lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice. Has to be a dream. But do dreams feature the gentle scent of patchouli and rose swirling in the air?

Fuck me. I don't need this in my life. Not again.

So, I should probably stop chugalugging every inch of her like a drunk who's tumbled off the wagon. I mentally slap myself and clear my throat, so I don't ribbit like a frog. "You must have lost your way this morning. What're you doing here, Ivy?"

What do you want her to be doing here?

Before I can quash it, my subconscious answers, developing another high-def image. Long curls set free, splayed across a silk-cased pillow, her eyes pleading with me, her body rising up to meet mine, writhing in pleasure under me as I drive into—

Hard stop. And incoming hard-on.

I shut down the rogue porn cam in my mind and stride to my desk, buying my groin area time to...relax. I turn back and lift my eyebrow. Holding my breath, I wait for her answer like a revolver's at my temple.

In a way, one is. Her answer is the firearm, and my question loaded it. I ache to reclaim it, before her mouth pulls the trigger. Because I know what's coming.

Let's face facts. She ghosted me like a delinquent tenant skipping out on the rent, sneaking into the night with zero notice and near-zero explanation. No, she didn't owe me a dime. Nor did she skip out with any valuables. After all, what's a heart?

So, what else could she be here for but—

A divorce?

My heart slams into my chest wall. It's from anger, nothing else. What in the actual fuck is wrong with her? She didn't need to blast her way into my office or my peace of mind for a divorce.

A phone. Just pick up a damn phone. Better yet, she has enough lawyers in her orbit. Have one of them call mine.

Blood roars through my veins. I didn't rate face time when she left. No warning. No personal goodbye. So, she doesn't rate any better now.

But I won't stoop so low as to throw her out on her pretty derriere. She can spit out whatever she came here for, and then, scam.

Except she just stands there. Lush lips, sluiced with raspberry-cinnamon gloss, parted just the way she did when she wanted my mouth on hers, or when—

Not again. For the love of God, not again.

Just like four years ago, when she blew in here mad as a hornet, ranting about my property development project destroying her daycare. If I'd just called security. Instead, I

happily let the Warrior Goddess lure me into her gravitational pull.

But we were happy. Or so my dumb ass thought until she went poof in the air. So, why show up now?

And why do you care?

Good question. At least one synapse in my brain still fires straight. Dream or not, I need to call security.

Or...

Or what?

Or finally, say what you have to say and get that chip off your shoulder.

Perhaps, I was premature about that one synapse. Still, there might be something to it. She's struggling to get her mouth working, but I have plenty pent up to say.

Hold up a sec, big boy. She doesn't need to know everything. Crying in your pillow at night? Maybe skip that part. Good point. Then, there's the burying your nose in *her* pillow to get a whiff of her. Too much information.

An even better point. I clear my throat and open my mouth.

Oops, one more thing, buckeroo. All those times your boys saved you from a DUI...Dialing Under the Influence? Strictly classified.

Anything else, Oh Wise One?

A shitload, but a day only has so many hours.

"Look, Ivy, some of us have to work," I finally get out. "So, if you're going to stand there like a dummy who ditched her ventriloquist, shall I start?"

Bull's-eye. The angry golden sparks in her eyes sputter and dim. Her chin shudders.

And maybe my heart, too, with a pang of guilt. That was harsh. And uncalled for.

When Ivy's mega stressed, she clams up. Can't speak. Her mammoth cup collection helps. A warm, genealogy-inspired cup in her hands filled with a hot drink—chai, coffee, or hot chocolate—calms her. A few sips can free her voice.

Now that I think about it, that's another Ivy Hart mystery. There's a story behind that cup collection and her genealogy obsession. But I never pushed for details.

The same story probably accounts for her mute spells. And the shimmy-shaking right leg. Like it's dancing to a tune only dogs can hear. And if the left one joins in, it's code blue. She's either nervous...

Or aroused.

I snatch that photographic image from my mental developing tank before it materializes, drag my eyes back to hers. The golden light sparks again, launching daggers at me. Her jaw hardens like cement in the sun.

