

Mr.

# ACCIDENTAL

an enemies to lovers romance

MADISON BAILEY

# MR. ACCIDENTAL

(CATCH-22 SERIES)



MADISON BAILEY

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# CHAPTER 1



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

*K*arma was a ruthless asshole.

Here it was, punishing me by not only burning the image of my office arch nemesis getting to second base with the secretary into my retinas, but also making me super late to work today.

And I am not the kind of person who is late for work. Not normally, anyway. Except this wasn't the first time. In fact, over the past few weeks, it'd been a common occurrence.

So maybe I'd become the kind of person who is late for work, and that's what the karmic secretarial ass-tastic photocopier revenge was for.

Let's start from the beginning of the day.

The problem was Cassidy. Okay, no, she wasn't the problem. I would never say she's a problem. Cassidy's my five-year-old daughter, the joy of my life, and my favorite human being in the whole wide world. I love her most-est, as I told her every day before I left for work.

"I love you most-est like French toast-est."

And she would giggle at that and give me a kiss goodbye.

But lately, that wasn't how it'd gone. She'd become obstinate, refusing to let me leave and threatening to throw a fit for my mom if I did. My mom had told me to just ignore her and let her throw that fit. "There's no use in giving in to terrorists," she said, and though I understood her point, the fact

that she thought of my daughter as a terrorist explained quite a lot about my upbringing.

Then I was three cars deep into the line to get into the law office parking structure, and whoever was at the front was taking his sweet time. If there wasn't the potential for him to be someone I worked with, I might have slammed on the horn. Except, no, I wouldn't, because I was a patient person.

Then why wasn't I feeling particularly patient right now?

Had I become the person who loses her patience?

The gate opened, and the car in the front of the line moved through. The next car had better control of their badge and quickly flashed it in front of the sensor, allowing them to follow right behind the first. I felt tempted to try and follow right behind them so I could slide in under the gate, but it wasn't me.

And though I may now have been a tardy worker who lost her temper, I drew the line at driving underneath access gates.

I pulled out my badge and put it up against the sensor like the good girl I was, then drove into the garage.

The car behind me wasn't a rule follower and managed to make it in under the gate without needing to provide their badge, saving as much as a second and a half off the time it would have taken them if they'd just waited.

I sighed.

I had to remind myself how little control we ultimately have over the world, especially when we're responsible for others. I was going to be late, and there was nothing I could have done about it. Between Cassidy, the accident on the 10, and the guy who couldn't figure out how to work the same sensor that he'd probably been using for the past several months, I was at the whims of the world with only the smallest amount of power over my destiny.

And I hated that. I hated that so much.



I managed to slink into the office without anyone seeing me and sat down at my desk, connecting my laptop to my keyboard and monitor before loading my email to see if I'd received any messages between the time I left the house and now. I had not. The inbox was cleared and empty. It was so satisfying for me to see that empty screen, a sign that I was, for the time being, caught up on my work.

As I checked my calendar to see when the next meeting was, I heard some sounds coming from the copy room down the hall. It sounded like an overexerted motor, with alternating deep and slightly higher-pitched hums. The copier had been on the fritz lately and I had nothing to do for the moment, so I went to go check it out to see if I could fix it or help whoever was having trouble with it.

When I entered I immediately realized there was nothing wrong with the copier. Perhaps my karma was now punishing me for trying to be helpful? Or maybe for even thinking about slipping under the office gate without using my parking badge? Or maybe for just opening my eyes this morning? Whatever the hell it was, karma got me good.

Because, in fact, as it turns out, the copier was running perfectly fucking fine.

I could tell even from where I was standing across the room because I could see the light coming up from the copier bed, back and forth, as paper spewed out the other end with the imprint of our office secretary's pale ass.

Her name was Erica and she'd only started a month or so ago, but all of the secretaries at the office tended to look the same. Young, blonde, and perky, who always wore low cut tops and heels. After the first couple of doppelgängers, I figured it was a coincidence, but now I realized that Brendan McDavis, the partner in charge of hiring, had a very clear and specific type.

She was sitting on the copier bed while it was running, though she may not have realized that it was running because her focus was entirely on Jackson Ekland, my co-worker and mortal enemy.

One of his hands was all the way up her shirt, and the other was on her back. Their mouths connected back and forth as they made out like teenagers in the back of a movie theater in an image I would never manage to unsee. Nor would I ever succeed in erasing those failing motor sounds coming out of the secretary's mouth. Now that I was closer to them, they sounded more like a moose struggling to get its hoof stuck out of the mud. Those baritone moose noises, combined with the suction sound coming from their mouths, made me want to throw up in my mouth a little.

“Ahem,” I said, shocked and disgusted.

Jackson stopped for a minute and turned back towards me.

“We're in the middle of something,” he said, not the slightest bit embarrassed. He returned to Erica, who was giggling.

“Jesus Christ, Jackson, are you trying to get yourself fired?” I asked. Not that I minded if he did get fired. To give him credit, he was good at his job, but the way he did his job made everybody worse at theirs. He was a distraction, always dragging co-workers and clients out to bars before the end of the day. Sometimes he'd even come back to the office drunk after lunch, but still remained remarkably functional.

And maybe that was the most frustrating thing about him. He always managed to get all of his work done. And it was always done well and on time. How, I had no idea, because he was, bar none, one of the least professional men I'd ever met. Frankly, it sickened me to work as hard as I did, only to see him slacking off and goofing around (not to mention feeling up the secretary) without any sorts of consequences.

I could very well report him for this, but for what? Sure, it was a violation of plenty of rules set forth in the human resources manual, but it's not like they'd do anything about it. The rest of the office loved Jackson, and doing anything to get him in trouble was bound to fail. And, in the process, would make everyone else hate me.

Which I was pretty sure they already did. You could feel the tension in the room shoot up whenever I walked by as

conversations abruptly ended and people switched to hushed voices. One time I thought I heard somebody whisper “Ice queen” when I walked by, but it may have just been in my head.

Either way, it was a title I wore proudly. Lawyers weren’t supposed to be your friend. They were supposed to be cold and ruthless. Like very well-educated sharks.

“I actually should get back to work,” Erica said.

“Should you?” Jackson asked. He gave her a winning smile that she seemed to find impossible to resist, but I didn’t have too much trouble.

I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, she should,” I said. “Because this is a professional law office, Jackson, not a frat house.”

Erica hopped up off the copier and straightened her skirt before sliding back into her heels. Jackson leaned over and gave her one more long, disgusting kiss and then winked at her.

He pulled the pages of her photocopied ass out of the tray and handed them to her. “Go ahead and file these under ‘Important Assets,’ please.”

Erica giggled and took the pages before walking away.

When she left the room I went over to Jackson. “Seriously, what the hell was that?”

“Oh, relax,” he said. “Just because you aren’t getting any doesn’t mean that the rest of us can’t have any fun.”

“For your information, I’m doing quite fine in the bedroom department, thank you very much.”

“Objection, your honor,” he said. “Not in evidence.” He mimed pounding a gavel. “Sustained!”

I ignored his comment. He kept going.

“Let the record show the closest thing to a man the defense has had in her bedroom runs on AA batteries.”

Jackson had a way of getting under my skin.

He lightly punched my arm. “Loosen up, I’m just messing with you.”

“What you’re joking about is none of your business.”

“Yeah, fine, whatever,” he said. “I need to go talk to Clarkson.”

Clarkson Orderly III was one of the partners. He was 80 years old and, while still sharp as a tack, slowing down as one often does when their age approaches triple digits.

“Right now?” I asked, but I saw a certain glimmer in his eye that suggested there was something he wasn’t telling me, and I grabbed his wrist.

“Oh my God. You’re getting information from Erica.”

“No, no, no,” he said and, with each progressive no, I became more sure that the answer was yes.

“You’re a gigolo,” I said.

“A gigolo? Are you 90? Who uses the term gigolo? Also, don’t be ridiculous. I am not.”

“You’re sleeping with someone to get something back in return. That is the exact definition of a gigolo,” I said. “And you have no shame, so at least own it.”

“Could you let go of my wrist, please?” he asked.

I realized my hand was still on his wrist, holding him back, and I was grabbing him harder than I thought. God I hated him, but for a brief second, the image of me being up there on the copier with him flashed into my mind. And I hated that it didn’t instantly repulse me.

“What did she tell you?” I asked and squeezed tighter, pinching a nerve in his arm like my older brother used to do to me when we were kids. If you get it in just the right spot, it’s an unbearable amount of pain. And, from the look on his face, I’d done a pretty good job. “Tell me what she told you, and I’ll let you go.”

“Fine,” he said, and I released him. He rubbed his red wrist. For a split second, I wondered if I’d pinched him too hard, then remembered who I was dealing with and wished I’d pinched even harder.

“You know Trevor Turner?” he asked.

“The entrepreneur and movie producer?”

“Yeah,” Jackson said. “He came to us because he needs us to handle an NDA.”

“What’s it about?” I asked.

“Well, it’s an NDA, so I can’t disclose...”

I reached for his wrist.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “He broke things off with his mistress and wants to settle it so that she doesn’t go running to the press.”

“And Clarkson’s in charge?”

“Apparently he and Turner go way back.”

Clarkson could not handle the NDA by himself. If he were on his own, he’d probably try to write it up on a typewriter, if not speak it into a dictaphone for Erica to handle. He had a computer, but we weren’t convinced he knew how to do much more on it than play Solitaire and Minesweeper. For an 80 year old who grew up before the time of mainframes, that was an impressive amount of tech savviness.

Fortunately, he was not on his own at the law firm, so he’d hand it off to someone else. Such a high-impact project came with a promise of a very generous bonus and, if handled well, would guarantee future work of a similar caliber.

And he’d likely give it to the first person who asked.

I didn’t say anything else to Jackson. Instead, I marched out of the room.

“Hey, wait!” he said, following after me. Before too long, the two of us were in a power walk together, heading towards Clarkson’s office.

“It’s mine,” Jackson said through gritted teeth. “I’m the one who found out about it.”

“You literally had to fuck someone else to get it,” I said.

“Oh, and torturing someone for information makes you all high and mighty?”

