

Chapter 1

Chapter I: A Healing Heart

I STILL REMEMBER THE TIME; it's vivid in my mind's eye, as though I could relive that moment in my mind at will. It was the spring of the year 2002. The neighborhood was slowly returning to its usual rhythm after the upheaval of 9/11. You could hear Enrique's chart-topping hit "Hero" on almost every radio station and television when these stations were not broadcasting some new development on the World Trade Center attack investigation.

At the time, we were living in Queens, miles away from New York City, where the attack happened. But the shock of the news had no doubt made it to the farthest corners of the country. Queens was a vast neighborhood, but it had a sense of closeness that made it feel smaller. Almost everyone seemed to know each other and at times, that would make it seem like privacy was a trivial concept.

Ours was a "happy" family with my parents, siblings, and me. We got along great with the neighbors and went to the church every week. Anyone who knew our family would tell you how well respected and established we were. The only thing, however, was that it was all a lie. To any outsider, we might certainly have seemed that way, but behind closed doors, things were very different. Every single one of us was broken, damaged, and dysfunctional.

My parents, the happy and incredibly friendly couple that everyone outside our family knew, were in fact at each other's throats for more hours during the day than they were not. More than once, throughout the day, things would get so heated up between them that it would end with my father physically, verbally, and emotionally abusing my mom. I still remember how she always wore sunglasses when stepping out of the house, to hide her bruises. Needless to say, my siblings and I were not spared his wrath either. All he really cared about was getting his next fix.

The only place I could truly be at peace back then was when I was with my grandparents. I considered myself lucky at the time that my parents allowed me to visit them, along with my aunts and cousins on weekends. The blissful feeling of being away from the toxic environment that we called home was what kept me going. My grandmother played a significant role in raising me and inspired me to strive for a better life than my parents had. Nevertheless, come Sunday, the feeling of dread would come back with the realization that I had to go back to that place.

With everything that was going on in my life, all I could focus on were my academics and a hopeful future career. Things were slightly different this time last year when I was still a "teenager in love". Ever since I had my heart broken, this was all I could do to keep myself engaged and maintain my sense of sanity.

The first time I met Brett, he took my breath away. Standing at six feet tall, with blue eyes and dark wavy hair, there was something about him that just wouldn't let me take my eyes off him. It

was at a get-together during my sophomore year (January of 2001), and we instantly connected. Over the months, as our relationship grew deeper, we eventually introduced ourselves to each other's families as well.

My family adored Brett. He was nothing but respectful and sweet whenever he came over. We went to parties together and he even prepared a dance for my sixteenth birthday. He opened doors for me, pulled out chairs, and even held my books for me in school. He definitely had the makings of a gentleman and that was part of the reason why I fell in love. I decided that he was the one I would give myself to for the first time. It only happened one time, but it was magical.

Sometime in the month of August later that year, Brett informed me that his mom had planned to send him to a two-week sleepaway camp. We were sad that we wouldn't be able to see each other till it was over. At the time, those two weeks felt like the longest time of my life, being away from him. After enduring unbearable two weeks, finally, it ended, and we got to see each other again. I was really happy, but that happiness was unfortunately very short-lived.

Soon after, I learned that he had been with another girl at that camp. Upon hearing this, it felt as though my heart had been ripped out of my body. The feeling of betrayal was immense and eventually, we broke up. This happened right before my sixteenth birthday, and I was devastated.

After breaking up with Brett, all I had to focus on was my school. I set my objective to get selected into UCLA for college. With the hopes of pursuing a career as a writer, I also immersed myself in creative writing and media courses. I was even looking forward to joining the cheerleading squad during my junior year. And the driving force behind all of my ambitions was my desire to make my family proud.

Overall, things were going great, and I was doing pretty well for myself. But looking back now, that time might just have been the calm before the storm because soon after, my life changed drastically.

It was May 23 of that same year – somehow, I still remember the exact date. My best friend, Rosemarie, and I were planning to have a sleepover at her house. It took some convincing, but I had finally received an allowance from my parents for it. Rosemarie came to pick me up from my house and we were much too excited at the prospect of what could be done with one night of total freedom.

We strolled through the streets together; Rosemarie's house wasn't too far away from mine. The conversation was far too typical for two sixteen-year-old girls: makeup, school, fashion, and the latest gossip from our group of friends, the Sexy Six. We earned this nickname from our favorite clerk at the grocery store who fondly referred to us as such.

At some point in between our stroll, Rosemarie suddenly looked at me and said, "Hey, come with me. I see some friends!" Naturally, I decided to join her. There was no reason not to. Anyone who's Rosemarie's friend would be my friend as well, I thought. Little did I know that this decision would trigger such a chain of events that would turn my life into a perpetual nightmare.