And the leg? No more dance moves. Ivy's not nervous or aroused, she's pissed as shit. "Work?! Doing what? Destroying City Sandbox *and* me?" she spits out with a grating laugh.

Of course, City Sandbox. If anything gets Ivy's mouth working, just mess with the daycare center or her kids. And suit up for all-out war.

Fucking unreal.

I gotta be home in bed. Having a nightmare. Either that, or I've been cast in a remake of Bill Murray's *Groundhog Day*, reliving the same 24 hours ad infinitum.

She's not here to apologize. Or to see how I'm doing. God forbid she be here to say she made a terrible mistake leaving. Nope. She busted into my office for City Sandbox.

Again.

“Destroy you?! No idea what you’re talking about, Ivy.” For good measure, I hold up a hand and form a circle with my thumb and index finger. “And what’s more, this time, I give this many fucks.”

“You’ll give a few more when I slap you with a lawsuit.”

Okay, maybe Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* fits this scene better. I wrinkle my forehead, letting it speak for me.

“Raising the rent,” she snaps. “Ring any bells?”

A rent hike at the daycare center? Damn, I should have...how the fuck did I let that happen? Maybe I can— Hell, no.

There I go, doing it again. Saddling up a horse, riding to her rescue. And for what? It’s her daycare center. Her problem.

I saved City Sandbox once. This time, she can extricate her own little behind—delectable as those juicy mounds are—all on her lonesome. It sounds cruel, but she’s got people. Her father, brother. Both lawyers.

But not me. Not this time. Decision made, I plop onto my desk chair. “Sounds like a personal problem.”

A vein pulses at her temple. Her right hand curls and uncurls itself, probably itching to clock me one. “The rent price was fixed for ten years. Honor it, or I’ll sue,” she says.

“Totally your choice, my dear.” I lift my camera from the desk. It feels good in my hands. Soothing. Not unlike her mugs for her. Leaning back, I cross one leather-clad foot over my knee and smile. Not a real smile, more a satisfied one. “But you’ll lose.”

She stiffens, every joint seizing like a terrified soldier whose foot just landed inches from a land mine. Time to detonate.

“It pays to read what you sign, Ivy,” I say, my finger on the shutter-release button. “The lease terms apply only as long as Barrett Enterprises owns the building.”

Bomb launched and blowing her world to bits. Like she did to our marriage.

Her eyes pop open, then narrow. “You’re lying.”

Again, I answer with a fake smile.

Her face turns grayish, and she collapses into the chair opposite my desk. Within seconds, a pool of tears shimmers in her eyes. I fiddle with the camera, steeling myself.

“Revenge for me leaving you? Is that it?” She swipes a hand across her damp cheeks like a windshield wiper. “I get hurting me, but innocent children. Nicholas, how could you?”

I didn’t, or at least, I didn’t mean to. Which is a distinction without a difference right now. My heart jackhammers in my chest as I rise and swallow the space between us. Plucking up the twin chair beside her, I slam it down directly facing her and lower my body into it, legs spread wide. I lean forward, bringing our faces inches apart.

Ivy slinks back in her chair, and again, I whittle away the space between us.

This is the last thing I expected from this day. Facing the source of my rage, frustration, and yes, pain. To feel every emotion I dammed up flood its banks. Finally, with nowhere to go for so long, a surging river has found its outlet.

“How could I, you say? I’ll tell you if you tell me something first, Ms. Butter Wouldn’t Melt.” I lift her left hand, gently stroke the now unadorned ring finger. I half expect her to break free.

She doesn’t.

“Tell me how you looked me in the eyes every day, knew you planned to leave, and kept it a secret,” I say as the river inside me roars. “How you checked out of our home like a hotel. No forwarding address. But most of all, Ivy, how you could leave an email the size of a thimble with some vague word salad about cultural differences. And to top it off, tell me not to contact you. Make it make sense.”

Another puddle of tears takes up residence in her eyes. Another con job.

“I’m sorry,” she offers, her voice a hoarse whisper. Her eyes dart to and fro, unwilling to meet mine. Finally, she snatches her hand away and flees her seat. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Oh, you didn’t mean it.” I throw up arms in mock surrender. “Well, that fixes everything.”