We both arrived at the door to his office at the same time, opened it, and jumped in together.

“Mr. Orderly,” I said. “I heard—”

Meanwhile, Jackson was talking over me. “Good morning to you, sir. I was wondering if you have any contracts you’d like me to take care of...”

I didn’t let his talking interrupt mine, so I supported my voice like a stage actor to talk over him. “I heard that you might be in need of someone for a project with extreme sensitivity. And I assure you, I can keep a secret safe, unlike some other employees around here.” I briefly gestured towards Jackson.

Clarkson sat there with a look of unexpected joy on his face. He had a half-open smile and a distant look in his eyes, staring right between us as he lay back in his chair, looking comfortable as ever.

And I realized he wasn’t responding to either of us.

“Jackson,” I said.

“As you know,” he said, “I’ve handled contracts in the past and am both efficient and—”

“Jackson,” I repeated, then walked up to the desk and waved my hand in front of Orderly’s face. No reaction.

“Is he?” Jackson asked after a pause.

“Let me check his pulse.”

I went around to check his pulse and put my fingers on his carotid artery, then saw that his screen had a big-titted woman with a bad perm getting rammed from behind by a muscular man with a strained look on his face.

And when I looked down, I saw that Orderly's pants were down around his ankles, and his hand was firmly gripped around his old man junk.

"Oh my God!" I shouted reflexively before jumping ten feet backwards.

Jackson came around the desk to see what made me react, and as he did, a huge stupid grin washed over his dumb handsome face.

"At least he died doing what he loved, I guess!"

I rolled my eyes at his comment.

I guess karma really had outdone itself today.

## CHAPTER 2





\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

My boss, the 80-year-old Clarkson Orderly III, had died watching porn! Honestly, my first reaction was disbelief that he even knew how to use the computer. My second reaction was that I should copy down the URL.

“He must have had a heart attack,” Zoe said.

“Looks to me like he died of a stroke,” I said.

When she didn’t respond, I clarified. “Because he was stroking his—”

“I get it!” she said. “I was ignoring you, you stupid ass.”

Was ten seconds after learning of the death of your boss the time to make that joke? No, of course not. But if I didn’t make it then, I might never have gotten another chance. I couldn’t just let it go unsaid. It was too good. Plus, we were in a really weird, morbid situation, and I wanted to break the ice.

“What do we do?” she asked. “Do we call 911?”

“What are they going to do? He’s dead.”

“So, who do we call, then? The medical examiner? We at least need to tell the other partners.”

I shook my head.

“Calm down,” I told her, to which she gave me a look that would have cut me in half if she was standing any closer. “There’s no rush here. He’s dead, and he’ll still be dead if we wait a few minutes. Clarkson has a family. Grandchildren.

Great grandchildren, even. We don't need them to know that great-granddad died while rubbing one off to Debra D-Cups."

"Of course you know her name," Zoe said.

"Uh, yeah, I know her name." I was offended that she thought I watched porn without knowing the names of the actresses. It somehow seemed insulting not to get to know them at least a little bit first. "Deborah is a human being, Zoe."

As the words came out, it was hard not to keep my eyes on the screen, watching in awe of Debra's impressive display of athleticism. Truly, Olympic caliber. Hell, most Olympic gymnasts couldn't do what she was doing, and she did it with a smile on her face while moaning improvised dialogue about the actor's cock.

"Look at that," I said, "she's still going."

Even Clarkson's death didn't slow her down as she kept going silently in the background, ignorant of what she'd caused.

"I wonder if we can sue the producers of this for wrongful death..." I let the idea sit for a second until Zoe literally snapped her fingers to bring me back to reality.

"Jackson," she said. "Focus. What do we do?"

I didn't have anything in mind other than this couldn't be the official story. As to what we should do to ensure that wasn't the case, I had no idea. How was I supposed to know? It wasn't every day that I was tasked with the problem of what to do with a dead boss, frozen in the midst of performing a one-handed pole dance.

"We get his pants back on, clear his browser history, and pull up a spreadsheet or something to honor his memory," I said and as I did, it all seemed so obvious. "It's what he would have wanted."

"Jackson," Zoe said. "You're talking about altering the scene of a man's death. That's a crime."

"What crime?" I asked.

"Interfering with a crime scene."

“It’s not a crime scene. He just died.”

“We don’t know that,” Zoe said. “Won’t the police want to investigate?”

“Investigate what?” I asked. “He’s 80 years old. Even if there was foul play, he’s on borrowed time.”

Zoe displayed a discomfort so strong that it bordered on nausea.

“Look, if somebody finds out that we did this and gives you a hard time, just pin it on me,” I said. “I know we’re probably *supposed* to leave everything as it is, but what’s the benefit? Who does that help? Nobody.

“Yeah, changing things around is a lie, but it’s a white lie. Not only about what he would want, but about what everyone else wants. Who wants to know about their boss playing King Arthur with his sword and his stones? I sure as hell don’t, and I bet you don’t either. Nobody does.”

One of the best parts of being a lawyer was the ability to formulate a quick and convincing argument. That’s not to say that Zoe wasn’t a good lawyer, too. In fact, she was an excellent lawyer so long as the facts were on her side. Her biggest weakness was that she fell apart when they weren’t.

“He’s dead,” I said. “All anybody wants to know is that he died peacefully. So that’ll be the story and nobody will question it. Then we can move on with our day.”

“Fine,” she said, “but can we at least wait for his... err...”

She gestured towards his waist.

“Dick?” I asked her. “Clarkson’s dick.”

She blushed. “Yeah, can we wait for it to not be hard anymore?”

“Won’t happen,” I said, shaking my head. “Corpses stay erect.”

“Why is that something you know, Jackson?”

“Oh, it’s this really good podcast called—”

She interrupted me. “Never mind, let’s get this over with if we’re going to do it.”

“Okay, I’ll work on the browser history, and you get him dressed,” I said.

“No way,” she said. “This was your idea. You have to do the gross part.”

“Rock paper scissors you for it?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Hell no. I’m not touching him.”

It was worth a shot.

“Fine,” I said and rolled Clarkson’s chair backwards.

This wasn’t what I signed up for when I entered law school. If I wanted to deal with actual dead bodies, I would have gone into medicine. As a lawyer, the worst I’d ever have to deal with was pictures of corpses. And, as a contract lawyer, I’d never even needed to deal with that. It was mostly a lot of fine print and coming up with potential loopholes, only to close them.

*It’s just a body, I reminded myself. Same thing as a living one, except without the life.*

That only got me so far, though. It’s not like this was something I’d be excited to be doing to Clarkson while he was alive, either.

Logically, I knew that there was nothing wrong with touching Clarkson’s body — he almost certainly died of old age and not some disease that could somehow infect me, and he wasn’t alive to be bothered by any of this — but it still had a huge ick factor that was difficult to get rid of. I just had to pretend that he was a mannequin. An extremely lifelike and heavy mannequin. Of my former boss.

With a quick tug of his arm, I managed to get his hand off of his dick, then leaned him forward onto me as I pulled up his pants. He was heavier than I thought he’d be, and I nearly lost my balance. With a careful step backwards, I kept myself from falling, but I bumped into Zoe in the process. She let out a

small yelp and accidentally turned the volume of the computer back on.

Moans of pleasure shot out of the speakers.

“Harder, harder!” I heard Debra say from the video. “Yes, right there!”

“Mute it!” I yelled in a whisper. “Or close the browser window.”

Zoe was in sheer panic mode. She fumbled around with the mouse like a schoolboy trying to unhook a bra for the first time. But finally, she clicked out of Debora’s screams, and a silence fell over the room.

“Now clear the history and the cache,” I told her calmly.

I pulled Clarkson’s pants up, zipped up the fly, and buttoned him, then leaned him back into the chair. After tightening the belt, I looked at him. He still had that look of pleasure on his face, and I had no interest in taking that away.

“How close do you think he was?” I asked.

“What are you asking?”

“Did his heart literally blue ball him? Because that would suck. He worked hard and deserved one last good—”

“Can you please not?” she interrupted.

“I’m just making conversation,” I said.

But I genuinely felt bad. Zoe looked physically ill. But at least Mr. Orderly looked like he died peacefully with happy thoughts on his mind. We should all be so lucky.

“Okay, have you cleared the browser history?” I asked.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Great.” I nudged her aside and started clicking through the file system.

“What are you doing?” Zoe asked.

“Checking to see if he saved anything onto his hard drive.” There was no point in performing a task if you weren’t going to perform it right. “That needs to be clean, too.”

I skimmed through the internal system files, looking for videos or images that the spirit of Clarkson wouldn't want remaining on this earth after he'd left it.

And, in the process, I found a text document: "Partner Promotion Meeting Notes.docx"

"What are you doing?" Zoe asked again as I hovered the mouse cursor over the document.

I looked back at her. "Come on, aren't you a little bit curious?"

Of course she was. But she'd never say it.

"He wouldn't want us looking through his files," she said.

"Oh, who gives a shit what he'd want? He's dead."

As I said, part of being a good lawyer was coming up with a good logical argument. But part of being a great lawyer was abandoning that logic and embracing hypocrisy when it served you.

I double clicked on the document and let it load. "Oops," I said. "I guess we'll have to see what it says now."

As much as Zoe had objected to us looking through the files, I felt her eyes on the screen along with mine after it loaded. And when it did load, my eyes went straight for text around the middle of the page:

Lawyers selected for potential promotion: Jackson Ekland and Zoe Travis.

Shit.

# CHAPTER 3



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

Jackson closed the window almost immediately. “You’re right,” he said. “We shouldn’t be going through his documents.”

He looked at me, and I could see the question looming in his head, wondering whether or not I’d managed to see the same part of the page he had. The part that announced he and I were the sole employees up for a future promotion.

I could pretend not to have noticed it, but that ruse wouldn’t last for long.

“I saw it, too, Jackson,” I said.

“Saw what?”

I gave him a look of disappointment. “We’re both up for promotion.”

“Oh,” he said. “That. Well, I think we should tend to poor Clarkson and trust the other partners to just make the best decision they can.”

Uh-huh.

“Forget about that,” I said. “Should we really leave him in the chair?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re going to go out there and say he died and they’re going to ask if we at least tried to save him.”