Rosemarie led and I followed. We soon reached her friend's house. A boy and a girl stood outside the house. Rosemarie introduced me to her friend, Angelica Patrick, and her brother, Richie. Angelica was a stunning-looking girl. She measured five feet nine and had long, beautiful curly hair. Her brother, on the other hand, was no taller than five feet. He wore a gray Nike jogging suit and had dark eyes that lacked focus.

We started chatting and soon after, Riche suggested going to Classico for coffee. Immediately, Angelica exclaimed, "Yes, Nikki is sleeping at my house and her parents will never find out."

I was left puzzled. Our plans for the night were changing too much and it made me anxious. Angelica must have noticed it on my face because she responded with a reassuring nod. I took a deep breath and agreed to join them.

We got into Richie's car, a pearl-white Honda Accord. He let me sit in the front with him, and Angelica and Rosemarie sat in the back. After a few minutes of driving, we reached the café. We made our way in and sat down. There, Richie and I started talking. Honestly, he had no remarkable features. He didn't fit into any of my preferences. But for some inexplicable reason, his eyes really captivated me. It almost felt like a scene out of a romantic movie.

As the conversation continued, I thought we shared many interests. I soon realized, however, that he was merely agreeing with everything I said. In hindsight, I realize that he never initiated any topics of conversation; he simply wanted me to do all the talking. I didn't even catch his age that night, but it didn't matter. I was completely mesmerized. We talked about puppies, how they were my favorite animal; and how I had dreams of being a writer. We talked about family life, and I found out that he was Italian. He shared with me his health challenges and told me how they resulted in him being shorter than his sister. He had scoliosis right from birth and supposedly was confined to a hospital in his early months.

On the way back home, we made plans to hang out again and since I didn't have a cell phone, he shared his number with me. The plan was to get together over the Memorial Day weekend since school would be closed that day. That night, I couldn't help but talk non-stop about him with Rosemarie.

"Wow, this guy might be good for you! You haven't mentioned Brett in three hours – that's a world record!" she remarked as we both had a good laugh.

The next weekend, I called him and as soon as he heard my voice, he exclaimed, "Nikki, I was really worried that you weren't going to call. I have to see you again." I agreed, despite sensing a demanding tone in his voice. We planned to go to the gym, and he suggested that we grab a drink after. By drink, I thought he meant a soda or something. I wasn't of legal drinking age, and I assumed he wasn't as well.

"Sure, we can go to the luncheonette near my house and get some lemon-lime Rickeys," I responded.

He chuckled and explained, “No, silly! You’ll come with me to my friend’s bar. Don’t worry, he won’t ID you.”

There was a desperate reassurance in his statement, and I was certainly quite surprised at the proposal. But this wasn’t the first time that I was being roped into something unexpected by one of my friends. Anyone who has lived through their teenage years would probably know that feeling. I agreed.

I ended the call and hurried upstairs to get ready. We were going to the gym, but I wasn’t going to take any chances. I tore apart my closet to find my best clothes. I needed to make a good impression, after all. Carefully, I picked my outfit for the day: black tights, a cute wife beater, and my pink Nike shoes. To complete the look, I put on some makeup and arranged my hair in a subtly messy bun.

I informed my mother that I was heading to the gym and rushed out of the door. Richie arrived soon after in his Honda and I realized that it looked even more impressive in the daylight. The pearl-white color shimmered like diamonds against the sky. Stepping out of the car, he greeted me with a warm kiss and graciously opened the door for me – a gesture that, I must note, happened just that once.

At the time, I had a very good physique and worked out quite regularly as well. I knew my way around the gym. Richie seemed impressed and he suggested that we become gym buddies. Having a workout partner was just what I needed as well, and so I agreed with him. Soon after we left the gym, we headed to the bar that he mentioned. He introduced me to his friends. I recognized a few of them from the neighborhood, even though I never socialized with them before because of our age difference.

The question had been lingering in my mind for a while and I eventually found the right opportunity to ask him how old he was. Interestingly enough, the song “I’m in Love with a Man Nearly Twice My Age” was playing in the background. It was almost as if the universe knew what was coming.

He hesitated for a moment before he revealed that he was twenty-five. It completely threw me off and caused me to panic. I had figured that he was maybe a few years older than me, but this was beyond what I had anticipated. I requested to go home immediately and seeing me panic, Richie agreed to drop me off.

Throughout the entire ride back home, he kept emphasizing that age was merely a number, and that love shouldn’t be restricted to it. “My family will adore you, Nikki. Trust me,” he said. In my mind, all I could think about was how all of that was just jargon. In reality, age mattered, especially for me since I wasn’t even legally an adult yet.

“My parents would never approve of it,” I tried to explain to him. But he didn’t care about that.

“Listen, here’s what we’ll do,” he proposed. “I’ll tell my parents that you’re nearly 18, and you can inform your parents that I’m 21.”

