

# Ignite

## Heart of the Inferno Series Book II

**Copyright © Nicole Fanning. All rights reserved.**

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopy, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written consent of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

**Prologue**  
NATALIE

“That’s impossible,” I say to the doctor.

“Well, it’s *not* actually,” she says, with a smile. “You’re pregnant, Miss Tyler. Congratulations.”

I shake my head in disbelief.

“I...I don’t understand, I’m on birth control. I have been for the last twelve years without interruption. This can’t happen.”

*Well...except for the night in the tunnels...and my two-day drive back to Miami.*

“Miss Tyler, I can tell this is a shock for you, but I assure you, this *can* happen,” she says, gently. “And while yes, this is very rare, these things sometimes happen on their own without any rhyme or reason. I can’t tell you *why*, all I can tell you is what is on the report.”

*I must be hallucinating. This can’t actually be happening.*

“But...” I trail off, staring at the tile pattern on the floor.

“Your blood work shows you’re in early pregnancy. I’d say about four weeks. We just fortunately happened to catch it early since you already had this appointment for the blood panel scheduled.”

My entire body has gone numb. I just continue to stare at her, asking questions in my brain, but knowing the answers already. I’m a nurse, and if there is anything I have learned about the human body in my time in medicine, it’s that practically anything is possible.

I can hear her talking in the background about my options. About how the pregnancy is still in the earliest stages of development, so there is still a chance I could miscarry naturally. About how we should just wait and see what happens. But I’ve stopped listening.

There is only thought in my brain at the moment:

I am pregnant...with Jaxon Pace’s child.

*A man I’ve known for a month, who also happens to be a billionaire, hotel mogul, and head of the largest and most dangerous Chicago mafia family...is the father.*

## Chapter 1

NATALIE

“Alright, Missy, enough messing about,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “What is your play?”

“I’ll see your bet, and I will raise you,” I contemplate, my face unflinching. “Five whole pretzels.”

“Ooh! Big move there... alright, CALL.”

“Read ‘em and weep big guy,” I celebrate. “Straight flush.”

“Well, well, well. Damn, that is a really good hand, Miss Tyler.” he says, sporting a defeated pout.

“Ah ha! I did it! I finally beat you!”

“But even still, it unfortunately doesn’t beat my *royal* flush,” he says, with a laugh as he leans back and crosses his arms.

“Darn it, Walter! I really thought I had that one!” I sigh dejectedly, tossing my cards on the table.

The satisfied smile on his face turns into a deep chuckle, which eventually becomes too hard for me to ignore, and I give in, laughing along with him. However, that deep chuckle soon turns into a hard cough, and poor Walter soon struggles to breathe. I stand up and refill his water glass with the cucumber water I’ve made for us, bringing it to his lips.

“Thank you, I needed that,” he smiles, as I dab the excess water away. “I must say, Natalie, you are improving.”

“As the one who still finds herself cleaned out of pretzels every single week, it doesn’t feel like it,” I wink at him.

“No, trust me, you are. You’re controlling your tells better.”

I smile at him and tilt my head.

“Well, I’ve had a really good teacher.”

“Which just means you have way too much time on your hands,” Walter says, with a smirk. “To be here, wiping spittle off my chin.”

“On the contrary Walt, I have actually really missed our daily games. I’m happy to be back to work again.”

I swallow hard. The news from my doctor appointment this morning is still ringing in my head. But at least being here with Walter is distracting me a bit.

“Believe me, kid, I’m happy you’re back too,” he says, raising his brows at me. “That lump they sent over, to replace you, Taylor? Trevor?” he asks, trying to remember.

“I think Timothy was the one who was covering for me while I was on vacation,” I say, as I pack up the cards.

“Yeah, him,” Walt continues. “He sucked.”

“Well, I think he is new,” I chuckle at his bluntness.

“New or not, he *sucked*.”

“Was it that bad?” I ask.

I don’t like the idea that someone responsible for my patients would do a bad job, especially when it comes to Walter.

“He was a LUMP! And he wasn’t very *nice*. Always showed up late, and the putz couldn’t find my vein to save his life,” Walter says, as he pulls his sweater closed.

“Oh my gosh, I am so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I had no idea it was that bad, and I could’ve said something already.”

“Nah, I didn’t want to trouble you with it. After all, it’s not your fault, it’s that damn hospital! They don’t screen their people very well. Stupid kid even got my meds mixed up! I had to correct him, or I probably would be dead right now! I called up and tried to get someone else, but they kept saying they were short on staff, so I just decided to wait for you to come back.” he says, as I wheel him into the kitchen.

My heart breaks hearing him say this. If there is anything I cannot stand it is nurses without empathy. Yes, it’s true, this job is stressful and even heartbreaking at times. However, when it comes to our patients, there is simply no room for incompetence or rudeness.

“Walter, I am so sorry. I will make sure that I tell someone.”

“Good. Also, just do us both a favor and never go on vacation again,” he says, with a wink.

Over the course of the next hour, the two of us work together to make dinner. This is not something I do with any of my other patients, but Walter isn’t

like my other patients. He is my last stop on my route every day, and our 'Friday Night Dinners' have become a regular engagement for the last eight months.

Walter is a retired luxury home builder from Boston. His wife, Hellen, passed away ten years ago, and all his kids still live back in Boston. Even though Walter has terminal lung cancer and misses them terribly, it's rare that they call to chat with him for more than a few minutes, and their visits are even rarer.

"What do you think?" I ask. "Sinatra?"

"Nah, you played good today. You've earned the big guns," he says, excitedly. "Bing Crosby."