“We can just say he was dead when we came in.”



“Are you serious, Jackson?” I asked. “We’ve been in here for like ten full minutes.”

“Okay, so he died while we were in here... and...?”

“You immediately got him on the floor and started doing chest compressions.”

“Okay.” He took Clarkson’s body off of the chair and put it on the floor.

“I’m going to go try to get help.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond and ran out of the room.

“Someone call the paramedics!” I shouted.

\* \* \*

There was complete chaos in the office as everybody was running in circles, perhaps trying to help, but mostly just adding to the confusion. Erica called 911 but got placed on hold, not that it would have mattered if she’d gotten patched straight through. Clarkson was dead as a doornail by the time we found him. He’d passed on and had no hope of coming back.

After a few short minutes, things quieted down in the office, and the emergency line operator said resources were spread too thin to send EMTs based on what had happened, so Erica called for the coroner instead.

The coroner, incidentally, was not as busy as the EMTs and managed to arrive within the hour. She wasn’t at all who I expected. I suppose in my mind I imagined a man, and one who looked like Lurch from *The Addams Family*, tall and thin, with a perpetual solemn look on his face.

Instead, she was a short, bright red-haired woman of about 35 with a midwestern accent and a pretty smile she couldn’t help but hide.

“Call me Susie,” she said, offering her hand, which I shook cautiously.

Jackson wasn't so cautious. He went into full-on charm mode, as he tended to do in the presence of pretty much any woman. It was like a force of habit for him.

“Wonderful to meet you, Susie,” he said as he took her hand.

“You two were the ones with him when he died?” she asked, and we answered in the affirmative.

“In cases where people die outside their homes, it's standard procedure for me to do a cursory autopsy and file a report. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions that'll make my job easier?”

“Not at all, ma'am,” Jackson said. There was that flirty smile again. Honestly, his behavior was outright sickening to me. Was there any situation where he wouldn't try to get in someone's pants?

I looked around at the office. The other lawyers pretended to work, but not very hard. On a day-to-day basis, there wasn't a whole lot of excitement in here. When something did happen, work ground to a complete halt.

There were private rooms to discuss sensitive matters, and I might have suggested we take the questions in there if I hadn't been so eager to get this woman out of here so we could move on with our day.

“How about you walk me through what happened in there?”

I let Jackson take the lead. I'm a terrible liar, which some might think would make me a terrible lawyer. It doesn't. I may not be able to tell direct lies, but I can keep my mouth shut when I need to, and in the court of law, lies of omission are much more useful than untruths. Untruths can be proven as lies. Silences are harder to debunk.

The trick was figuring out exactly how much truth to tell.

Like when I ran out of Clarkson's office, I was careful with my words. Everything I said was true. Clarkson was, in fact, dead. What I left out was the fact that he'd been dead for

quite a while. If people assumed anything, it was their own fault for not asking follow-up questions.

Jackson, however, had no qualms about flat-out fabricating.

“Zoe and I were in there for an impromptu meeting,” Jackson said. “We were discussing a future client that I cannot disclose due to confidentiality agreements.” He winked at Susie, who seemed more than a bit flustered by his charm. The only thing more obnoxious than the fact that he was trying to flirt with her was the fact that it seemed to be working. “Not without a court order, anyway.”

“That shouldn’t be necessary,” she said.

“Right,” he continued. “I was presenting my idea of the best legal approach, and he seemed very impressed. Just out and out amazed at what I’d presented to him.” He paused, considering the thought. “Is it possible that I got him too excited? Oh, I’d hate to be responsible for his death.”

“I’m sure that’s not what happened,” I said, chiming in. And, as bad of a liar as I knew I was, I knew I’d need to offer something up if I wanted any chance of getting that NDA project. The other lawyers were well within earshot, and not a soul was murmuring or typing on a keyboard or doing anything but listening to us. I had a chance to make an impression here and at least suggest that Clarkson’s dying thoughts were that I was the one who deserved the promotion. Law is a dog-eat-dog world, and I wasn’t about to go hungry.

“If anyone should feel guilty, it’s me,” I said. “It wasn’t until I suggested the monthly payments from escrow that he really lit up and, unfortunately, right after that was when I saw the life leave his eyes.”

Jackson jumped back in. “That’s true. After all I’d put him through with the anonymous third-party witnesses and pseudonyms, I suppose you pushed him over the top. I feel so awful. It’s tragic, really.”

He refused to break eye contact with Susie as he told the story. I’m sure she was enraptured by his stare and his smile,

which was perfected through years of staring into a mirror.

“He clenched his chest,” Jackson told her, acting it out as he described it to her.

“It came on all the sudden like that?” Susie asked. It was the first sense of doubt I heard in her voice. While it wasn’t full-on disbelief, it was a bit of rockiness in what should have been smooth sailing.

And I knew exactly what the problem was: Jackson had no idea of what a heart attack actually looked like in person. Movies always portray them so dramatically, though in real life — at least in the one I witnessed — it was nothing like that.

“No,” I said, remembering what it had looked like when my uncle had his heart attack before we managed to rush him to the hospital and the doctors saved his life. “While Jackson was restating the points I was making, practically verbatim, Clarkson stopped him and told him that he already heard me say them, then scolded Jackson for trying to take credit. At that point, Clarkson began to sweat, and Jackson began to argue with him. I didn’t want to rudely interrupt my colleague while he was speaking, but Clarkson began to have trouble breathing.”

I turned towards Jackson. “You know, maybe you’re right. Maybe you did have something to do with his death, now that I think about it.”

“I wasn’t arguing; I was passionate because I was worried about him, and the words came out a bit stronger than I’d meant them to. I’d asked him if he was feeling alright, but he wasn’t responding. He wasn’t responding at all.”

His words weren’t sounding so certain anymore. He looked briefly at me for my approval, but I’d exhausted the last of my heart attack knowledge with the few things I said.

“As Jackson stood there, stumbling over his words, I checked Clarkson’s pulse,” I said. “And there wasn’t anything.”

“So I leaped into action,” Jackson said, “and got him on the ground to perform CPR.”

“You did mouth to mouth on him?” Susie asked.

“I did what—”

I stomped on Jackson’s foot before he said the wrong thing again. “No, no,” I said. “Just chest compressions.”

One of the other lawyers seated close to where we were standing piped in at that point. “Oh yeah,” he said. “We were wondering why Zoe was screaming for you to push harder.”

I wasn’t yelling for him to push harder. I couldn’t have been because none of this even happened, and for a fraction of a second, I wondered what he could have been talking about, but then I remembered that’s what the woman in the video was screaming when I accidentally turned the volume on.

I had to put my hand in front of my mouth and bite my tongue to keep from laughing. It didn’t stop me from blushing, though.

“That’s right,” Jackson said quickly, “but it wasn’t working.”

“I ran out of the room to get help,” I said, wiping away a tear that emerged from stifling laughter, “but it was too late.”

“There there,” Jackson said, patting my cheek. “We’ll all miss him, but he’s in a better place now.”

\* \* \*

Susie took the body away and by the time the day’s excitement settled down, we’d already reached the end of the day. As I began collecting my things to take home, my boss approached my desk space.

“Mr. McDavis,” I said, unplugging my computer and putting it away. “I need to pick my daughter up, but I’ll finish up the work on the Wilson briefs this evening and get them to you by midnight.”

McDavis nodded. “Could you get them to me any sooner? I don’t want to take any chances, in case we need to do edits.”

There weren’t any reasons he would need to do edits. It was a straightforward brief, and I knew the details better than he did. Still, I didn’t want to argue with him. Not when a promotion was on the line.

“How does 8 PM sound?” I asked.

Jackson overheard what I’d said and walked over.

“Sir,” he said, “You’re always talking about the importance of a work-life balance, and I would feel awful taking time away from Zoe here that she could be spending with her lovely daughter. I’m happy to fill in for her.”

Jackson was laying it in so thick I was surprised McDavis didn’t notice. He didn’t give a shit about work-life balance, and neither did McDavis. He was trying to steal my thunder.

It was very possible — maybe even probably — that even without getting tipped off, Jackson would have ended up getting the promotion. But now that he knew what he was up for, he wasn’t going to stop at anything. Part of me thought I should just give up and let him have it. Was it really worth working myself to death for a promotion that would probably just mean longer hours for slightly more pay?

But it was no longer just about the promotion. Now it was about winning. And, more than that, it was about Jackson losing.

“You don’t need to do that, Jackson,” I said. “There’s some nuance to the case, and I’d hate to overburden you with it.”

Mentally, I put together my evening. If I ordered a pizza instead of making dinner and put Cassidy in front of the TV for a while, I could probably have everything done before I had to give her a bath.

“How about 6 PM?” I asked. “I can email it to you by 6 PM. Does that work?”

McDavis considered it for a second and nodded. “That sounds perfect, Zoe.” He turned towards Jackson. “Thanks for

offering, though. You're a real stand-up guy.”

At that moment, I realized he won the second he'd walked over, and I had just handed an even bigger victory to him. Not only would he get credit for offering to help, but he would get that credit without actually doing anything. I should have let him take over the project just so he could fall flat on his face with it. He didn't know what was going on — if he turned something in, it would have been terrible, and I would have had to swoop in and save the day.

But it was too late to take back what I said. Instead, I packed my things up and headed out to get Cassidy, muttering the word “asshole” under my breath as I prepared to spend yet another evening bringing work home.

The life of a working mother was never easy.

# CHAPTER 4





\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

I've been known to sometimes speak without thinking things through, and this was one of those moments. The fact of the matter is that I couldn't work on whatever it was that Zoe was supposed to do. For starters, I had no idea what it was she was doing. Maybe I could have pieced it together from the notes she left — it's not like anything we're doing involves reinventing the wheel — but it would have been extra work for me and she was right in saying she could get it done quicker.

The other reason was I had a date for the night.

Natasha, Natasha, Natasha...

We had a torrid affair maybe six or seven years prior where we couldn't get enough of each other. It was wild, and it was hot. To date, it was the longest relationship I'd been in, but part of the reason was that it never worked the way other relationships did. It was just a casual thing that we were both doing.