She flinches at my sarcasm. “I thought no contact would make it easier to move on.”

Like sour milk, disgust curdles inside me. With her. And myself. I should’ve just called security instead of encouraging this pointless conversation. But I couldn’t help myself. And still can’t.

“Falling off the face of the earth, telling me not to contact you! That was easier? For whom, Ivy?”

“I can’t lose the daycare, Nicholas. Please—”

Who is this woman? And what the fuck is wrong with me. To have taken up with someone so selfish, so self-involved. “Please?! Please what, Ivy?” I growl.

“Nicholas, just come and see City Sandbox again,” she pleads. “You wouldn’t do this if you came by to see the kids.”

I blow out a harsh laugh. She’s not here for me. She’s probably not even here for the kids. Ivy’s here for Ivy. And using the kids to get what she wants. “How about you

please. Please figure it out yourself,” I fire back. Raising a hand, I point to the door. “Please, get out. And next time you feel like showing up here, please don’t.”

Her eyes blink as if I slapped her. Her lower lip trembles. I feel my own heart flinch, fight me to react differently. To take back my words. To relent. To help.

But my mind overwhelms my heart. I will not cave, and she will not get to me. Not this time. Not ever again.

I stand and return to my desk, scooping up my camera again. Turning, I peer out the window and raise the camera. I snap once. Then, again. And again. Until I hear the office door click shut.

And I fall into my chair, burying my head in my hands.

The Bright Idea

IVY

What in tarnation just happened?

Plus, what in tarnation is tarnation?

I'll google the second question. But Professor Google can't help with the first, so it consumes me on the subway back to Brooklyn.

In a way, it's obvious. I walked in. Nicholas handed me my entire behind. I stumbled out like a punch-drunk boxer.

Welp. What did I expect?

I swipe away teardrops. When more sprout in their place, I reach in my purse for a tissue. What a lame move going there, imagining a replay of our first meeting, complete with him riding to the rescue.

Still, who can blame a girl? It was all weirdly déjà vu-ish, what with that unexpected letter showing up today, just like that equally surprising letter four years ago.

Congratulations, Ms. Hart! Your city block is scheduled for demolition to make way for an office complex that promises Bed-Stuy an economic boost. Sorry, not sorry, but the boost doesn't include you or City Sandbox. So pursuant to Paragraph 15, we've scuttled your lease. BTW, you and the shorties? Six months to vacate. Toodles.

A lot of poetic license in my version, but same result.

Bye, Felicia.

Terrified for my daycare kids and parents—okay, myself, too—I made my maiden voyage to Barrett Enterprises. Same as today, I set off for Manhattan, ready to blast the property developer back to the Dirt Age.

A new office complex, an economic boost? For whom? Would people from the community be hired? Not if City Sandbox, which has always served long-time and increasingly marginalized Bed-Stuy residents, was getting the boot.

Like vultures, outsiders had long ago begun descending on Bed-Stuy. Buying up and renovating any stick of a house their greedy talons could grasp. Then, either flipping or renting them out for sky-high prices that very few current residents could afford.

It's like switching on a kitchen light and watching a mouse or roach scurry. Except, *we* are the mice. The roaches. Generational Black, Bed-Stuy residents sent scurrying, desperate for affordable living spaces. Or like me, business space.

When I got that eviction letter and set off for Barrett Enterprises that first time, all this percolated inside me.

And by the time I got there, I'd built up a frothy head of steam. So, I confess. I went in loaded for bear, ready to battle the old codger threatening my community.

Instead, Nicholas Barrett greeted me. Cobalt blue eyes—dark, deep, and laced with a mischievous silver light. Hair blacker than the midnight sky. His tall frame packed with an athlete's lean power.

He reached out a warm, lean hand with an easy smile on his handsome face, and before we touched, a fizzy shiver of excitement scudded up the nerve endings of my spine. A heady sensation of tiny champagne bubbles fanning out and tickling my body from the inside out. So powerful, I can feel the same vibration right now.

