

## IN PLAIN SIGHT (EXCERPT)

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Girls' Night Out was moments away and Nikki was having trouble settling the boys down for bed. Dane had called to say he was running late, but he would be there before her ride arrived.

The boys were showered and fed, and she had stationed them on her bed while she got ready for her evening out. Justin had taken to tickling Reggie and now they were both tussling on the bed. The pillows were now on the floor and she had already rescued the bedside lamp from the energetic boys.

As she fastened her earrings, she smiled as she watched their reflections in the mirror. They were happy. The bed could be fixed. A lamp could be replaced. It was harder to replace bad memories and exorcise fear.

A knock at the open bedroom door startled her. "I let myself in as you couldn't hear my knocking with all that screaming." Dane looked apologetic. "Sorry I'm late. Roxie and Bella are just pulling in to the yard." His repentant look was quickly replaced by a look of appreciation.

Nikki had taken her cues on how to dress for the night's get-together from how Roxie and the other ladies dressed at the parties where she had worked as a waiter. They took Girls' Night Out seriously, and jeans and T-shirt would not cut it.

Montserrat was still limited when it came to clothes shopping, and so she had decided to make herself an off-the-shoulder red cotton top to go with the white linen pants she had been keeping for a special occasion. The blouse revealed a hit of cleavage and Nikki could feel Dane's eyes ...

"Daddy!" The boys screamed and dived off the bed into his arms. He had no choice but to catch them.

*Such confidence*, Nikki thought. What it would feel like to trust your man to catch you every time?

Justin had managed to climb on his dad's back as Reggie found his favorite position wrapped around his thighs. Nikki laughed at the sight. He would have an awkward time maneuvering out of the apartment and upstairs like that, but she knew he would do it just to hear their laughter.

Reggie had the most amazing giggle and she found herself laughing every time it echoed

through the house.

She checked her look one more time in the mirror and picked up her purse and the gift for Roxie.

Peals of laughter came from the driveway as Nikki rounded the corner. Roxie's jeep had now been joined by Callen and Monique's and Dane's colleague Declan was right behind.

Wolf whistles came her way as Callen and Declan watched her walking to the jeep where Bella was riding shotgun.

Declan parked his car and ran to open the back door of Roxie's jeep, so Nikki could get in. Monique was busy kissing Callen through the window on the other side.

"Get a room you two," Dane shouted from the steps where he stood, still holding the boys upside down by their legs.

Nikki shook her head and smiled.

"Bye Nikki!" The boys screamed in between giggles.

She waved and blushed when Dane sent her a wink.

"We saw that," Bella announced. "We expect details."

Nikki groaned as the women all laughed with her. Roxie turned up the music and did a three-sixty in Dane's driveway before heading down the graveled lane.

As the women were intent on simply de-stressing, the conversation never got around to Nikki and Dane, much to her relief.

Following dinner, they signed up for karaoke and spent the better part of the night belting out seventies and eighties tunes with the other customers at the seaside restaurant.

Bella was in the mood to let her hair down and so Nikki did her best Supremes imitation as they took on a few of the other wanna-be singers.

After three rounds of reggae, pop, and R&B, Bella and Nikki walked away with a bottle of champagne as the prize.

Nikki excused herself to get the gift she had left in the vehicle. By the time she returned, her friends had moved outside and were sitting on lounge chairs with their feet in the sand.

“Roxie,” Nikki hesitated.

Everyone turned and looked up as she approached.

“Is that for me?” Roxie reached for the bag.

“Yes. I wanted to say thank you for helping me to settle in here. Your help with finding me work and your friendship has been priceless.”

A squeal escaped from Roxie’s lips as she unwrapped the gift. She shook her feet in pleasure and squealed again as the silk gown unfolded.

Monique and Bella gushed as they touched the delicate fabric.

“Oh, my goodness. Where did you buy this? Wait. Did you make this Nikki?” Bella asked stroking the gown.

Nikki nodded and took a seat next to Monique.

“This is simply exquisite. I’m saving this for the Governor’s Ball.”

Roxie stood and modeled the gown, holding it in front of her. It was the perfect length for wearing with the incredibly high heels the executive preferred.

“I am going to try this on when I get home. My goodness, look at these colors. Is this hand painted?”

Bella and Monique had turned on the lights on their phones to see the details on the gown. Roxie rubbed the fabric against her skin.

“This feels fabulous. Thank you so much Nikki. I have never received such an amazing and heartfelt gift.”

Roxie hugged the younger woman and before long Monique, who never passed up a hug joined in and so did Bella.

Bella sprung for a bottle of champagne to seal the moment.

“Well here’s to discovering your passion and the courage to manifest it,” cheered Bella as she

raised her glass to Nikki. Roxie and Monique agreed as they each took a sip.

Nikki buried her feet in the sand as she sipped her champagne and thought about the toast. She had known what her passion was but to live it was another matter. She did not want to ruin the moment. There would be time enough to tell the women she could not pursue sewing or fashion design. For the foreseeable future she would put her energy into caring for Dane's boys.

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Justin and Reggie had been allowed to stay up late to enjoy the barbecue and a few video games. Dane had eventually retired them to his bedroom to watch a few of their favorite cartoons. At last check, they were both asleep and Road Runner was still outwitting Coyote.

