



## CHAPTER 1

# George

### Now

Emerald Jewel All-Inclusive Resort  
October 5th 🎵 4:00 a.m.

“**W**E NEED TO call the police.” George, Emerald Jewel’s newest security guard, lifts a hot pink dress over his head, as if it’s evidence in a high-profile murder trial. The vibrant color glows against his brown skin. Although young, he’s ready to prove himself. Someday he plans to be the boss of the island’s prestigious resort.

He hands the dress to Mr. LaFleur, Emerald Jewel’s general manager, hoping he’s impressed.

Mr. LaFleur grabs the dress and runs his fingers over the silky fabric. His nose twitches from the dress’s sharp smell, a potent mix of baby powder and floral perfume. He stuffs it under his arm like it’s one of those day-old baguettes sold on the corner down the street.

George’s confidence wavers. Mr. LaFleur seems irritated to be awake at four in the morning. *But a woman is missing!*

Three women, also wearing hot pink dresses, huddle together. One swipes her hand across her face, smearing her tears with runny

mascara. “That’s our friend’s! We found it on the beach an hour ago!” She brushes away fine grains of sand clinging to her skin. “There has to be a logical explanation.” She looks at George, her face pleading for information.

He wishes he knew the location of the missing woman. He’d love to be the hero.

“Haven’t you seen those five-part Netflix documentaries about missing vacationers?” Another woman with big, messy hair stumbles forward, looking like she’s had one too many mai tais.

George can’t believe how wasted American tourists get on the weak drinks served at the resort. The other day, a bartender showed him his trick of intensifying the first sip by dipping straws in alcohol. George laughed as the bartender bragged about how the hotel guests always fall for it, saying the drinks are surprisingly strong for an all-inclusive.

“What will we tell her husband? You have to find her!” The third woman paces back and forth in front of Mr. LaFleur as if in a trance. Her torn dress strap slips down her shoulder.

George waits for Mr. LaFleur’s response. *A woman is missing!*

Wiping a thin layer of sweat from his forehead, Mr. LaFleur looks at George. “Do a thorough search of the property.” His deep voice remains steady despite the panicking women.

“Yes, sir,” George says, noting how Mr. LaFleur’s calm demeanor reminds him of the way his high school football coach never cracked under pressure. They even look alike, with pale skin, square heads, and cropped hair. George always loved the way his coach beamed at him after an amazing catch. Finding this missing woman would certainly make him Mr. LaFleur’s MVP.

“Let’s go to my office.” Mr. LaFleur turns back to the crying women. “I’d like to get as many details as...”

But before he can finish, Jordan Knight from New Kids on the Block struts into the lobby. A throng of elated women rushes in behind the nineties heartthrob. Their ecstatic screams reverberate around the three women in hot pink dresses. They trail the boy band superstar, unaware that a resort guest attending Boy Bands at the Beach has vanished.



## CHAPTER 2

# *Nicole*

Hamilton Beach, California  
October 1st 🎵 Four Days Ago

“**B**END FORWARD AND push your breasts together. Let them spill out of your bra.”

Leaning over, I press my arms against my sides. My boobs smash together, creating over-the-top cleavage. These boudoir photos are going to make me look as curvy as Kim Kardashian.

“Shake out your hair. Let it cascade around your shoulders. You’re gorgeous!” Sheila, my photographer, winks.

I rake my fingers through my auburn waves to give them more volume. Recently, I cut bangs, hoping to draw attention to my green eyes and porcelain skin. I’m trying to freshen up my stale stay-at-home mom image. Side parts and beach waves are so basic.

“Perfect.” Sheila snaps several more shots.

I lift myself off a bed covered in cheetah-print sheets and walk to the other side of the studio. Teetering across the floor on my gold stilettos, I strut across the room wearing nothing but hot pink lingerie and a matching garter belt. My kids have no clue how cool their mom was back in the day.

“Give me a sec to reapply some lipstick. Can you toss me my makeup bag?”

Sheila hands me a pouch stuffed with hundreds of beauty products I’ve bought from twenty-nothing-year-old TikTok influencers. I swipe a fuck-me-red shade over my lips, still tasting the fruity champagne I drank when I got here. Bubbly before noon may be the solution to all my problems. I swirl my hips as the nineties hip-hop music I chose for the photo shoot beats in the background.

“I love the hot pink lingerie.” Sheila leans in, capturing a few images of me stretching on my back like a doodle basking in the afternoon sun. “Most of my clients choose red or black.”