And it worked for both of us because she was busy focusing on her career. She was, hands down, the most impressive musician I'd ever met in my life. And I say that knowing full well that my brother Kiefer is a professional guitarist. He'd agree with me. She could seemingly pick up any instrument and play it like a master.

When we were together, she was focused on putting together her first album, alongside my brother. And then, when it was done, she began to tour the world. She started in Japan

but made her way to Europe and when she made her way back to the States, we hooked up one last time. Neither of us expected to get back together, nor did we want to. Our lives were in different places, and they'd never match up again.

She had to travel the world through her career, and I had to stay in one place because of mine.

Sometimes it's good for things to have a natural ending.

We fell out of touch shortly thereafter. It was a few years later that I heard one of her songs while shopping for shoes at a department store. It was playing over the PA system. At first, it was a strange sense of déjà vu as I tried to remember why the voice sounded so familiar, but then it clicked for me: that was Natasha. I knew she was beginning to have some popular success, but with her songs becoming so popular that you couldn't avoid them, she must have really made it.

I contemplated reaching out to her but figured it had been too long, and with all the industry people she'd connected with in the meantime, she might not even remember me. People probably wouldn't even believe me if I told them I dated Natasha Tau and, besides, what would it matter? It was a pleasant memory I kept in my head for when I needed to smile about something, and I didn't need to ruin things by trying to make something happen again.

So I never did contact her.

Instead, she contacted me in a message through Instagram.

“Jackson, would you mind meeting me for something tomorrow night?”

This has happened before. Women I've dated in the past ended up on the wrong side of a breakup and saw me as an easy rebound because I'm rarely attached. Sometimes I ignore the message — some exes are better left in the past — but Natasha? Well, it'd be fun to catch up. Especially with the exciting life she'd been living. I was genuinely interested in what the life of a rock star was like.

The thing I had going with Erica at the moment was super casual and we weren't exclusive, so I picked up a bottle of

wine — a nice one, mind you, not the cheap stuff — and headed straight to Natasha's after work.

On the way, I couldn't help but wonder how someone would stop their life in their prime the way that Zoe had. Why have kids when you could be living a single person's life, staying up late and drinking and meeting new people, then sometimes waking up next to them? After spending all day at work, who would want to go home to do more work as an unpaid babysitter?

No thank you.

I expected a bigger home when I pulled up to Natasha's place. It wasn't small by any means, but I figured a big star like her, whose music played at Nordstrom's, should be living in a mansion in Beverly Hills, not some three-bedroom house in Santa Monica. I wondered if maybe I had the wrong house, but she answered the door after I rang it.

I wasted no time, moving forward and pinning her against the wall, looking deep in her eyes like she used to love and saying, "It's good to see you."

That's the thing about a booty call — just make the move. They called you over, so now it's your turn to show some initiative.

As I went in for a kiss, a high-pitched voice interrupted me.

"Hi, Daddy!" the voice said.

Was her husband home? And she had a kid?

I turned my head and saw a young boy with a familiar face sitting on the stairs. He wasn't talking to Natasha's husband, but then why call me "Daddy"? Sometimes I could be slow with things like this. All the pieces were there, but my mind wasn't fitting them together. Even as I stared at the boy's face and noted how similar the shape was to my own, I wasn't making the connection.

"Jackson," Natasha said, "I'd like you to meet someone." She gently pushed me away from her.

“This is Jude,” she said, and that’s when it all clicked into place. “He’s your son.”

The boy beamed at me with delight and ran over to me, giving my leg a hug.

\* \* \*

It was so strange to see a piece of you that’d been out there in the world for five years or so without your knowledge. It made me wonder if he was the only one.

“Do you want to show him your toys, Jude?” Natasha asked.

“Mario Kart!” he said.

She looked at me and sighed. “I try to limit his screen time, I really do.”

I heard the words, but they weren’t processing in my head. They could have been in another language for all I cared. Or animal sounds at the zoo. They meant nothing. After “He’s your son,” my brain wasn’t ready to take in any new information.

“My son?” I asked.

She turned back towards Jude. “Go easy on him, okay?”

“Come on,” Jude said, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the living room. He repeated himself when I wouldn’t budge. “Come on! Come on!”

“Go on,” Natasha said, “spend some time with him.”

My eyes had glazed over as I stared at the kid. It was like looking into a strange mirror. He didn’t look exactly like me, but I could see a little bit of myself in his face. And a little bit of Natasha melded in there, too. But at the same time, he just looked like a kid. If I’d seen him on the street, I would have walked right past him.

“Go start up the TV, Jude,” Natasha said.

“Okay, okay!”

He was super excited and ran towards the living room, hopping over the back of the couch to get to the remotes. The kid was a baby, but he could work them like a master. Three remotes to get the TV going and he hit them in the right order on the first try, then offered me a controller.

“I’ll explain everything later,” she said.

I wasn’t sure how much there was to explain, other than why she hadn’t told me earlier. We’d done things with each other that could have resulted in something like a Jude, though we’d always taken proper precautions to ensure...

And then I remembered the exception. The last time I’d seen her was when neither of us had a condom on hand at my brother’s apartment, and we hadn’t seen each other in forever, and... well, sometimes things just happen.

“Go play with him.” Natasha shoved me in the direction with all her might and I took said controller, a tiny thing compared to what I remembered using when I was a kid.

“It’s been a while,” I said, shaking my head and returning to the real world as opposed to staying stuck in the realm of my thoughts. “I was pretty good at Mario Kart back in the day. Should I go easy on him?”

“Oh, you’re going to lose,” she laughed, “but try to talk to him a little bit while you do.”

What was I supposed to talk to a five-year-old about?

“C’mon, Daddy,” he said, shaking his remote.

“Okay, okay.” And what was this about? Why didn’t she warn me about what was going on? I could have at least brought a gift or something. Or maybe she thought I wouldn’t show up if I knew about him.

The game was very different from what I remembered as a kid. What used to be a simple racing game where you picked your character and went was now confusing and elaborate with a bunch of cars and tires, and at a certain point, I just gave the controller to Jude and had him do it for me.

“This one looks like you,” he said, giggling, making me some weird skeleton turtle thing.

“Yeah, a little bit.”

It goes without saying that it looked nothing like me.

“So, do you go to school?” I asked.

“Daycare,” he said. “Sometimes. When mom works.”

He was talking quickly, staring at the screen intently as the game loaded.

“You’re not allowed to blue-shell me,” he said.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

He scooted closer to me and leaned against my arm.

“All the other kids there have dads,” he said. “Some of them only see their dads sometimes, though. I asked Mom why I didn’t have a dad, and she said I did. And I said when do I meet him? And she said... Oh, wait, we’re starting.”

The race began, and he immediately left me in the dust. I couldn’t believe how bad I was at this game. I mean, I could drive a regular car just fine, but these cartoon go-karts? Not to save my life.

Meanwhile, Jude was leading the pack. He shouted some pointers to me, but none of them sank in. He even had to take the controller from me after he finished so he could finish for me. When he did, I realized that the game had provided a distraction, but I still wasn’t completely sure what was going on. This was my kid sitting next to me. A guy with one half my DNA, fully thinking and using his hands like a champ, whooping my ass in a video game.

*I have a son*, I thought, the idea finally beginning to penetrate my skull, though I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. I was partially still in shock, but also upset that he was a full-grown kid at this point, and I’d missed all those milestones I was supposed to care about, right? Like his first birthday. His first step. His first word.

Why was Natasha only telling me about him now?

Anger was building up inside me, and I was wondering how long I'd be able to keep it under control. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. Did she really think so little of me that she didn't think to tell me that there was a little version of me running around?

"Right," he said, "so Mom said I had a dad, too. And I said I really, really, really wanted to meet him, and she said maybe. And now I got to meet you."

"Uh-huh," I said, unclear of what else to say to that.

"I'm glad you're here," he said, leaning up closer against me.

The kid didn't even know me, and he was already attached. Was I doing this right? Was this what I was supposed to do? Because I couldn't commit to anything, especially without knowing why Natasha had me over in the first place. Was she going to expect me to come back? I had a social life. I couldn't commit to that sort of thing.

After a few more races, Natasha told Jude it was time for his bath. She let me stay downstairs with the game while she got him set up in the bath. Without Jude, I was even more lost than before and threw the controller down out of frustration. Then I discovered I didn't know how to turn anything off, pressing random buttons on the remote controls that were doing a lot, accidentally cycling through the video options and switching to live TV, but not actually doing what I wanted to be doing.

I'd had a son for only a few minutes, and I'd already turned into my father.

Natasha came back down a few minutes later and I realized, though I was happy to see her, I had questions and was feeling angry.

"Okay," I said, "what's this about?"

"Oh, it's easy," she said.

She walked over to the coffee table, picked up one of the remotes, pressed a single button, and turned the whole system off.

“I’m not talking about the TV,” I told her, the steam building inside of me, looking for a place to escape.

“I know,” she said, “I am sorry.”

“Sorry?!” I asked, my voice booming. She gestured for me to keep my voice down, pointing upstairs to where Jude was taking a bath.

I switched to a raspy whisper. “For what? For not telling me I had a kid or for springing it on me with no notice?”

“You need to calm down and hear me out...” she said.

“Calm down?! Like, what the actual fuck, Natasha? We created a human life together, and you didn’t think that was something I needed to know about?”

“Look, I didn’t want it to affect your life,” she said.

“How can it not affect my life?!” I asked. “Just him existing in the world affects me.”

“I swear, I had the best intentions, and I thought about it a lot. Ultimately, I didn’t want you to be in the middle of something that was my decision. I wanted to be a mother, and I had a good feeling you didn’t want to be a father. Am I wrong?”

I shook my head. “No, you’re not wrong, but you could have told me and gone off to be a mother on your own.”

“Could I have?” she asked. “Is that what you would have told me to do? Or would you have offered to be a father?”

She had me there. I may not have wanted to be a father, but I knew what the right thing to do was when someone tells you that you made them pregnant.

“So I made the decision for you. I figured you were better off not knowing, and it wouldn’t affect you. I could handle raising him on my own, and I didn’t need child support, so it just made things easier.”