But wait, not quite the same. My eyes pop open half expecting to see Nicholas.

Oh, right. The subway. That's where I am.

And the current champagne fizz in my veins? My iPhone vibrating. I root around for it in my purse.

Ohmigod. Nola texting.

NH: How'd it go?

IH: Sideways as a wino on his second bottle.

NH: Sounds good as the first time.

IH: Better.

NH: Oops, gotta go. TTYL

IH: Okey dokey.

I stuff the phone back in the purse pocket. Yet again, my eyes flutter closed, and my mind shifts into reverse. Right back to four years ago, and my first crusade on Barrett Enterprises.

“So, Ms. Hart, this is about our Bed-Stuy Brooklyn office complex project?” Nicholas said.

One second passed, then another. Chime in anytime, Ivy.

One damn job—to speak like a normal person. That’s all my vocal chords had to do that day.

Instead, my upper lip performed a sadly familiar magic act and conjured sweat beads out of thin air. But that wasn’t all. I went completely mute, which hadn’t happened in ages.

My mute spells started in high school with BJ. Before showing up at Barrett Enterprises, they’d only happened during difficult personal conversations. Never regarding business or with complete strangers. And Nicholas was nothing but business and a stranger that day.

Yet, as he stood there, a wrinkle between his dark brows and a slightly bemused smile playing on his lips, my body reacted very...personally. Fizzing and tingling at the mere touch of his hand.

Even back then, as the words in my head refused to be pressed into the service of my mouth, I longed for a calming mug of chai hot chocolate to loosen my voice.

Bzzz, bzzz.

Geez, the phone again.

NH: Sorry, folks here think their work beats my personal life.

IH: No problem.

NH: About your rent...TBC tonight over drinks. Lots.

IH: Not really feeling it. Raincheck?

NH: No! We'll figure this out. We do our best work toasted. Until then, relax.

IH: Okay, SYL.

My cousin knows me. I take a deep breath, close my eyes again, and try to do as she said. Relax.

Instead, my mind twirls like a tornado and touches down in the rabbit hole of my past. Right back to my first ever glimpse of Nicholas Barrett.

Even on my second try, no words left my mouth. Soon, my leg went haywire, shaking like crazy. Why the heck was this happening now? I wasn't anxious. I was angry.

And maybe a little hot and bothered, Baby Girl?

Whatever. I couldn't get out one word about the kids. Their parents. Or about him and his kind displacing Bed-Stuy residents. Not one syllable.

"Maybe reclaiming your hand will loosen your tongue," he said.

Ohmigod. My hand was still nestled in his. It felt so good, so at home. And the glint in those deep blue eyes betrayed he knew it, which angered me even more. The man was an urban predator.

I tore my eyes away, clawed around inside my purse for the daycare eviction letter, and shoved it in his face. Just the thought of its contents made me boil. And luckily, restored my voice and calmed my leg.

“For starters, you can stop uprooting neighborhoods and businesses. Putting people out of their homes. Ejecting me and my kids from a vital daycare center. All, just for profit,” I railed.

Another noise yanks me from my rabbit-hole reverie, and my eyes jerk open. Swooshed back to the here and now, I see the subway doors opening.

Wait! What stop is this? A quick look at the station stop sign outside the window tells me. Yikes, Fulton Street.

I bolt from my seat and make it to the doors just as they’re closing. It’ll be a long walk if I miss this stop. Seeing my predicament, a fellow rider pulls the doors apart like he’s Superman. I smile my thank-you, and he nods.

Trudging the few blocks to City Sandbox, everything in me longs to go home. I could catch the B46 bus up Malcolm X Boulevard, and within minutes, be lounging in my cozy kitchen bingeing on the Paleo cookies I baked.

But duty calls.

As the hours pass, I applaud my fortitude. The little ones and their antics always set my mood straight. They might have me tearing my hair out sometimes, but mostly, they bring a wide smile to my face and a lightness to my step.