A few moments later, Bing is blaring on the sound system as Walter chops zucchini, and I check on the salmon in the oven.

"So," he says, gently. "have you heard from...*him*?"

I shake my head.

"Hmm. That's disappointing," he says, cutting the zucchini.

"Honestly, it's fine," I say quietly, shifting the potatoes I put in earlier. "Every day that passes it seems to get a little easier."

"Uh huh, and is that why you've started carrying a gun in your purse?" he asks, without looking up from his vegetable chopping.

I smirk to myself.

*Walter is very observant.*

I told Walter about meeting Jaxon, because the first thing he did was ask me about Chicago...which caused me to burst into tears. In the end, it felt cathartic to come clean and talk about it with someone. I did, however, leave out the part about Jaxon being a billionaire, and that he is the head of the mafia, and the fact that I had nearly watched him die from a bullet that was meant for me...

*The bullet.*

I shudder just thinking about it.

The image of Jaxon bleeding out on that underground platform is something I know I will not get out of my head anytime soon. I ended up taking a couple of extra weeks of vacation because ever since Chicago I've had constant nightmares, in which that horrific scene just replays over and over.

But we *had* saved his life. At least, as far as I know. He was stable when I left, but despite asking Ethan to update me when he came out of his coma, I haven't heard a word...from anyone.

Which feels a bit like salt in an already gaping wound.

They had all come for me in the tunnel.

Jaxon, Charlie, Josiah, and Ethan had all risked their lives for me. And even though I know their loyalty is to Jaxon, I guess I still thought we were at least becoming...friends. I hoped that at least one of them would've reached out to tell me Jaxon came out of his coma, and that he is recovering.

But all I've had is silence. From ALL of them.

"Yeah, I guess I just want to protect—"

"Sweetheart, it is fine," he gently interrupts me. "I get it, the world has lost its mind, and it's crazy out there. I just want to make sure that you're okay."

I swallow back the emotions rising in my throat, and smile at Walter.

"I'm okay, Walt."

*I am not okay.*

I am pregnant. And Jaxon, the incredibly wealthy and incredibly dangerous Mafia Don who took that lethal bullet for me four weeks ago, has no idea that he is the father.

*I am so far from "okay" that I don't even know how to focus on this.*

So, instead I'm just focusing on dinner. And Walter.

"Hey, I am sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," he says, gently passing me the chopped vegetables.

"Oh, no, you didn't Walter," I say, with a smile. "It's just been crazy. But I guess it just wasn't the same connection for both of us."

"Well, then he's an IDIO'T," he says, crossing his arms across his chest. "If he can't see what a catch you are, then he's an idiot, and didn't deserve you in the first place."

I smile tenderly up at him.

"One day," I say to the vegetables as I put them in the pan. "One day I will understand all of it. Colton *and* the Chicago man. And, at the very least, now I know exactly what I want, and I won't settle for anything less."

"Good," Walter says. "Hell, if I wasn't three times your age, I'd marry you, simply for how good my kitchen smells every time you cook in it," he says with a laugh.

I laugh with him, rolling my eyes.

"Would you allow an old man to give you a piece of advice?" he asks, as I take the food out of the oven.

"Fire away."

“The way I’ve always seen it, the heart that is meant to love you, will never stop fighting for you,” he says, with a smile.

I smile back, but my stomach twists.

I really thought Jaxon would fight for me, especially after everything he said to me that night in the library, or after everything he risked just trying to get me out of those nightmarish tunnels.

*But...I guess I was wrong.*

Maybe he decided that all of this was just too much? Or perhaps now that he knew Rachel, the mother of his FIRST child, was still alive, maybe he wants to try and reconcile with *her*?

I wish with all my heart I could fight the bitterness rising in it. But I know, deep down, that she is probably the better choice for a man like him. She is part of his ‘world’ and better suited to it than someone like me. Perhaps she is the one Jaxon wants to fight for.

And despite my selfish wants in this moment, maybe that is the right choice. Because at least then Jaxon’s daughter, Jessica, would have *both* her parents again.

However, all these thoughts are excruciating, and I feel tears welling in my eyes as I plate our dishes.

*What about MY baby?*

I know it’s still incredibly early, but, if this fluke pregnancy is viable, am I really prepared to do this...on my own?

I can’t even finish that thought and decide that unless I want poor Walt to fend off yet another one of my emotional meltdowns, I need to pack these thoughts deep in a box and just enjoy our dinner together.

“Look at your face, my God, I’m saying everything wrong tonight,” he says, with a chuckle. “Forgive me, I was just trying to cheer you up.”

“I know, Walter,” I say, with a smile. “And for the record, you always cheer me up. I look forward to our weekly dinners, if only so you can inflate my ego about my glorious cooking.”

“I am a good schmoozer!” He winks. “The best of the best!”

“Oh, I know you are!” I laugh, wheeling him to the table.

I grab the pitcher, and his nightly meds, before joining him at the table to dig into our dinner.

“Did I ever tell you about how I met my wife?” he says.

I shake my head, even though he has—at least a dozen times. But Walter loves to tell this story and I love watching his eyes light up when he talks about his late wife.

“I went up to New York City, to visit my brother, you know, for a boys weekend. But what I didn’t know was that his new wife bought tickets for a Broadway show that Saturday night. Well, I was a young man, and didn’t want to go to see a stupid Broadway show, I wanted to go party and drink at the BAR! But my damn brother was so utterly wrapped around her finger that the next thing you know, I find myself sitting like a putz at a damn Broadway show, cursing my luck!”