“You didn’t want it to affect me,” I said, “then why am I here right now?”



“Yeah...” she said. “I was wrong. Look, I know you probably think I’m a big rich celebrity, so I can handle things on my own, but the fact is that the problem with being famous is that you can’t trust anyone you meet after becoming famous. Everybody wants to act like your best friend, and most of them would put a knife in your back if someone offered them a buck for it. And everyone’s offering everyone a buck for even the smallest piece of gossip.”

She gestured around to the house.

“This is my secret getaway house,” she said. “Nobody knows I have it, and it’s where I can be safe and be myself. The girl I was before I was famous.”

“It’s very nice,” I said.

“Oh, it’s a mess,” she said, “but thank you.”

Her house wasn’t the least bit messy. In fact it was pristine, but I kept that to myself.

“Oh my God, sorry, there’s so much to say.” She flailed her hands in the air, almost like a muppet. “You want to know why you’re here. Why I called you up out of the blue.”

With Jude up in the bath and about to go to bed, there was still a chance we’d be hooking up. The thing she said about not knowing who she could trust? Maybe she was just horny and wanted someone who she knew wasn’t going to blab to the world about it. If that was the case, I could hold back my anger long enough for a quick hook-up. And she could answer the questions afterwards.

So I turned down the ire and turned up the charm.

“I’m happy to catch up, but yeah, I’m curious.”

“So you don’t know,” she said. “I guess that’s a point in your favor.” She made that same gesture. “Okay, okay. Sorry, I won’t leave you in suspense. I need you to take care of Jude for a few days. Just a few days.”

What?! Was she serious?

I disabled charm mode and went back into angry mode.

“Natasha, I can’t—”

“Hear me out,” she said. “Look at me. I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t serious. The fact is, I don’t have anyone else I can ask. That’s why I reached out to you.”

“Are you going on tour or something?”

“No,” she said. “Not right now. I’m just recording some stuff, but the paparazzi has some idea that there’s a thing going on between me and my producer. Like a relationship thing.”

“Is there?” I asked.

“No,” she said and I wasn’t sure whether or not I believed her. “Anyway, the press has been out of control right now getting pictures of the two of us together or not together — they don’t care — and they’ve been particularly aggressive. The other day, they showed up at my house, within the gate, and got a picture of me as I was leaving the house. They bribed the security guard. That’s why I’m here now. I can’t even trust the people I’ve hired.

“Fortunately, they managed not to get a shot of Jude, which is important to me. I want Jude to have his privacy. So far, I’ve managed to keep him out of pictures, but I don’t know how much longer I can do that. He’ll be safer with you.”

“You can’t just get a bodyguard or something?” I asked.

“Jackson,” she said. “If I could trust a bodyguard, I would get a bodyguard. I’m asking you as a personal favor. You’re the one decent guy I know who the paparazzi won’t know. You’re not family. If Jude’s with you, they won’t be able to find him.”

I shook my head. “Look, I wish I could help, but I’m not a father. Maybe if I’d known about him, I don’t know, five years ago, I could have prepared for this. But you call me out of the blue like this and expect me to completely change my life around just because you don’t want someone to take a picture of him? News flash, Natasha: Cameras are everywhere. Everybody’s getting pictures of everyone. So what if they get a shot of Jude?”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand how aggressive these guys are. You remember Princess Diana? They’ve only gotten worse since then. Because now, with social media, *everyone* is a paparazzi. They’re just doing it for likes and shares at this point, not even decent money. You don’t know what it’s like to literally not have a moment’s privacy. I’m not sleeping right now, and I’m an adult. Jude is still growing up. I need him to have a normal childhood, or at least as normal as possible.”

“Mommy, I’m done!” Jude called from upstairs.

“Let me go dry him off and get him in his PJs,” she said. “Please, Jackson. I wouldn’t be asking if I didn’t need you.”

She went upstairs to take care of Jude. I sat there and thought about it. At first, I considered just walking out of the house, but I felt guilty. He was my kid, too, and he was so excited to see me. Now that I knew him, I couldn’t flat-out abandon him like that.

In a few minutes, Natasha came down with Jude, who was in pajamas. Pajamas with musical instruments on them. I saw a keyboard, electric guitar, and drum kit — he was certainly his mother’s child.

And he yawned. It triggered something inside me I didn’t know existed. Some kind of primordial fatherly instincts locked away so tightly that I might never have seen them had Jude not released them.

“Okay,” I said to Natasha. “I’ll do it.”

# CHAPTER 5



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

I promised myself I wouldn't be the kind of mother who put work ahead of her kids. And yet, here I was, sitting at the kitchen table, leaving my daughter with her grandmother while I frantically typed up the brief for the case that was going before a judge tomorrow. I'd planned on getting it done in the office, but, you know, a dead boss can really put a damper on your plans. I suppose we could have used that as an excuse to ask for an extension, but this was such a slam dunk of a case. It was open and shut long-term wage theft. The employer should have settled, but I guess he had too much pride and wanted to roll the dice in front of a judge, which was just about the stupidest thing he could have done.

Rather than wait for him to see the error of his ways, it was best to get this thing over and done with quickly so we could get our clients what they were owed and move on to the next case.

As I was typing it up, Cassidy came up behind me and roared. I jumped ten feet in the air in shock, and she came around me with her T-Rex toy, started dancing it on the keyboard, and giggled in glee.

"Cassidy, honey," I said, "Mommy really needs to get work done right now."

I pushed the T-Rex gently aside so it wasn't typing anymore on the brief.

"But you work all day."

“I know,” I said, disappointed in myself, almost unable to look into my daughter’s eyes as I said it. I wanted to try to explain it to her, but she was only five. “Sometimes Mommy needs to bring work home with her.”

“Work should just be at work,” she told me, pouting. “It should stay there.”

“It should,” I said, “but right now, Mommy needs to impress her boss because he might promote her. Do you know what that means?”

There was a slightly blank look on her face, which suggested maybe she didn’t.

“When adults do really well at their jobs, they get a present,” I said.

“A present?”

“Yes,” I said.

“What kind of present?”

“A better job.”

“So you won’t need to work as much?” Cassidy asked.

“Not exactly,” I said. I bit my tongue to keep from saying it might mean I’d have to work more. “But I’ll get to be more like a boss. And more money, too.”

“To buy me more dinosaurs?” she asked. The T-Rex continued to dance on the table.

“If I get the promotion,” I said, “I’ll definitely buy you another dinosaur toy.”

“A stegosaurus?”

“Sure,” I said, “but I need to get to work on this.”

“Okay,” she said. “T-Rex will help you.”

She danced the toy over towards the keyboard and I brushed it away again.

“No, honey,” I said. “I really need to work on this on my own. Go play with Nana.”

My mother was over. She'd volunteered to watch Cassidy during the day, but I didn't want to burden her with that, which is why I'd signed her up for daycare. My mom had told me that she could handle Cassidy — after all, she'd raised me — but it felt like such a childish thing to do, to pass the responsibility of raising my daughter off on my mother. At least with the daycare, I was paying for it out of my own pocket. For some reason, that felt more independent to me.

“I don't want to play with her,” Cassidy said. “She doesn't even like dinosaurs. She names them the wrong things. She said a brachiosaurus was a brontosaurus. A brontosaurus isn't even a real dinosaur!”

“Cassidy, please,” I said.

“I want to play with you.”

I looked at the clock. I promised I'd have the brief emailed to the office by 6 PM, and we were already pushing up against 5:45.

“Give me just fifteen minutes,” I told her. “Two episodes of *Bluey*, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. “But I'm also hungry.”

*Shit*, I'd forgotten to order the pizza, and I was getting hungry, too. That was a problem I'd have to deal with in 15 minutes. “Two episodes of *Bluey*,” I repeated, “and then we'll get dinner, too.”

She let out a reluctant sigh. “Fine.”

And then walked away, leaving me to feel horrible about myself because even though I promised myself I wouldn't, in that instance, even for only fifteen minutes, I put work ahead of my child.

Sometimes I didn't even recognize myself anymore.

\* \* \*

I finished the brief with nearly a whole 90 seconds to spare, sent it out, and then ordered pizza, watching cartoons with

Cassidy and my mom while trying to remind my brain that I'd done what I needed to do and could relax. My brain refused to accept that and proceeded to send stress hormones through my body up until the food arrived and the three of us gobbled both large pies up in what must have been record time.

I checked my phone after dinner, almost out of force of habit, praying that there would be an email from McDavis telling me the brief looked good, but there wasn't one. Great. Until I got that email, I would still be on the hook because it was possible he'd want edits. Possible, but not likely. My brain knew that and after seeing there wasn't an email, it sent me more of those stress hormones, just to keep me on my toes.

Cassidy took her bath, but I felt like I needed one of my own at this point in the night. That sounded great, in fact. A big warm bath with a lot of bubbles, a book with a shirtless man on the cover in one hand, and a large glass of red wine in the other to keep me company.

I'd have to give myself a raincheck for it though, because as soon as Cassidy was out of the bath, she needed a story. And then one story turned into four stories. But, thankfully, that was all it took. She was out like a light, cuddling with her stuffed puppy and sucking on her thumb.

I pulled the blanket up over her shoulders, kissed her on the forehead, and then went downstairs to join my mom, who was watching some horrifying true crime documentary while texting her friends about it.

When I sat down on the couch, I plopped, falling deep into the cushions, so comfortable I thought I might never get up.

That was when I got the alert on my phone from McDavis: *Could you move the reference to the precedent set by Judge Eggers to earlier in the document? I want to make sure it's not lost in the shuffle.*

McDavis could have easily copy pasted that himself, but I wasn't about to argue with him. Using all the energy I had left in my body, I pulled myself up, grabbed my laptop, which was on 5% charge, and made the change, sending it off to him before closing it and putting it down on the coffee table.



“The end,” I said.

My mother looked at me and did that thing she sometimes did which really got on my nerves: she said nothing even though her eyes indicated that she was clearly thinking something.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“You’ve got something you want to say.”

“Why would I have something I want to say? I’m just sitting here enjoying a murder show after my daughter’s been running around like a chicken that’s lost its head from the moment she got home.”