“I keep things fresh,” I say. The day I snagged this set, I was shopping for the hot pink dress I need for my upcoming girls’ trip. Excitement pumps through my body. I can’t wait for this vacay! Boy bands, the beach, my besties. I’ll crank up the fun like I always do. Peace out, *momlife!*

“Give me a sexy pout. Kick up the drama, Nicole!”

Ha! Drama. Three nights with my high school squad will definitely kick up some drama. I couldn’t believe it when Carly and Liliana told me Angie was coming on the boy band trip. We haven’t seen her in ten years, not since that hot mess of a trip we took to Miraval where Carly and Angie were at each other’s throats. There’s bound to be at least one blowup before we leave St. McAna Island.

“Can I throw around the hundred-dollar bills I brought for these next pictures?”

“Absolutely.” Sheila brings over the stack of fake money. “Such a fun idea. How’d you come up with it?”

I take the bills and tuck a couple under my bra strap. “A Lil’ Kim video.” Growing up as a solid size twelve, I idolized the way she owned her curves when rail-thin heroin chic was in style.

*Knock. Knock.* We both turn our heads toward the sound.

“Excuse me for a moment.” Sheila walks to her studio’s door and cracks it open. I hear a man’s voice. They chat for a second, then she shuts the door.

“Sorry about that. My husband watches the baby on Fridays, so I can keep doing my photo shoots. Teamwork makes the dream work.”

She grins, unaware that the dynamic in my marriage is like a group project where Garrett gets an A, even though I'm doing all the work. He never pitches in, even when it's obvious I'm struggling. Just last night, I was cleaning the kitchen, folding laundry, helping Mack with his solar system diorama—when the dog started scratching to go out. Garrett didn't blink. He laid on the couch and continued to watch ESPN. I doubt he even noticed the way I slammed the door when I took Noodles to pee.

I can't lie to myself. Our relationship was better before kids. Instantly, I hear the *do, do, doop*, of Mariah Carey's "Always Be My Baby." It automatically plays in my mind when I think of us as twenty-somethings. It was our go-to duet for karaoke. Back in the day, Garrett and I were legends.

I throw fake money into the air to keep my thoughts from spiraling. "Make it rain." Sheila circles around me. *Click click click*.

While Lil' Kim's voice pulses, I tap back into something that's eluded me since giving up my career, becoming a mom, and spending a couple months in a wheelchair. Sheila, the camera, the lighting—it all blurs and fades. In an instant, I'm connected to an earlier version of myself. A version that doesn't cater to everyone else's needs. *Slay, queen*. Isn't that what the cool kids say now? I feel fierce. This photo shoot proves the badass bitch I used to be hasn't completely disappeared.

But just as I'm losing myself in the power of it all, my phone pings. Trying to ignore it, I swing my legs off the couch, stomping my stilettos on the floor with boss energy. I toss the fake money over my head, but then my phone pings again. A second later, it's ringing. My head throbs. *What if something's wrong with the kids?* There's no school today, so they're at home with Harlow, my favorite babysitter.

"Shoot. Let me make sure everything's okay." I kick off my stilettos and rush toward my bag.

Pushing past a package of wipes and a handful of loose goldfish crackers, I find my phone. The missed call is from Harlow. The spell I was under a moment ago vanishes. I'm not a badass bitch. I'm a mom. And moms aren't sexy vixens. We're here to wipe snotty noses, change diapers, and plan bake sales. My face flushes, realizing how ridiculous

I look. I'm dressed like a seductress, throwing hundreds around, and popping champagne, *but I have to check in with the babysitter?*

"Everything good?" Sheila asks.

"I hope so." I call Harlow back, who confirms my kids are fine, but her grandmother is sick. She needs to go. *Ugh*, why is the universe hell-bent on making sure I'm a boring, suburban mom?

"What's wrong?"

"My babysitter has to leave."

Sheila's lips quirk. "Oh, no. Can your husband help?"

"Garrett?" I ask, surprised by her question. "No, he's at work. He never leaves the office early." *Except a few Fridays a month for golf with his buddies*, but I leave that infuriating detail out.

"We're only halfway through the shoot. Maybe call him and ask. I'm sure he wants these sexy photos of his wife." Sheila fiddles with her camera and waits for me to answer.

My stomach twists. She's assuming these photos are for my husband, which makes sense. I smile and play along. She doesn't need to know the truth.