I smile as I fill our water glasses.

“And just when I was ready to stand up and walk outta there, I saw her. She was one of them backup dancers, ya know? From the moment I saw her I couldn’t take my eyes off her. I ended up watching the whole damn production, and I still have no idea what it was about!” He laughs, taking a drink.

“But I just thought she was the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen. She looked like an angel. There was like this glow behind her. Like in the movies.”

I sit back, admiring Walter lost in a beautiful memory.

“I waited around after the show, just to see if maybe I could get another glimpse of her. I told my brother I was going to go find the bathroom, but what I really ended up doing was sneaking backstage to try and find *her*.”

“Naughty boy!”

“I was! But I had no idea where the hell I was going, so I was just wandering around in the dark like an idiot. Lo and behold, who should come flying out a side door and crash into me?!”

“That very pretty backup dancer,” I say, with a wink.

“Crashed right into me and knocked my ass over,” he laughs. “I looked up at her on top of me and let me tell you, I was done for.”

He smiles, his eyes glazed over, still thinking about her.

“I miss her every damn day,” he says, with a sigh.

“I know, Walt,” I say, gently. “You two, you had the real thing, something really special.”

I stand to start cleaning up our dishes, but just as I am stepping away, he gently catches my hand in his.

“Natalie, I’m sorry things didn’t work out with Chicago man,” he says, sincerely. “But I mean it sweetheart, one day it will happen, I promise. And

whomever the lucky guy is, he will know exactly how lucky he is, and he will *never* let you go.”

There is no way for Walter to understand how badly I want to cry in this moment, but instead I just smile and kiss his forehead.

“One day,” I say softly, “One day.”

\*\*\*

The sun is setting a few hours later when I step off the bus a few blocks from my house.

I usually don’t need to take the bus, but my car started randomly acting up shortly after I returned from Chicago and is still in the shop. Thankfully, the weather has been lovely, and all my patients just happen to be conveniently located near bus stops.

I step into the local market on the corner to buy a few groceries, as I do every Friday.

“Hola Chica!” Edwardo, the friendly cashier says.

“Hola Edwardo!”

I find my items quickly and I am just finishing up when I hear someone say my name.

“Nurse Tyler, is that you?”

I turn to see a tall, handsome man I recognize standing in the aisle.

His name is Scott Mitchell, but he is known at my hospital as ‘Scotty the Hottie’ or ‘Dr. Hottie.’ The consensus among the nursing staff is that he is one of, if not the *most* attractive resident doctor on the entire staff.

“Dr. Mitchell, what are you doing on this side of town?” I ask, grabbing a box of waffle mix off the shelf.

“Oh, well, I just happened to be passing through and figured I should stop and get a few necessities so I can sleep in tomorrow. Who knows, maybe I’ll get to enjoy my Saturday morning for once,” he says, with a smile. “What about you?”

“Oh, I usually stop in on my walk home. I live right around the corner.”

“Really?” he says, shock blanketing his face. “How strange. You couldn’t find any good rentals closer to the city?”

“I looked at a few places, but I just really liked the neighborhood in this area, so I bought a house here. I’ve been here for about two years.”

“Wow, that’s brave,” He looks around quickly, before lowering his voice. “Is it true that there is a lot of *crime* here?”

I try my best not to immediately roll my eyes at his question.

*Ugh...I'm so sick of this rumor.*

“No,” I sigh, shaking my head. “That’s a myth. Just a terrible misconception about this area. It’s actually a remarkably close-knit community and very safe.”

I push myself past him toward the registers.

For some reason, I feel like “Dr. Hottie” is judging the neighborhood I have come to love, and I feel strangely defensive.

When I first moved here, I was still shattered from my break with Colton. My neighbors were incredibly kind and welcoming to me. They adopted me into the community immediately, as if I was just part of the family. I love my neighborhood and wouldn’t change anything about it. Except perhaps the judgmental assumptions of city-bound folk like Dr. Hottie.

“Interesting,” he says, following me to the cashier. “I guess I *have* heard that micro-communities are all the rage right now.”

“Uh huh,” I glance in his cart, noticing that he only has a box of rice from the aisle he was just standing in, and a soft drink.

*Seems to be an odd selection of “necessities.”*

“So, I heard that Walter Brasado was missing you while you were on vacation,” he says, with a grin. “I heard he called the hospital five or six times asking when you were scheduled to come back,” He chuckles. “Matter of fact, several of your patients did that. You must have a hell of a bedside manner, Nurse Tyler.”

I smile, putting my groceries on the conveyor belt.

“Oh, well, I don’t think I can take all the credit. I just think my understudy might need a bit more training *in* bedside manner.”

After checking out, I thank Edwardo and gather the two stuffed paper bags up in my arms.

“Well, I hope you have a good weekend, Dr. Mitchell.”

“Hey, hold up,” he says, apparently deciding that he doesn’t want his rice and soda. “It’s starting to get dark out, let me drive you home.”

“Oh, no, that’s totally unnecessary,” I say, dismissively. “I literally live like two blocks from here.”

“Right, but you’re all alone and...”

“I appreciate the offer, but I assure you I am perfectly safe here.”

But I accidentally lose my grip on one of the bags in my arms. Luckily for me, however, Dr. Hottie catches it before it hits the floor.

“Well, then at least let me walk *with* you,” he says, with a charming grin. “And carry one of these.”

I stare at his handsome smile and don’t know what is wrong with me, or why I am impulsively refusing his help.

*These bags are a bit heavy and perhaps a little help would be nice.*

“Sure.”