I groaned. “It’s just a one-time thing,” I said. “They need the brief by—”

At that moment, I realized I hadn’t even told my mom anything about my day. I didn’t even get a chance to tell her something major had happened at work, and I’d been home for more than five hours with her.

“My boss died today.”

“What?!” my mom asked.

“At work,” I said.

“What happened?”

“Well, he was...” and I realized maybe I could spare her some of the specific details. “...he was just at his desk and I was talking to him, and he, you know, died.”

“He just died?”

“It happens,” I said.

“No prior conditions?”

“I mean, he was well into his 80’s.”

“Oh, that’s nothing. Your great-grandmother was in perfect health until she died at 103, and when she went, she left with a fight.”

“Mom...”

“They say it’s diet and exercise, but she smoked two packs a day and loved red meat. They say it’s genes, but no, that’s not it. It’s stress. You live a relaxing life, you’ll be living that life forever. Stress is what kills everybody. I’m sure that’s what must have gotten your boss.”

*No, Mom, I thought, I don’t think it was stress...*

“Sure, yeah,” I said. “He was pretty high-strung.”

“I don’t want you working there,” my mom told me. “It’s not good for you. Look at me.” She held my face and stared into my eyes, then poked under my left one. “It’s just what I thought. You’re starting to get a bag under this one.”

“Mom!” I said.

“Look at me,” she told me. “No wrinkles. People say to me, ‘Vivian, did you do Botox?’ And I tell them, ‘Nope. The secret is that I never worked myself to death.’”

That was half the secret. The other is that she managed to get pretty generous alimony checks from my dad after she divorced him when she caught him cheating on her with the nanny. She never told me that directly, but I was savvy enough to figure out what was going on by the time I was in my teens and realized what those yellow envelopes showing up in our mailbox the first week of every month contained.

“You look great, Mom.”

“Don’t change the subject,” she said. “I’m talking about you. You need to decide if you want to be a mom or a lawyer because you won’t be good at either if you keep trying to do both.”

“I’m fine, Mom, today was just a busy—”

“I’m not done!” she said, putting her finger up in front of my lips. “If you want to be a mom, you’ll get to see your girl grow up and bring you joy every day of your life.”

“Is that what I did for you?” I asked.

“Not right now, you’re not,” she said. “Because you’re focused on your job and hurting yourself. It’s not good for you, and it’s definitely not good for your skin.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to moisturize.”

“Why don’t you meet a nice boy?” she asked, the thing she always defaulted to as the answer to all my life’s problems.

“Tried that,” I said. “I got Cassidy out of the deal, but he didn’t stick around long enough to meet her.”

“A *nice* boy,” she said again. As if I hadn’t considered that. As if I knew Simon was going to ghost me like that after a year together. He saw the two lines show up on the test, promised he’d support me and never leave, but by the next morning he was gone, and I never heard from him again.

“They always seem nice,” I said. “That’s how they fool you.”

It wasn’t like she’d had great luck with men, either. After she divorced my dad, there were a couple of boyfriends who stuck around for a while, but nothing too serious and none who ever became especially close with me. I wasn’t *their* daughter, so why should they act like a father?

“I can tell,” she insisted. “You run him by me first, I’ll let you know if he’s a keeper or not. You don’t get to be my age without learning a thing or two about who you can trust.”

“Yeah, well, I need to keep my job if I want to keep this place,” I said. “And I don’t have the energy to date in addition to working and taking care of Cassidy.”

And I also didn’t have enough heart left in me to risk breaking it one more time.

“You’re young, Zoe,” she said. “It only gets harder. If you don’t appreciate what you’ve got right now and take advantage of it, life will pass you by. And I don’t want that for you.”

In a sense, she wasn’t wrong. And I worried about loneliness. But work was something I could control. I knew I could go in every day and do a good job. And, if I did, I’d get rewarded for it.

Men didn't work like that. They were unpredictable beasts. It was a roll of the dice and I wasn't about to gamble my life away. Not when I had Cassidy.

"Can we talk about anything else?" I asked.

"Only if you promise me something," she said. "Try to go on at least one date with a guy in the next week. Can you do that?"

I was too tired to argue.

"If you do that, I'll get off your back about it."

"Okay, Mom," I said. "I'll try."

"If you can't find someone, I will," she said. "You're a beautiful girl. You look just like I did when I was your age. Any boy would be lucky to have you."

Yeah, I didn't say, but I come with baggage. Most guys run the second they see you have a kid. And I wasn't about to date anyone unless they were going to be a good father to Cassidy.

That was something I refused to negotiate on.

# CHAPTER 6



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

“*I*’ll miss you, my little buddy,” Natasha said, kissing little Jude on the forehead. “You be good with your daddy, okay?”

“Okay.” Jude was in his pajamas, holding his well-worn teddy bear.

The two hugged. It was a poignant moment that made me wish I could disappear for just a minute so they could have it to themselves. Was I supposed to look at them? Or pretend they didn’t exist? I just stood there waiting for them to finish.

I couldn’t help but think that Jude didn’t quite understand what was going on. If he did, he would look more scared. But he didn’t look scared at all. He looked positively happy.

Maybe this seemed normal to him, for him to just stay with some stranger for a few days. Maybe it seemed normal because he called me his dad, which I technically was, but it didn’t feel like it. Sure, I fathered him, but I didn’t raise him at all. I’d known him for no more than a couple of hours at this point, and now I was supposed to parent him?

Even if it seemed perfectly normal to Jude, it wasn’t something I was entirely on board with.

Natasha wiped away a tear and looked at me. “He’s all yours,” she said. “Have fun, you two.”

“We will!” Jude said.

Natasha handed me a small duffel bag of Jude’s clothing along with a booster seat for the car.

“Call me if you need anything,” she said, and there was a brief moment when I thought she might kiss me goodbye, too. She didn’t. She stepped forward and opened the door, peeking her head out of it back and forth before gesturing us to come through. The coast was clear. No paparazzi.

Jude fell asleep on the ride home and was so groggy when I lifted him out of his seat in the back that he instantly went limp against me. He was nothing but dead weight as I juggled him and his duffel bag in my arms, making my way up the stairs to my apartment, though I figured at least that meant he would sleep through the night pretty easily.

I was wrong. Oh, how I was wrong.

As I hadn’t planned to bring a five-year-old child home from what was supposed to be a simple in-and-out booty call, my apartment was not child-proofed. There weren’t knives out or anything dangerous like that, but everything was in a place where a kid with sticky fingers could touch and damage it.

After managing to somehow unlock the door with a phantom third arm, I stepped inside. At this point, Jude’s eyes opened, and he jumped out of my arms, full of eager energy at everything I had inside.

“Oh my God,” he said, much too loudly, apparently not used to neighbors.

A question immediately occurred to me: did I need to register a child with the management of my apartment? I knew I had to register dogs and they had to be less than 40 lbs. What about a kid?

But that was a question I’d need to answer at a later time. For now, I had a kid heading straight for my action figure collection.

Yes, yes, I have an action figure collection. I used to have a bunch of action figures when I was a kid, but one summer, after coming home from camp, I found out my mom had donated them all because she said I’d outgrown them. This was my way of reconnecting with my childhood.

As an adult, though, I kept them all in their pristine packaging to preserve their value. I had a Wolverine figure from the mid-80s that was worth upwards of \$1500.

But Jude was five and didn't understand the concept of an investment. To him, they just looked like toys. Because that's what they were. Or once were.

I had to pick him up and sit him down on the couch.

"Jude," I said, "we're going to need to lay down some ground rules for while you're here."

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"We have your toys that your mom sent along with your clothes that you can play with." I hated the way I sounded, like a boring grown-up trying to ruin all of his fun. "But don't touch anything that doesn't belong to you, okay?"

"Just one?" he asked.

How did parents do this every day? I'd argued in court against tough judges, making complex arguments to win cases that were seemingly stacked against me. And yet I felt almost powerless against Jude. The look he gave me with his sad, sunken eyes was enough to destroy me.

"Sorry, man," I said. "Besides, it's bedtime. Let's go to sleep."

I should have had more confidence in my words, but they came out of my mouth sounding like a question, as if I was asking permission to this boy rather than telling him as his parent. Why was I doing this?

It was absurd, but I guess part of me was afraid he wouldn't like me. I'd just met him, and already I was telling him about what he couldn't do. I wanted to be the fun dad, but I was being a total tool, dangling toys in front of him but telling him it was time for bed.

"Okay," he said. His head went down as he said it.

"You're going to sleep on the couch for tonight, but I'll grab some blankets."



“Okay,” he said again, with deep disappointment. Was I being unreasonable? It was nearly 10:30 at night. What time were kids supposed to go to bed? This was after that, right?

He spread out on the couch and put his head on the pillow, turning over to his side.

When I put the blanket over him, he said, “I’m glad I got to finally meet you.”

“Me too, sport.” It was so strange to look at him, like peering into a magical mirror that made you young again. It was a face that I thought only existed in old photographs, but here it was in front of me, so real that I could literally touch it.

I lightly ruffled his hair.

“Have a good night.”

\* \* \*

As a contract lawyer, I hold one rule sacred to my heart: Get every agreement in writing.

I broke my rule. In my defense, the agreement I’d made was with a child too young to read.

Before he went to bed, I got Jude to agree not to play with my action figure collection, but I didn’t get it in writing. Oh, who am I kidding, that wouldn’t have made a difference. Either way, I woke up to the simulated sounds of explosions and punches. But I thought nothing of it until I walked out into the living room and saw cardboard and plastic torn to pieces and spread across the wood floor.

If I’d taken even a split second to think about what had happened, perhaps I wouldn’t have screamed “Holy fuck!” as loud as I did. But I didn’t take that second, so I did scream “Holy fuck” at a volume that probably would have concerned the neighbors if they cared about such things.

I froze in place, realizing what I’d done, both terrified at the idea of Jude telling his mother and furious with him for what he’d done. There was no correct response. He was just a

kid. A little one. I couldn't scream at him. But also I already had, and, when I did, I dropped the f-bomb.

He stared back at me, unsure of how to respond. Was that fear in his eyes? Or...

"Oh," he said.