Dane grabbed fresh beers for his guests and settled down for the first real game of the night. As the games he preferred had guns and bombs, he did not allow the boys to play them or even watch while he played. It was his only outlet for shooting serious firepower as local police did not routinely carry weapons.

In another time and place, taking down terrorists and dodging bullets was a daily routine. That had been before Justin and Reggie. He missed the life and the camaraderie, but he would not trade the time with his sons for a gun battle or car chase.

“You must miss the guns, Dane.” Callen read his thoughts as he emptied a magazine into the base of a water tank hoping to cut off Dane’s man.

Dane smirked at Callen’s attempt to distract him and countered by lobbing two grenades at the truck Callen’s avatar was driving.

“I do, but moving here and improving the odds of coming home to my boys makes up for it.”

Callen nodded in agreement as he took cover behind a wall.

“That is a good deal. For a minute there, I didn’t think I could be happy here or even have enough to stay busy, but the training camp is taking off and we’ve got our first cohort coming in next month.”

Callen and two friends were partners in a high-end training program for athletes. While the initial plan had been to focus on basketball,

as it was his background, word was spreading and injured athletes from other disciplines were expressing an interest in coming to recuperate and train with the program.

“Both of you plan to talk all night or play?” Declan asked as his soldiers entered the scene leaping from helicopters while spraying the area with bullets.

Declan would have probably made a good special forces operative. He was a stellar detective who had the respect of his subordinates and the senior officers in the island’s police service. He had filled Dane in on local protocols but also the elements of the police culture which usually made it difficult for foreign officers to come in and succeed with their assignments. He got along with everyone and he had been open to everything Dane was willing to teach.

“Play time is over,” declared Callen as he took up an offensive position and prepared to battle his way out.

For the next few hours, the men traded bullets, bombs, and beers and by the time the women returned, they had reverted to raiding the kitchen for leftovers.

Bella, who had an early call on a construction site begged off on the coffee Dane offered and left. Monique sat on Callen's lap giggling as he whispered in her ear.

Nikki made herself busy in the kitchen, putting away glasses and extra napkins that had been unused.

"So Nikki, I'm going to need that recipe for those veggie burgers," Declan said coming close to hand her another plate.

The twinkle in his eye told Nikki he was up to mischief. She decided to play along.

"That's a secret I can only share with family by blood or marriage."

"Well you're single and I'm single so this could work." Declan said it loud enough for everyone to hear.

"I think it's time for you to go. Isn't Karen or was it Kiki waiting for you?" Dane pointed to the open kitchen door.

"Don't be that way boss. Nikki is a one-of-a-kind lady. The only woman who could get me to eat a vegetarian dish is worthy of my heart," Declan teased as he grabbed the last burger on his way out the door.

Nikki shook her head and excused herself to tuck the boys into their beds and left Roxie and Dane to chat.

“That was a very possessive move there,” Roxie said.

“He knows I was kidding, Rox. Don’t make anything of it.” Dane busied himself with clearing the table and putting away the condiments.

“We’ll see,” she declared. “Tell Nikki I will call her tomorrow. Night, Night.”

Dane walked her to the vehicle and waited for her lights to disappear down out the tree-lined driveway.

Roxie had not been convinced by his comeback and frankly neither had he. It had been a struggle all week to hold back his compliments and need to always seek out Nikki’s company. He asked her opinion on everything from disciplining the boys to her view on international politics. She never seemed phased by his questions and always had a studied opinion. Nikki looked happy and it was very attractive. He wondered if being with him and the boys was part of her happiness. He really hoped so as she was becoming a big part of his.

He had thought he was managing his feelings for Nikki until he saw Declan admiring her. Dane could not blame the man.

He turned towards the house and saw the lights go out in the boys' room. He timed his entrance, so he could catch her before she headed downstairs.

"Hey. Did you have fun tonight?" Dane locked the front door and checked the windows while he waited for her response.

"I did."

She looked ready to run. It suddenly clicked that her trapped look always followed him closing a door. She always needed a way to escape and where he stood was blocking her. He needed to reassure her that he was not a threat to her safety, so he kept his distance.

"By the way, thank you for prepping the meal and for setting up the grill. That was the easiest barbecue I have ever had to do."

She smiled at that and it lit up his soul.

"Glad it worked out. The boys didn't even stir when I took them to bed, so they must have had their share of fun as well."

"Yes, we all did. Look I'm going to have to go to the office tomorrow for a few hours. I know it's usually your day off, so we can trade off for

a couple of hours next week if you want to get out of here." Dane stuck his hands in his back pockets. The temptation to reach out and tuck in a wayward strand of hair was strong.

"That won't be a problem. I wasn't planning on going out. Well I'm going to head to bed. Hopefully they sleep through the night." Nikki picked up her purse and headed for the side door that led to her apartment.

"Good night Nikki. Sleep well." Dane had not moved from his position in the hallway. He listened for the sound of her front door closing before turning off the lights and heading to his room.

He brushed his teeth and got ready for bed before hitting the floor for twenty push-ups and a prayer. "God, I need you to help me figure this out. I like this woman. I am not sure if this is the right time for me or for the boys. I don't want to be hurt again, and I can't risk my sons for my own selfish needs. Please give me some direction. I will listen. Amen."