As we head down the street, he tells me about his patients and his growing practice. I just listen silently for the most part, nodding and randomly inserting an occasional “ah, I see,” into the conversation to seem as if I am paying attention. Dr. Hottie seems really interested in talking, which is fine because I don’t have much to say tonight.

As we near my house some of the local kids are still out playing in a sprinkler outside, screaming and laughing as they run in and out of the spray.

“Hi, Natalie!” A pretty little brunette named Mercedes giggles as she runs past us waving.

“Holy shit, all of these kids are just out here, running around in the street!” Dr. Hottie says, staring after her. “No one is worried about them being out after dark? Where on earth are their parents?”

“As I said,” I say, with a laugh, “It’s a close-knit community. Everyone kind of watches everyone. We’re all kind of ‘parents’ here.”

But oddly enough it is this *very* phrase that seems to jolt me back to my reality at present.

*I guess I am kind of an actual parent now, too.*

“Well, this is me,” I say, stopping at the bottom of my porch steps.

“Thank you so much for this. I think I can manage it from here.”

I put my bag down on the steps and reach for his, but he side-steps me and motions toward the house.

“Oh, come on, I carried it this far. I can carry it inside for you. I mean, after all, it is the gentlemanly thing to do.” He smiles at me as he walks up the porch steps toward the door.

Maybe it's just my long and trying day, but I feel slightly uncomfortable at the thought of inviting Dr. Hottie inside.

*I will just take it from him at the door.*

I follow him up the stairs and set my bag down on the porch.

"Holy crap..." he says, looking down at me. "Nurse Tyler, that is a *very* large gun in your purse."

I had been in the middle of fishing my keys from my purse, but now I look down at the gun.

*Whoops. I didn't realize he could see that.*

"Yeah, well, a girl has got to look out for herself these days," I say, unlocking the door.

"I guess that's fair," He takes a step forward, but I turn around and block the doorway with my body.

"Thank you, Dr. Mitchell," I say, with a smile. "For being so kind to walk me home and help me carry my groceries. I can take it from here."

"Nurse Tyler, it's fine," he says. "It's no big deal, I'm happy to carry them inside for you," he says, trying again to step into the house.

"No, that's alright," I say, reaching for the bag in his arms again. "Really, I am all set."

"Are you sure? I mean I'm already here and—"

"HEY! ASSHOLE! SHE SAID NO!"

A low and exceedingly commanding voice shouts behind me...from *inside* my darkened house, making me jump.

*Oh my God...I know that voice.*

My breath hitches in my throat but I don't dare turn around yet. Instead, I take the bag from the now stunned Dr. Mitchell, who is still staring past me, presumably at the source of the voice.

"Thank you, Dr. Mitchell," I say, with a smile. "I hope you have a great night, and a lovely weekend. I'll see you on Monday."

I try to do my best to control my racing heart and shaking limbs, while also trying to say goodbye to Dr. Hottie, who stares at me with a shocked expression before nodding slowly.

"Um, well, then I guess have a good night, Nurse Tyler."

He quickly bounds down the stairs and heads quickly back down the street as fast as his legs can carry him. I grab the bag of groceries I set down on

the porch and take a deep breath, before turning around and walking into my house.

I flip the light switch and that's when I see him.

*Well, what do you know, it's Jaxon Pace...alive and sitting in my living room.*

## Chapter 2

JAXON

Nearly two hours I've sat in this chair, waiting for Natalie.

And all of it was worth it, as my heart nearly stops at the sight of her. But *she* does not look as pleased to see *me* as I hoped she would.

In fact, Natalie looks...pissed.

*And who the HELL was that clown who was with her?!*

"Traitor." She suddenly breaks the heavy silence in the room.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"I wasn't speaking to you," she snaps coldly, "I was speaking to *Cyclops*." She stares at the little dog, shaking her head.

Her little one-eyed rescue pug, Cyclops, sits on my lap, happily panting and wagging his tail at the much-anticipated sight of his owner.

"Some guard dog you are, Lops," she says, rolling her eyes.

"Who was that?" I ask, unable to stifle my brewing frustration at seeing her with another guy.

"Who was who?" She asks, crossing her arms across her body, maintaining her rigid stance.

"That man that—"

"That man? THAT man?" she scoffs. "That nice man who just walked me home and carried a bag of groceries? *That* is the man you want to discuss right now?"

"Yes? I thought that was obvious?"

"Oh, it was," she snaps at me, her eyes narrowed. "What is not obvious to me, however, is THIS man sitting in my living room!" She shouts, waving her hand at me.

*Oh...now I understand. Natalie IS pissed.*

“What are you doing here, Jaxon? In *my* house?”

“Well, obviously I’m here to see you,” I say clearing my throat.

However, seeing the anger in her eyes, I instantly feel uncomfortable and stand to my feet, adjusting my jacket.

“I guess I just assumed, foolishly it seems, that you might be excited to see me. *Alive.*”

She laughs, shaking her head and pressing her tongue against her cheek.

“You know, Jaxon, I really might be. If it hadn’t been four fucking weeks of radio silence from you and your entire brigade!” She shouts, stunning me.

*Why is she THIS angry? I mean, she is the one who fucking left me!*

“I mean what the hell?! I’m just left wondering if you’re alive or dead or still in a coma! I didn’t know what happened to you!”

“Well, maybe that’s because you just fucking LEFT before I could wake up!” I shout back, my own anger bubbling over. “Imagine my surprise when I come to, and find out that you just left, Natalie! Which was something I told myself you would never do, but I guess I was wrong!”