"Jude," I said. "I thought we talked about this last night."

It was that expression. Pensive. Thoughtful. I'd seen it before in witnesses, though it was more pronounced in Jude since people get better at it with age.

He was trying to come up with a lie.

"We did, Jude," I said, and he looked down at his feet.

"I know. I'm sorry. I just wanted to play with them."

Hard to argue with that. Inside, I was still fuming, but it was only at that moment that I realized I was going to have to go to work, and I didn't have anywhere to leave him.

I called my brother real quick to see if he or his wife could take him for the day.

"This better be an emergency," he said when he picked up the phone after three rings.

I didn't have time to tell him the whole story, so I just asked point blank. "Can you watch a kid for a day?"

"What?"

I looked over at Jude who, seeing I was distracted, continued playing with the collector's item toys. Part of me thought I should go take them from him, but the damage was done as soon as they came out of the packaging, and I figured I might as well let him be distracted.

"I can explain later," I told Kiefer, "but I'm in possession of a five-year-old child and I don't know what to do with him."

"A five-year-old child?! I'm not even going to ask. Is it weird that this isn't the craziest thing you've ever said to me?"

he said, “I’d like to help, bro, but we’re out of town right now, remember?”

*Oh, right!* I thought. Kiefer, Melody, and Olivia, their young daughter, were out in Texas visiting family.

I hung up the phone without saying goodbye. There wasn’t time for that.

I contemplated calling Zoe. She was the only other person I knew who lived close by and had experience with children, and she could tell me where to take Jude.

But after all that had been happening between us, I couldn’t show any weakness. Not right now when we were both up for that promotion.

I looked over at Jude and the mess he made in the time since he’d woken up. Obviously he was too young to leave home alone, especially in my apartment where nothing was locked up or safe from young boys’ hands.

Maybe I could call in sick and watch him, but again, with this promotion coming up, I couldn’t risk slacking off from work. I needed to make an appearance and give everybody the impression that I was there.

That left only one option.

“What are we doing today, Daddy?” Jude asked.

I sighed.

“You’re coming to work with me,” I said.

He smiled.

“Yay!”

Today was going to be a very long day.

# CHAPTER 7



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

I didn't receive a follow-up email from McDavis regarding the work I'd done on the brief yesterday evening. That probably meant he didn't need anything more from me, but my neurotic instinct worried that maybe he didn't get the edits or who knows what. I needed reassurance.

He walked into the office alongside Orville Boyd, the third partner for the law firm. McDavis held his briefcase in one hand and a coffee mug in the other and was deeply involved in whatever it was Boyd was saying.

They walked on the other side of the office from me. I tried getting up to intercept them, but they headed straight into McDavis's office and closed the door. They were talking about partner stuff, which was always considered more important than whatever a non-partner might want to talk about, so I let it be. As far as I knew, they were probably just having an early morning chat together, but it was none of my business, and part of succeeding in this world is knowing where you rank in the hierarchy.

Respecting authority was among the most important characteristics you could adopt in law, whether it be a partner at the firm or a judge on the bench. It was essential to refer to them with their proper titles and defer to their expertise, even if you disagreed. And lawyers always disagreed with everybody, so having this level of tact and social know-how was among my best assets.

So my question would have to wait. I returned to my desk, reviewing my email and spam folders again to ensure I didn't

miss it. No, I didn't. He just didn't respond.

*It's probably fine, I thought. No response is a good response. If he had a problem, he'd let you know.*

Eventually, McDavis and Boyd emerged from the office and went their separate ways. McDavis headed down in my direction and I stopped him.

"Sir?" I asked.

"Oh, Zoe," he said, turning towards me, "have you happened to see Jackson anywhere?"

"I haven't seen him," I said, "but I was wondering—"

"I need him for something," he said. "What time does he usually come in?"

"You know, there's no telling," I said. Not exactly a lie, but not exactly the truth. The fact is I didn't spend a whole lot of time focused on whether or not Jackson was in the office. If I had to guess, he'd already come in, but was in the copy room with Erica again, like the horny swine he was. Just the thought coming back into my head made me retch. Even 24 hours later, whenever I closed my eyes, I couldn't help but see it.

God, I hated him.

"I see," McDavis said, "If you see him, can you send him to me?"

But whatever the reason, Jackson hadn't yet arrived, and this was an opportunity for me to get an edge on him.

"Well, what is it you need?" I asked, taking a note from Jackson's playbook. You snooze, you lose. If he wasn't around to help either because he was sleeping in or out galavanting with the secretary, it made no difference to me. I was in the office, so I might as well volunteer. His dick was about to screw him out of a promotion.

"It's a new client," he said. "We need someone who can put together an NDA quickly."

His hesitancy with the details told me that this was it. It was the non-disclosure agreement for Trevor Turner that

Jackson was talking about.

“How quickly?” I asked. “I could get it to you by the end of the day. You know I’m good at getting these things done quickly. Like with the brief. Did that work out okay?”

“The brief?” he asked. “Oh yes, that turned out fine. But this project requires a certain amount of complexity.”

“More complex than the Janus Chemicals agreement?”

He considered it. “No, I suppose not. Maybe you can—”

At that moment, we were interrupted by a ding. We both instinctively turned towards the elevators. As they slid open, they revealed Jackson’s face — usually composed with a light smile or a steely, determined look, but today looked beaten down and tired.

Beside him was something so strange that, at first, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. It was a small child who was a dead ringer for Jackson. Maybe it was a nephew or something, but they looked too much alike. Maybe Jackson had a twin he’d never mentioned before.

“Ah, Jackson!” McDavis walked right over to him and the boy, right out of earshot. The boy made eye contact with me, with a kind of blank look on his face. Small children did this all the time with me, especially young boys. I gave him a smile and a wave, which caused him to avert his eyes and hide behind Jackson. I guess he was shy.

He peeked his eyes back around Jackson, saw I was still looking, and returned to hiding.

Very shy.

I looked back up at Jackson and McDavis, who were talking in hushed tones. Given the personalities of both of them, this was unusual. Frankly, I was surprised that McDavis didn’t take him to the private room for this kind of discussion, but since it was just a quick discussion, it likely wasn’t worth it.

They finished the conversation and McDavis walked away without acknowledging the boy. That really irked me. I hate

people who treat children as less than human. It didn't surprise me, though. McDavis was a fine boss and he worked hard to get there, but good lawyers often seemed to have serious personality flaws to the point that, for a while, I wondered if it was a job requirement.

It wasn't, but some people still seemed to think it was.

Jackson came by with the boy and sat down at his desk space near me.

"Do we have a new paralegal?" I asked Jackson.

He responded with a scowl. Rather than address him, I turned to the boy. "Hi, My name's Zoe. What's your name?"

The boy hid behind his thick, shaggy hair, then looked up at Jackson.

"Go ahead," he said. "Tell her your name."

"Jude," he said softly. "Jude Curtis Tau."

"Nice to meet you, Jude," I said. "What are you doing in the office today?"

That loosened him up a little bit. "Oh, well, my mommy said I'm going to spend time with my daddy, and daddy needed to go to work. So I'm going with him."

"Daddy?" I asked. "He's your daddy?"

Jude nodded his head.

I looked up to Jackson. "I didn't know you had a son."

"Yeah, neither did I."

No explanation. Pressing on felt taboo. If he wanted to tell me, he would have told me, so clearly this was something he didn't want to talk about.

But this was Jackson. A guy who treated every woman he encountered as a potential conquest and every flat surface in the office as a potential place to conquer them. If he didn't respect taboos, I saw no reason I should adhere to them when I was around him.

"What does that mean?"



He gave me a look as if to say he didn't want to talk about it. And I ignored it.

“What does that mean, Jackson?” I raised my voice in an intentionally obnoxious way, letting him know that I wasn't going to stop asking until I got a satisfying answer.

He let out a defeated breath and mumbled, “You know how it goes. Somebody gets pregnant and doesn't bother to tell you until years later.”

“No, Jackson, as a matter of fact, I don't know how it goes,” I said, trying to hide the glee in my voice. “Most of us manage to keep it in our pants so we don't have secret children. Did your past finally catch up to you?”

“You can't have a secret child,” he said. “You're a woman. If you have a kid, you'll know about it.”

“If I had a kid,” I said, “I'd know who the father is because I don't—”

I stopped myself from saying “fuck and run” around this child.

“...because I'm not meeting up with the stork for some random deliveries.”

Jackson was not amused.

“I just met my daddy last night,” Jude told me matter of factly, as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

“Last night?”

He nodded and I looked at Jackson. Kids didn't always have the most accurate impression of time, but Jackson nodded to me.

*The plot thickens*, I thought.

“Jude,” Jackson said, “why don't you play with your iPad? I have something I want to do.”

Jackson pulled an iPad out of a duffel bag he'd brought and handed it to Jude. Jude started it up as Jackson opened up his laptop.

Jude remained focused on the screen for a few moments, then pushed it in front of Jackson's face.

"Want to play air hockey with me?" he asked.

It was really a double shot of joy: seeing a child so excited to play with his daddy and seeing Jackson so annoyed.

"Jude, could you not?" he asked. "Let me work."

It looked so familiar from the other night, in its own way. I'd had a bit more practice handling my child and knew what to say to let her give me some space — specifically, promise to play with her later — but Jackson didn't know his son well enough. And his son didn't know him well enough either.

I wanted to be excited by Jackson's discomfort and this weird turn his life took, but I had too much sympathy for the kid, who just wanted to play with his dad and wore a clear sense of rejection on his face when that dad said he was too busy for him.

I felt bad, just as I had the other night with Cassidy.

Jude wasn't going to let the rejection last for long.

"Daddy," he said more loudly. "Play with me."

"Jude," he said. "I can't right now!"

His voice got louder as a result.

This was only going to escalate if I didn't put a stop to this.

"Jude," I said. "How about your daddy takes you to the park down the street, right by the bagel place?" I was asking Jude, but the information was for Jackson. "While he's playing with you there, I can take care of his project for him. How does that sound?"

With that, Jude nodded his head frantically. He very much liked that idea.

Jackson wasn't so keen on it, but I didn't expect him to be.