I glance at the wall clock. It’s past six o’clock, and only one child remains. I spare baby Nicola a quick glance as I scour the room, scooping up and storing strewn toys and storybooks. The infant burbles happily in her baby carrier, her chubby hands batting at the musical Peter Rabbit mobile like she’s a prizefighter.

It's getting late. Maybe I should try again to cancel drinks with Nola. Just as I pull my cellphone from its holster, the daycare door buzzes.

"I'm really sorry, Ivy." Rhonda rushes in, eyes pleading for forgiveness. "The J train was delayed."

"NYC transit delayed? You lie." I pat Rhonda's shoulder. "No worries. Nicola and I are having a high-old time together."

And it's true. I love alone time with the chubby-cheeked four-month-old with her sweet baby scent. A scent I will likely never—

*Ain't no good coming from going down that dirt road,
Baby Girl.*

Totally true. I shake my head to cast away the blues.

And watch as Rhonda rushes over to Nicola and plants a bouquet of kisses from head to toe. The baby burbles her joy, and Rhonda pops up. "Is that a dimple on her right cheek?"

I get closer as she tickles Nicola's tummy with more kisses, and sure enough, it appears. "Yup, that's a dimple."

Rhonda scoops up Nicola and holds her tight. Tears form a gleaming film over her inky-brown eyes. "Darius had the same dimple."

What a bittersweet discovery. A lump immobilizes my throat, and the best I manage is a nod.

Life for this pretty twenty-year-old has been tough. With an abusive mother and absent father, Rhonda spent her entire childhood shunted from one foster home to the next. None felt like home.

Then, she met Darius in high school, and they became family. The sweethearts graduated, started college, moved in together. Life was good.

But bad news has no home training. It shows up to a party uninvited and trashes the joint. Like the day a knock on the door shattered Rhonda's life. Darius had gone to shoot hoops with friends. A heart attack took him instantly.

In some ways, Rhonda's my kindred spirit. Bad news crashed my party, too. Not as cruelly—the love of my life didn't die.

Just my marriage. And a dream.

I swear, somebody needs to teach bad news some manners. Maybe explain how invitations work. Either that or catch it in a dark alley and beat the crap out of it.

I didn't know Rhonda back then, but I can imagine her devastation. Her feeling lost. Hopeless.

Thank heavens, surprising news took some of the awful sting out of the bad. She had a baby on the way, a part of Darius to keep. No, nothing about it is easy. But she's done a great job juggling everything.

She rubs Nicola's dimple with one finger, stares at it in wonder, then back at me. "Ivy, you know all that family history stuff you do?"

I nod.

"Well, I was thinking. You know, Darius was adopted. He didn't get along with them," she says as she walks across the room and stoops down with Nicola still in her arms. She picks up a stray toy, puts it in the toy bin, and looks back at me. "Maybe I should try and find his real parents."

Half question, half declaration, it's obvious she's seeking advice.

"Well, if you want help, you've come to the right place. What do you know?"

She lifts a hand and lets it fall. "Nothing much. It was a closed adoption."

“In New York?” I ask, dreading the answer.

“Yeah, right here, so that should make it easier, right?”

My heart sinks at her hopefulness. It should be, but it’s complicated. Until recently, New York laws actively thwarted adoptee efforts to find their birth families. All records were sealed. It was criminal really.

Finally, they allow adults to have their adoption records unsealed. But Darius is dead, and Nicola is a minor. And not the adoptee, so it’s possibly more difficult.

“I’m not sure the state will help us, because—”

Rhonda lets out a groan like I just punched her.

“Hold on. I’m not finished,” I say with the flash of a palm. “Even if New York plays hardball, we have options. Maybe DNA testing.”

Her eyes bug. “You mean on Nicola?”

I raise my hands in surrender and nod. “It’s not painful, and it’s likely the only way. But it’s complicated. For instance, you can make the decision for her as a minor. But *should* you?”

Rhonda stands there looking lost. Uncertain.

“I can send you some articles on the ethics of testing minors. Read them. Take your time and think about it. And you know I’ll help.”

She sets little Nicola back in her carrier and rushes over to me. Her arms enfold me like a warm blanket. “You’re a lifesaver, Ivy. Without you and City Sandbox, I’d be up a creek.”