“Fuck you, Jaxon!” She shouts. “I didn’t leave because I didn’t care about you, I left because I found your file on me! And yes, I saw everything! All of my personal information you had your men dig up on me! Something you didn’t have decency to tell me about!”

“I had planned to tell you, but I never got the opportunity!”

“You had plenty of opportunities, Jaxon!”

“Forgive me, Natalie, but as I recall I was a little busy wading through tunnel systems filled with armed men to rescue you!” I snap sarcastically.

“For which I am very grateful for, Jaxon, believe me! But, okay, since we are on that subject, let’s remember the only reason I was in those tunnels in the first place, was because your resurrected psycho ex-girlfriend and her lunatic brother *kidnapped* me!”

“I’m aware of that! Don’t forget I took the bullet, Natalie!”

“Oh, I won’t forget it, you hear me? I will never forget it! I was the one who kept your fucking heart pumping for over thirty minutes after you took that bullet! The bullet of a woman you said was DEAD, Jaxon!”

“I THOUGHT SHE WAS! But I was wrong! Just like I guess I was wrong about you! Here I thought you’d at least give me the chance to explain or have any desire to see me!” I thunder at her, taking a step for the door. “But clearly, I was wrong! AGAIN!”

I am almost to the door when all of a sudden I hear her gasp, and it immediately stops me in my tracks.

“I *had* a desire to see you!” She says, her voice cracking. “But then you left me in the dark. Again! LIKE YOU ALWAYS DO!”

I steal a glance at her discreetly, but the moment I see the tear streak down her cheek my anger evaporates in an instant.

I cross the floor toward her and she puts a hand up to stop me.

“Don’t. Don’t come near me, Jaxon!”

“Fuck that!” I say, grabbing her and pulling her into me.

“NO! Stop! Let me go!” She wails, shaking against my chest, but I ignore her and press her against me, holding her tightly.

*She’s not pushing me away. Or trying to get away from me.*

“Right...I’ll jump right on that,” I whisper sarcastically, gently laying my hands across her back.

She breaks, sobbing hard against my chest. Softly I press my lips to the top of her head but make no other movement, afraid she might bolt.

There are no words to describe how grateful I am to finally have her a back in my arms and feel her body against mine again.

For the first time in weeks my heart exhales.

*I have her back.*

“Boss, we have a problem...” Charlie’s voice suddenly sounds in my earpiece. I hear a car door slam, and the immediate sounds of a woman shouting on the front lawn.

“WHO THE HELL ARE YOU? GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY WAY!!”

“Oh my God! MEL!” Natalie breathes, breaking away from me and rushing to the door.

She yanks it open, and we are met with an interesting sight.

A young woman, a curvy girl with bright red hair and thick-framed glasses, is being detained by Charlie and Josiah.

Well, they are *trying* to detain her. But she just so happens to be wielding a giant baseball bat, which she is swinging aggressively at them as they narrowly avoid getting hit.

She looks up toward the porch as Natalie walks out the door.

“Nat! Oh, thank God!” She yells raising her hand to her forehead and instantly dropping the bat. “Girl, you had me so worried! You didn’t call like you usually do, and then you weren’t answering your phone, and you specifically asked me to check-in with you every night. So, when you didn’t call, I just got in my car and drove over here, thinking the worst but ready to whoop some ass!”

*This is Mel, Natalie’s best friend.*

“Mel, I am so sorry! I, um, well...” Natalie starts bashfully, but her voice trails off as I step up behind her on the porch.

“Oh. My. God.” Mel whispers, glancing at all five of my men now on the premises. “Is that... *him*?”

Natalie says nothing, looking up at me tentatively.

Suddenly, Mel picks up the bat again, and lunges forward, trying to break through Charlie and Josiah towards me.

“I’M GOING TO KICK YOUR ASS, JAXON PACE!” She shouts!  
“HOW DARE YOU SHOW YOUR FACE HERE AFTER WHAT YOU DID TO HER!”

“Mel! Stop! It’s okay,” Natalie says, racing down the steps.

“Bullshit! You’ve been crying, I can see it from here! LET ME PASS!” She shouts at Josiah who blocks her path, still dodging her bat swings.

“Mel, stop! I swear, it’s okay! I’m fine!” Natalie says, as she reaches her.  
“I’m sorry I forgot to call you. It’s just been a very weird day.”

“Well, then I still want to kick his ass because he’s a fucking jerk!” Mel yells, still thrashing against my bodyguard.

“Please, Mel. Calm down it’s fine,” Natalie says, putting her hand on Mel’s arm. “I... I want him to be here.”

*Well, that’s good.*

“I have lots that I want to discuss with him.” She continues. “And I can’t do that if you kill him... *first*.”

*Well, that’s not as good.*

Mel stares at Natalie for a long moment.

“You sure?” she says, softly. “Not even a little pop-pop?” She swings the bat down hard as if she is playing the Whack-A-Mole game at the fairgrounds. This clearly makes Josiah uncomfortable, and he frustratingly yanks the bat from her hands, putting it behind his back.

“I’ll let you know,” Natalie says, turning back around to look at me. “I guess that depends on if I like what *he* has to say or not.”

“Fair,” Mel relents, wrapping Natalie in a hug but glaring at me in the process. “You will call me tomorrow? And let me know if my hitwoman services are required?”

“Of course.”

“You hear that, boys?!” Mel suddenly shouts to all the men gathered around. “If anything happens to her, you will have *me* to contend with! And don’t worry, big guy, I have LOTS of bats,” she winks at Josiah.

Natalie smiles, and walks Mel back to her car. I lean on the porch banister with my hands in my pockets.

*And here I had been worried about her safety. Jesus.*

“Gentlemen,” Natalie says with a sigh, when she returns to the sidewalk. “It’s good to see you both again. It’s been a minute. How are you liking Miami as opposed to Chicago? How’s your leg, Josiah?”

“We’re just starting to get used to it, Miss Tyler,” Josiah says, with a smile. “And the leg has healed up beautifully, thanks to you.”

I swear he looks happier than I’ve ever seen him look before.

*Unless of course he was blowing something up.*

Charlie is ecstatic and makes no effort to hide it.

“Yeah, well you know, we would’ve knocked on your door and said something a few weeks ago, but the Boss said we couldn’t make our presence known until *he* got here.”

“Charlie!” Josiah snaps, hitting him on the arm.

*Damnit, Charlie! I hadn’t gotten to telling her about the protection detail yet!*

“What? You heard all the yelling. I just assumed that meant he told her about us already?”

“Charlie,” I say, giving him a look. “Please shut up.”

However, to my surprise, Natalie laughs.

“I’ve missed you both.” She says, wrapping her arms around them.

“For the record,” Charlie mutters, as he pulls away. “We ALL tried to tell him this whole ‘silence then surprise’ plan was a stupid-ass, and fairly *creepy* idea.”

“CHARLIE!” I snap. “STOP. TALKING. NOW.”

“Yes, Charlie,” Natalie says, crossing her arms and turning to me.

“Jaxon Pace, the Billionaire *Burglar*, has plenty of talking to do this evening, and I’m sure you all know how much he doesn’t like anyone stealing his thunder.”

She stares intimidatingly at me as she walks up the stairs and into the house, leaving the door open for me to follow her inside.

“I guess it’s back into the fire I go...” I say to myself with a grimace, as I turn and step back inside.

\*\*\*

Natalie sets a glass of wine down on the table next to me before sitting down on the couch with a cup of tea. The first few moments we sit in silence, as she taps her fingers on the mug, glancing up at me.

Each time her eyes meet mine, I feel a sharp pain in my chest.

I have longed for this woman more than I have ever longed for anything in my life. Her absence from it felt like a bottomless pit of despair, and I want nothing more in this moment than to go back to when I was finally getting to hold her again.

But it’s clear that there are several mildly *angry* elephants lingering in the room between us, and they need to be addressed first.

I clear my throat.

“So, do I get to ask about who that man was tonight?” I ask, staring at the floor and then glancing up at her.

“Not yet,” she says softly. “But he is not important.”

*I’d like to make that determination myself, actually.*

“Where should I start?”

“Rachel is alive,” Natalie says, her eyes finding mine and holding them with a smoldering burn. “She is alive AND she thinks you tried to kill her.”

“Do *you* believe that?” I ask, holding my breath.

Natalie’s eyes scan mine for a long moment. Then she sighs before raising her mug to her lips.

“No...I don’t,” she says softly, taking a sip of tea.

*Thank God.*

“But I still want an explanation. And I think I deserve one,” she says, setting her mug down on the coffee table and crossing her arms across her chest.

“Natalie, I swear to you, I had no idea she was alive until she walked out into that tunnel. And even then, I didn’t believe it,” I say, leaning forward on my knees and rubbing my hands together. “Neither myself, nor any of my team had any indication whatsoever that that was even a possibility. Which is why we weren’t ready,” I say with a sigh.

“You told me she died in a fire,” Natalie says, frowning her brow. “That’s a very specific statement to be *unsure* about, Jaxon.”

“I know, but it’s the truth. At least it was the only truth I knew until four weeks ago when I saw her.”

I stare at her, realizing that if I have any chance of getting her back in my life, I have no choice but to walk her through this horrible story, in all its grimy detail.

“The night Rachel left we had just had another one of our fights. I don’t remember what it was about, but I remember that I apologized, and she accepted. But then, in the middle of the night, she just packed up her stuff and left. She took off to my winter home in Texas, leaving me to discover her absence in the morning.”

Natalie nods for me to continue.

“The Texas house was always her favorite of my houses, but she knew I hated it there. When I realized she left, I knew it was the only place she would’ve gone, and eventually my men confirmed it.”

“I won’t lie, I was angry she could just leave Jessica in the middle of the night like that. But as for me? Well, I knew that I deserved it, based on badly I treated her.”

“What do you mean?” Natalie asks. “Did you...*hit* her?”

“No, never.” I say firmly. “I’ve *never* laid a hand on any woman in anger. But I have already told you how I was a useless partner and an awfully absent father. On top of that, I was just consistently unfaithful and on edge constantly.”

“*Why* were you on edge?” Natalie asks, her face blank.

*Fuck. She wants to hear me acknowledge this...out loud.*

“I was...*using*. For most of our relationship,” I sigh, unable to look her in the eyes.

“What were you using, Jaxon?”

“Anything I could get my hands on. I wasn’t exactly picky in those days.” I rub my chin, hating the sound of these sins rolling off my tongue.

“And are you using now?” Her green eyes burrow into mine.

I stare at her in silence for a long moment, matching her stare.

“I’ve thought about it,” I say, quietly. “Often. Especially the last three weeks. I’m told the temptation is not exactly something that ever goes away.”

Natalie stares back at me in silence.

“...But no, I’m not.”

Her paralyzing gaze rakes me in what I assume is every effort to determine whether I am being not only honest with her, but *completely* honest.

Which is what I am trying to be.

“Go on,” she nods, apparently satisfied. “Continue.”