The sentiment melts—and chills—my heart.

Say it again. For the hater in Manhattan. City Sandbox fills a critical need for so many. Me included.

“City Sandbox isn’t going anywhere, my dear. It’s the paddle on the creek for all of us,” I promise her.

Just then, my phone pings.

NH: Sorry. The bastards' work lives won. Gotta cancel. Try to contain your disappointment.

IH: Totally bereft, but I'll carry on somehow.

Carry on home to a chai hot chocolate, beeline it to my bed, and pull the covers over my head. Hoping not to wake until morning.

NICHOLAS

A whispered knock pulls me from my thoughts, and I check my watch.

Most of the day's gone since Ivy left and I plummeted into my chair. I'm still sitting here, camera in my lap, staring blankly out the window. Emily must've held my calls and postponed the meeting, but I can't board up the place like a hurricane is coming and stay here forever. Hurricane Ivy came and went hours ago.

"Come in," I call out, swiveling my chair around.

Jessica. Her high-heel footsteps on the wood floor soften when she reaches the carpet. She settles herself in a chair before my desk. "Emily said the coast was clear. Are you

okay?” An overly bright smile flashes across her lips, her eyes crinkle with concern. “So good to see Ivy. Are you two...?”

More than my brilliant right-hand, Jessica Fowler is a good friend. Nosy though. She collects intel on people like squirrels gather nuts. Then, collates and stores the bounty in her brain as methodically as the squirrels burrow theirs into the ground. After that, she and her fuzzy counterparts diverge.

Squirrels retrieve their hidden treasure the coming winter. But Jessica? She nurses her golden nuggets like Ebenezer Scrooge—mostly for business—keeping them in her brain’s vault for years if necessary. Only releasing the tidbits when they will render the most good. Or damage. Whichever fits her needs.

As friends go though, Jessica’s true blue. She even befriended Ivy when we got serious. The two got along great before Ivy went MIA.

I stand and stretch, then head to the bar. I pull a bottle from the fridge, pour two ginger shots into crystal shot glasses, and hand one to Jessica before sinking back onto my chair.

“You mean, are we back together?” A growl of laughter barrels up from my stomach. “Fuck no. She just—“

I stop myself, zipping my lips. God, I sound bitter. It’s justified, but I need to get over it already. I should’ve let go.

No, I did let go. Long ago. The shock of seeing her, that’s all this is.

“No, we’re not. She’s got a problem with City Sandbox is all,” I say.

Jessica nods. “Oh, I thought maybe...” She hesitates, blinks a few times as she considers her words. “It’s just you

two made such a beautiful couple. I hoped maybe you'd come to your senses."

I have. Just not the way Jessica means. More like I survived one bout of Ivy Hart. Unfortunately, the bug still lingers inside—a burning resentment—but that's normal, right? And whatever I felt today when she crash-landed back in my life is normal, too. A bit of surprise, nothing else.

Certainly, not joy. And definitely, not hope. Hell, that'd be like rolling out the red carpet for a second round of jock itch.

Nope. I'm done with Ivy Hart-less, and it's staying that way.

Jessica clears her throat and yanks me back. Oh, right...my turn to speak.

"Yeah, I thought we were good together, too. But shit happens, right?" I say, hoping to lighten things. Now, let's pivot please. "Anyway, we should call the crew back and finish the meeting."

Fifteen minutes later, the staff are back at the conference table.

"Sorry about the interruption, guys, but one good thing came of it." I stretch out a hand toward our newcomer with a smile I don't feel. "Will's back and can brief us on the Bancorp Élysée project. Whatcha got for us, Will?"

Something about our new hire Will Jensen sets my teeth on edge. Too much of the pretty-boy, trust-fund-baby thing going on. But Jessica pointed out his bona fides. A solid résumé with top-notch work experience, priceless connections, and well-rounded extracurriculars. She rode hard for him during the hiring process. He'll fit in well, she predicted.