“Well, I assumed that after a few days away Rachel would come back. I thought she just needed to cool down, or maybe take a break from the stress of motherhood and get some distance. But I always assumed she would come back, because after all, she had Jessica.”

“But she didn’t. Days turned into weeks. Weeks turned into months. Not once did she call, even just to speak to the nursery staff or check on Jessica. And while I could understand her being angry with me and punishing *me*, I couldn’t understand her taking out her anger on her infant daughter, who was still breastfeeding for crying out loud.”

“It was as if she just snapped and wanted to leave us both behind. Permanently. And I started to resent her for it.”

Natalie takes a sip of her tea, settles back on the couch, pulling her feet underneath her body.

“However, in Rachel’s absence, I had no choice but to become the father I wasn’t. Jessica needed me. I struggled at first, but little by little I started to find that fatherhood wasn’t that difficult. Jessica had the nursery staff and Old Nan for the daytime, but at night I was her primary caregiver.”

“I realized that I couldn’t be responsible for Jessica’s care and safety while also out of my mind on drugs. I decided to quit. *Everything*. Cold turkey.”

A faint smile crosses Natalie’s face as she tucks her hair behind her ear and glancing down at the coffee table.

*I know I can’t get distracted, but holy fuck is she pretty.*

“Ethan found Dr. Franklyn for me, and the two of them helped me get clean completely. As my mind started to clear up, I started to regret how I treated Rachel for nearly our entire relationship. I started to take ownership of my mistakes and failures. I thought that maybe, if I could get my shit together,

we could put the past behind us and be a real family.” I sigh heavily, taking another sip of wine.”

“But?”

“Every time I tried to reach Rachel in Texas, the phone would just ring and ring. Sometimes the line would be dead for days on end. I understood what it meant: she didn’t *want* me back. But I kept hoping anyway.”

I take another drink and sit back in the chair.

“But one day, I came home to a letter on my desk, from Rachel. In it, Rachel told me about how she had moved on with her life. She met a man and was starting over. They were going to move out of my house and get married.”

“I’ll be honest, it stung. It was the crushing feeling of guilt, and of being ‘too little, too late.’ But mostly, I was angry that she could just walk out of Jessica’s life so easily, as if her daughter didn’t exist. I think I spent all night just sitting in my office, reading that letter.”

“The next day, I called Ethan, and had him put a flight plan together for Texas. I figured, if Rachel *really* wanted to say goodbye to me and our daughter, forever, then I would let her. But I at least deserved to hear her say it to my face, and not in a fucking letter.”

I sigh, closing my eyes.

“But as soon as we touched down in Texas, we got the call. By the time we pulled up in front of the house, the fire department was already there, and the whole thing was ablaze. In the end, they were only able to recover partial remains, which were unidentifiable.”

“Oh my...” I hear Natalie gasp softly.

“At first I held out hope. I had my team try and track down any information, any hint that maybe Rachel had NOT been in the house when it caught fire. But they all came back emptyhanded.”

I down the rest of my wine, and glance up at Natalie, whose face is filled with an emotion I cannot place.

“I held a funeral for her, but with her parents having already passed on, and Michael committed to a psychiatric facility, she had no family to attend. We just ended up burying her empty casket.”

“Jesus,” Natalie whispers.

“For months I kept hoping that I was wrong. I hoped that she would show up at my house and tell me it was all part of some horrible mistake. But every day that passed without word only further confirmed that she was gone. Forever.”

“The guilt I felt from all of this, the weight of my selfish and inexcusable actions having a hand in her death, was almost debilitating. It is one thing to lose someone you love, but it is an entirely different thing to feel like all of it was *your* fault.”

*Christ, this is heavy.*

I know we need to discuss this.

However, I had hoped that Natalie and I would’ve at least been able to put the two of *us* back together before I started laying my sins on the table for her like some sort of morbid show-and-tell.

“And that was the last you heard from her,” Natalie says, “in the letter she sent you before the fire?”

I nod slowly, “until the tunnels.”

“That’s unbelievable,” Natalie whispers, shaking her head.

“It is. But it is the *truth*,” I say, softly. “I’ve tried to always tell you the truth, Natalie, even when I’d rather not. And trust me, I’d rather none of this was the truth. But I promise you, I did plan to tell you about all of it. It was never my intention to keep it from you. I’m sorry.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear again and looks at the floor.

“I believe you,” she says softly, “it was just a lot to take in.”

She sighs, shifting in her seat as she steals another glance at me, her eyes setting fire to my bones.

“I spoke to Colton that night and he mentioned that you caught him buying drugs at some club. Which was something you had never shared with me, and it just confused me. And then, obviously, there was the file I found on your desk with my name...”

She looks up at me, this time apologetically.

“Perhaps...I shouldn’t have just left the way I did, and now after hearing your story about Rachel, I understand why me leaving without saying goodbye was such a big deal for you. But all my doubts, combined with everything that happened that night...” Her voice cracks, and I notice the tear that streaks down her cheek before she hastily wipes it away. “It was just a lot. But I’m sorry too, Jaxon. Truly.”

Her words rush over my body like a cleansing wave.

As devastated and brokenhearted as I was, Ethan assured me tirelessly in the last three weeks of recovery, that Natalie did *not* hate me. The poor girl had

just been understandably overwhelmed by the ridiculous chain of events she endured in my dark world. Which was ultimately my fault by proximity.

“Please don’t apologize, Natalie,” I whisper. “I’m the one who is sorry. I’m sorry for all of this, and for everything you went through.”

“Colton,” she says, as if suddenly remembering the twat exists, wiping another tear from her face. “What happened to him? And why *didn’t* you tell me you saw him at the club buying drugs the night of the bachelorette?”

I sigh, nodding slowly, trying to figure out how best to broach both subjects.

“I didn’t wake up from the coma for at least a week,” I say, softly. “Which proved good for Colton, because I know I would’ve *killed* him for what he did to you. However, by that time, Ethan spoke to Josiah, who told him about the conversation the two of you had with Colton.

“Ethan gave Colton a choice: he could wait until I woke up, and would assuredly put him in a long hard sleep, six feet under, for what he did to you. Or he could go to rehab. He obviously chose rehab. Ethan enrolled him immediately and sent him off before I came out of my coma.”

Natalie closes her eyes and shakes her head in confusion.

“Wait, *you* enrolled him? Does that mean you’re *paying* for his rehab?”

I nod.

“Holy shit...” she says, in disbelief. “That’s so...generous of you.”

*Well, technically it was Ethan, but I need all the help I can get with her right now.*

“I didn’t tell you about Colton buying drugs that night simply because I knew that night had already been very chaotic for you. Then, after the wedding, you came to stay with me. And let’s just say at *that* point, Colton was the very last thing on my mind.”

I see her blush and take a drink of her tea.

Seeing her cheeks flush, my mind races back to the images of those passionate two days we spent together, and the sounds she made as I was buried deep inside her...

*Throw the breaks on, dude. We are finally digging ourselves out of this hole.*

“And the file,” I say, deciding just to wrap all this bullshit up at once. “The file, I will admit, was wrong. It was entirely wrong to keep it from you. But please know, that’s just how I’ve always done things. I live in a world where I *must* be one step ahead and can’t take a person’s word about who or what they

are at face value. And to be fair, I met you under the most unique and chaotic of circumstances to say the least.”

“I understand the *why*, Jaxon, but still...” Natalie says, with a grimace. “It’s really personal information. I don’t even know how you got all that info.”

“Well, it’s actually remarkably easy when—”

“I don’t *want* to know,” she says, holding up a hand to stop me. “I can just let that exist as it is for now.”

“You’re right,” I nod. “It was wrong, and I’m sorry.”

Natalie stares at me, a soft smile settling on her cheeks.

But unfortunately, it is short lived. She adjusts her position on the couch, taking a deep breath and draping her hand across her stomach.

“So, what happens now?” she whispers, her eyes falling to the floor.

“What do you mean?” my breath catches in my throat again.

I feel like I am back to that pivotal moment we shared in the library, where it felt as if my entire world was hanging by a thread.

“Well, now that you know Rachel is alive, are you interested in trying to...reconcile with her?” she says quietly, staring at me nervously. “As in, do you want to *BE* with her?”

“Are you kidding? Of course not!” I scoff. “Natalie, she tried to *kill* you. She did so simply because it would hurt me. All because she mistakenly believes I tried to kill her. And while I could perhaps understand *that*, I cannot for the life of me understand why she would abandon Jessica for this long,” I say, trying to contain the rage boiling in my chest at everything that just came out of my mouth.

*I don't know if I can ever forgive her for that.*

However, as I look up at Natalie, the anger immediately evaporates.

Her green eyes search mine with an intensity I have never seen, pushing me past the breaking point. I’m hopelessly drawn to this woman and find myself unable to resist any longer. I stand and move to sit beside her on the couch.

“But above all of that,” I whisper. “I do not want to be with Rachel. I want to be with *you*.”

*Christ, she is so beautiful.*

I study her face, taking in the shape of her cheekbones and the soft blush settling across them, feeling my pulse quicken within my veins as I take her hand in mine. Thankfully, she does not pull away.

“I told you once, that I was yours,” I whisper to her, pressing her hand to my chest. “I meant that. And I still do. Maybe more than I’ve meant anything. This heart, although completely undeserving, beats *only* for you, Natalie,” I choke out, as my emotions nearly strangle the words from my throat entirely.

There’s still a part of me that can’t believe I’m sitting here with her. I thought I had lost her.

When I faded into the blackness on that subterranean platform, my soul called to her. Natalie Tyler was the last thing I thought about when the lights went out, and the first thing I longed for when I woke up. She was the flame that set my heart ablaze, and my world is cold and dark without her.

“Mine...beats for you *too*, Jaxon,” she whispers, as a tear streaks down her cheek. “I’ve been in agony without you.”

I cup her face in my hand, gently stroking away her tear with my thumb.

“Then don’t be,” I whisper, watching her smile. “Be with me. Be *mine*.”

I watch her breathing rapidly increase, and the way her eyes drift down to my lips, confirming that she wants me too.

I lean in to kiss her and as soon as her tender lips touch mine, sparks erupt in my chest. She kisses me back, pushing her tongue into my mouth and pulling me closer. I wrap my arms around her waist, passionately matching her fervor as I kiss down her neck, inhaling her scent.

For the first time in weeks, fire ignites inside my veins.

But just as I am plotting to rip every article of clothing from her body, she suddenly pulls away, sending my heart plummeting through the floor.

“Jaxon, I...” she whispers, unable to look at me. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

*Oh no...Am I too late?*

My heart begins to pound, as my brain desperately tries to recall everything she just said a few moments prior, fearing that perhaps I misunderstood her.

My eyes scan hers, but I cannot speak. I cannot utter a word.

*Maybe the grocery bag guy is the new boyfriend, and I am too late...again.*

“Jaxon,” she whispers. “I’m pregnant.”