“Well, they’re definitely moving ahead with their U.S. market plans,” Will says, as he opens a notebook and reads for a bit before looking up. “They’ve already acquired the property for their flagship headquarters and are looking for a Design-Build team.”

“Where’s the property? What’s standing there now? And what’s abutting it?” Jessica rapid fires at him. Still, there’s a hint of sultry in her voice.

Sometimes, I swear I spy a glint in her eyes, a tremor in her voice, when she’s around Will. Maybe she wants to add herself to his extracurriculars.

Ivy dubbed Jessica my work wife. Not in a jealous way though. More of a joke, acknowledging how much I depend on her keen mind and hard work.

So, Jessica can check out Will’s boners—um, bona fides—all she wants. None of my business. Actually, Jessica getting a life would be a plus. Maybe slow her down from meddling in mine.

“Downtown Brooklyn on Livingston. A six-story building with an attached outdoor parking lot. New skyscrapers popping up all around,” Will says.

“Address?” she asks while firing up her tablet and the projector.

A quick Google Earth search, and the proposed building plot appears on the office Smartboard. I lean forward and stare at the existing structure. Definitely early 20th-century. A façade cleaning would restore the alternating sand-and-brown brick to its former glory. Terracotta figurines rising just above roof level give the building an Old World touch.

I rise, walking over to the Smartboard. The building’s twin figurines resemble royal pages with shoulder-length hair and blue tunics. I can’t quite make out what they

hold close to their chests. Books maybe? My eyes swing to the ground floor where a hair salon's purple awning camouflages the historic beauty's charm. I bet thousands walk past this gem of a building every day and never raise their heads to look up.

The chances of any one of them—the page boys, the awning, or the hair salon—making it out alive from Bancorp Élysée's acquisition? Winning Powerball's a better bet. Most likely they'll be torn down, chewed up, spit out, and left for dead. My stomach lurches at the potential loss. Real estate is a brutal business.

I pivot back to the conference table. "What are they after architecture-wise?"

"Well, it's a French company, so I anticipate them going *trés chic*. Understated elegance," Will says.

Sounds logical.

"I'd recommend retaining the building façade as a focal point and go from there," Will continues. "Be nice to save the salon business and the upstairs residential apartments. But let's face it, that's likely a bridge too far."

Well, will you look at that? Here I have Pretty Boy Will pegged, and he tosses a curve ball with his soft spot for dispossessed renters.

Will Jensen's lips remain slightly parted, like he wants to say more. A minute ago, I'd have ignored his indecision and moved on. Now, I'm curious. And begrudgingly impressed. "Any other ideas?" I prod.

"Just thinking, since they're French..." He hesitates again and raises his hands in surrender and lets them fall to his thighs. "Not trying to stereotype anybody or anything, but it's no secret Europeans take climate change more seriously."

“More seriously than whom?” I ask, deliberately dipping my voice in acid. Will’s body tenses like a wound clock, and I relent with a puff of laughter. “Just kidding. Go on.”

“Well, if we want this project, it might pay to float some innovative eco building techniques. Like in the building materials, incorporating CO2 concrete or concrete with bamboo. We could work in water-use reduction and gray-water recycling, maybe natural lighting and ventilation for heating-cooling, maybe rooftop greenery.”

“Hmm,” I murmur, looking eyes anew at Will Jensen. “Could be a fun project. And maybe get us an “in” with other foreign companies coming here. Thanks, Will.”

I look down at my notes on this new gadget Jessica ordered—an electronic notebook. Just before I move on, a thought springs up. “Any intel on who else might bid on this?”

“Why?” Jessica asks. Sharp as the point of a dart, her voice comes for me like I’m the bull’s-eye.

For my sake, Will needs to take her up on whatever she’s offering. I shrug. “No reason.”

“Mm-hm.” She raises one eyebrow damn near to her hairline. “Then why ask?”

Maybe Ivy had a point about my work wife. Jessica can ride a person harder than a grizzled cowboy breaking a stallion. Taking up with Will—minus any whiff of workplace sexual harassment naturally—is a win-win for everybody. Nothing wrong with a little workplace polygamy if it gets Jessica off my ass.

“Just wondering,” I say noncommittally. “Are questions a federal crime now?”

“You’re wondering if Lester Cook and Associates will bid. And contemplating not bidding if they plan to, right?” she asks, her voice sharp with accusation.

So, what if I am? Lester Cook was my mentor. I love the guy. And yes, I understand Jessica’s point. I cannot continually opt out of bidding to help Lester’s company. But I know they’re hurting right now. What’s one or two projects if it helps an old friend?

Ignoring her, I turn to Will. “Have you heard if they are?”

Will’s eyes ping-pong between Jessica and me. If *ass in a sling* were a person, Will would win. He doesn’t know who to please, me or Jessica.

I bug my eyes and dip my head. “Well?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. He swallows hard and continues. “But I have some contacts over there. I could find out.”

“Okay, but nothing sketchy. Like a bribe or anything.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so offended in my life,” Will says. He claps a hand to his heart and shifts his chin into reverse. Then, a wolfish smile lights up his whole face. “Not to worry. She’s uh...she’s a friend. So, this’d be more like an incentive package.”

At that, my throat muscles convulse as I battle the urge to laugh. I come out the loser, and coffee jettisons from my mouth. “Sorry about that,” I say, picking up a napkin and daubing the mess on my face and lap. “So that’s what we’re calling it these days. An incentive package.”

My eye catches Jessica, who’s twisted her face into an angry knot. Not sure if she’s jealous or thinks this conversation borders on workplace impropriety. Either way, I take the hint. “Well, just do what you can within the bounds of ethics,” I say and move on. “Now, last thing on

the agenda. I've hired a high school intern, and I'm going to want all of you involved."

A collective groan rises up, yet I barely hear it. My mind keeps hitting the replay button on Will's phraseology.

Incentive package.

By the time the meeting ends, I swear I have a carnival barker in my head—one with wacky spinning eyeballs, a bullhorn, and short-term memory loss. Over and over, the same phrase.

Incentive package. Incentive package. Incentive package.

I know why it's an endless loop, and that I need it to stop. But it won't. The Ivy Hart Mystery plagues me.

Why did she leave? It still gnaws at my insides, and now, I can't let it go.

As the days wear on, a kernel of an idea bores its way into my head—a bad kernel I try to prevent from sprouting. But in the dark of night, unable to sleep, my fertile brain provides soil and water, and the sprout grows like Jack's beanstalk into a full-blown plan.

The Ivy Hart Incentive Package.

About S. Marie



S. Marie has been writing romance for over 30 years. The same book ... for over 30 years.

Nearly published a couple of times, the stars never fully aligned. Or maybe, her Great-Grandma Stella whispered from beyond — *Hold*

your horses, Baby Girl. This sucker ain't ready.

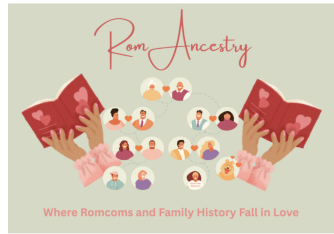
It got so bad, characters Ivy and Nicholas threatened her. Said they'd hire a ghost writer.

Over the years, the manuscript evolved into a marriage of her twin passions ... Romance and Genealogy. And it's finished.

So, Ivy and Nicholas will finally get their debut. Let's hope they don't fall on their faces.

S. Marie attended Spelman College and graduated from American University.

She holds a Juris Doctor from Georgetown University Law School and a Master's in Teaching English as a Second Language from Hunter College, both of which she hopes never to use again in life.



She presently lives with her husband in Germany, and in her spare time, loses herself in family history research, writing her next romance, travel, and time spent with friends, family ... and the ancestors.

Finally, she hopes you enjoy reading Nicholas and Ivy's love story as much as she's loved, hated, feared, faltered, persisted, and rejoiced in writing it.

How to Find S. Marie

Finding me's easy. I'm either:

In a cozy chair, reading.

In a not-so-cozy chair, writing.

Or down a rabbit hole, researching family history.

What?! You want specifics ... like where to find me frfr?

Oh, okay!



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