"Wouldn't you rather go with Zoe?" he asked, the question leading. "She's super fun."

Nope. Jude shook his head back and forth. “She’s not my dad. I want to go with *you*.”

I wondered about the kid’s home life. If he got flung on Jackson like this, then he must not have had a father figure at home, and of course he would rather go do something with his dad.

“Unfortunately, Zoe doesn’t have the files she needs to do the write-up for me,” Jackson said. “I’ve got to stay here.”

“No!” Jude said, his voice raising just a bit, threatening to make a scene. “I want to go to the park! And I want to go with you!”

“Just forward me the files,” I said. “I’m happy to help.”

With a child about to have a full-on tantrum, Jackson didn’t have much of a choice. Hell hath no fury like a five-year-old who isn’t getting what he wants. Maybe my mom wasn’t wrong when she referred to them as little terrorists.

And I could see Jackson contemplating all this in mind, terrified of being embarrassed at work in front of everyone that he knew. He turned towards the front of the office, where Erica was stationed. She’d been watching him from the moment he walked in, just as curious and confused as I was, probably with the same questions I did, but too far away to get the answers as Jude and Jackson shared them.

Erica, noticing Jackson about to look at her, immediately averted her eyes and returned them to the computer screen in front of her. Probably not quickly enough to avoid Jackson seeing that she’d been looking at him and his son.

“Yeah, maybe it is a good idea for me to get out of here,” he said. “Where’s the park again?”

“Right across from the bagel place,” I told him. “You can’t miss it. Send me the files?”

“No,” he said. “I’ll just take my laptop with me, thanks.”

He picked up his briefcase.

“You’ve got a full charge?” I asked.

“I’ll be fine,” he insisted.

There was absolutely no way he was going to get this done in time. Jude couldn’t care less about the park. What he wanted was to play with Jackson. And it was adorable. It was also an opportunity for me to swoop in, take care of the NDA, and serve Jackson a great big helping of crow for lunch.

# CHAPTER 8



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

I must have looked ridiculous showing up at the park in my full business suit and briefcase, but I didn't exactly keep a change of clothes in the office, though maybe I should have. At the very least, I could have left my jacket behind. The sun was out in full force and it was perfect beach weather, which is to say, too hot to be wearing much more than a swimsuit.

Whatever, Jude seemed to be happy, and maybe playing around outside would tire him out. Meanwhile, I'd be able to knock out that NDA without a problem.

"Go nuts, kid," I said to Jude when we arrived.

It was a nice park, looking like it had been renovated fairly recently, with plenty of equipment for him to play around on. Slides, swings, ladders, and monkey bars — everything a kid needed to be happy.

"Come on," he said, taking my hand.

"Go play," I told him. "I need to take care of this thing."

He just stared at me in response.

"Go on," I said, gesturing towards the equipment.

He walked over to the slide and climbed his way up. I sat down on the bench and pulled out my laptop. With the direct sunlight, I had to turn the brightness all the way up. And once I did so, I realized I only had 10% battery remaining. Then it immediately dropped to 9%.

*Shit, I thought, better at least try to do as much as I can before the machine dies.*

I opened up the word processor and loaded the standard NDA template. By the time I actually got in there and was ready to write, it had fallen to 7%.

But even a paragraph or two was better than nothing.

Before I finished the first sentence, an alert came up on the screen informing me the computer was going into sleep mode to conserve battery life and encouraging me to plug it into a power source if I wanted to keep working.

The screen went black.

That left me with no other choices. I had to hope that we'd finish up at the park and head back to the office where, with any luck, he'd need a long nap, which should give me some space to write.

I closed the computer screen and looked up to see Jude sitting on a swing, kicking his legs with all his might but unable to gain any height. After a few worthy attempts, he gave up and looked down at the wood chips below him as solemnly as a five-year-old could.

It was perhaps the saddest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

I put my laptop away and walked over to him.

"Need a push?" I asked. His glum mood instantly lifted with the question.

"Yeah!"

He practically jumped up in the swing. I began pushing him, but he begged me to let him go higher and higher, which I wasn't comfortable with. The kid had only been with me less than 24 hours. I wanted to at least wait until the 48 hour mark before risking doing something that could land him in the emergency room.

Gradually, though, as I relaxed, I did push him a little harder and listened to his squeals of joy.

Maybe it was for the best that my laptop died. Maybe I needed the break from it all. After he got bored of the swings (which took longer than I might have expected), he wanted to do the monkey bars, but he needed help going from one to the next. I supported his weight and helped move him as he leaned forward to swing to the next one. Back and forth and back and forth he went. Again, it took him a surprisingly long amount of time to get bored.

“This is fun!” he told me as he repeated the same back and forth movement ad nauseam. As he got his rhythm, I released some of the force I was using to hold him up so he’d be doing it more and more by himself.

“Glad you’re having a good time,” I told him.

“Mom doesn’t usually get to take me to the park,” he said.

“Oh yeah?”

“She doesn’t like going outside with me.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “She says it’s safer inside. She didn’t use to say that.”

I imagined this might have something to do with the paparazzi.

“Oh, so this is more recent?” I asked. “Last few weeks.”

“I don’t know. I guess.”

“How’s your mom doing?” I asked. “Does she seem happy?”

“Sometimes,” he said.

“She still play guitar?”

“Yeah. And she showed me how to do Row Your Boat on the piano. I want to play like she does, but she says it takes time.”

It takes time and a ridiculous amount of talent to play at the level Natasha was at. Nobody could play like she could. Maybe one day, Jude would — after all, my brother’s a



musical genius, so I've got that in my blood, too — but he was still a baby.

The time had come for me to completely let go of Jude and see if he could do the monkey bars on his own.

“I'm going to let go of you now,” I said, “but you've got this.”

“Daddy, no!” he said.

“Trust me,” I said. “One. Two. Three.”

And I let go. He remained there for a second, frozen in place.

“It's just like you were doing before. Reach for the next one and keep going.”

Jude struggled to get to the next bar, inching his fingers closer until they touched and forming a grip over it so he was dangling between the two of them.

“Now go like a monkey,” I said. “Go! Go!”

He released one of the hands and swung forward. At first he missed the bar and swung back, but he remained attached and caught the other bar on the way forward.

“I'm doing it!” he said. “I'm doing it!”

“I see you!” I said, and it honestly warmed my heart to look at him and see him as happy as he was.

He was building up momentum as he went back and forth, so I stepped aside and pulled out my phone to get a quick video of him.

Once I did and had my phone out, I figured I should search and see exactly what was going on with Natasha. Why were the paparazzi suddenly after her? Had she released a new single or something?

I plugged her name into the search engine, feeling horrible about doing so, and nodded when I saw the results.

Of course.

## **Pop Queen Natasha Tau Seen at Angels Stadium with Famed Electronica Producer VIR: Rumors of Torrid Affair Intensify**

She certainly made it sound like she wasn't seeing anyone, so maybe this was just tabloid fluff. Because if it wasn't, why wouldn't she explain that to me? Especially considering how easily I could find out.

It didn't matter. Because more than those curiosities, it all raised a practical question: How long exactly was I going to have to keep an eye on Jude?

With Jude still distracted on the bars, I called her up.

"What is it?" she asked, concerned. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I'm with him at the park. He's doing great."

"Okay, good," she said, and I heard the relief in her voice through the phone.

"Were you really worried something had happened?"

She paused. "No, of course not. I trust you."

I didn't respond. Old lawyer trick. Let the witness talk, and they'll keep talking. People hate silence.

"Okay," she continued. "I'm a little concerned. He's my baby. I worry about him. And I haven't seen you in six years. And..."

I'd let her embarrass herself more than enough.

"I understand," I said. "He's a kid."

"Yeah."

"All right," I said, "now that that's out of the way, I want to ask you a question. And I want you to answer me honestly, because I think I deserve it."

I waited for an acknowledgment, but it was her turn to be silent.

"Do you really think I'm only going to need to watch him for a couple of days?"

At that moment, I wished that I could see her face. I wished I could read her expression to get any sort of idea of what she was thinking. Because the silence continued or, more accurately, the wordlessness continued. I could tell she was on the other end of the line by her breathing. Instinct was pushing me to say something, but I'd already asked the question, which meant it was her turn to answer it for me.

"You need to understand," she said eventually, "I didn't intend to take advantage of you."

I nodded my head because I knew exactly where we were ending up with this. It would take a while to get there, and she was going to make me take the scenic route, but ultimately, we were going to end up at a definitive no. I'd be watching Jude for more than a few days.

Still, I was curious and let her say her piece.

"Like I said, I was out of options. I called you up and was planning on telling you everything, but something happened in the moment. I don't know. I just got scared you might say no. I know what I'm doing to you is unfair and I'm sorry, I really am. But you don't know what it's like. How aggressive these creeps can be. I'm paranoid. I can't go anywhere because I'm afraid they might see me. I'm not sleeping. It's horrible."

I was pissed off. She sprung a secret child on me after six years of silence, only to push him off on me under the understanding that it would just be a short-term thing.

"How long is it really going to be?" I asked.

"I don't know, Jackson! Maybe a week. Maybe a month. Maybe even several months. I wish I knew. I just know that however long it is, I don't want it to affect Jude."

"It is affecting Jude," I said. "This is time away from his mother."

"I know."

"And this couldn't come at a worse time for me," I told her. "I work for a living, you know. And I'm supposed to be in the office taking care of an important contract at a time when I'm up for a promotion. Instead I'm here at the park."

I felt bad doing this to her, but she threw all this on me with no consideration.

“Just find a daycare to put him in,” she said. “I can find one for you. I know people.”

“That’s not going to fix today, Tasha,” I said. “And tomorrow a new surprise is going to pop up.”

“And I can help you through that one, too,” she said. “I just can’t have him anywhere near me right now. It’s not safe.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” I said. “I’m going to go walk with him back to my car and drive him back to you. And you’ll figure something else out. If that means calling things off with this other guy, so be it. But you can’t push a responsibility on me just because of something that happened an entire lifetime ago that you never bothered to tell me about.”

“Jackson!” she said. It was a sound of desperation, with tears in it. In the entire time we were together, I never once heard her cry. “Please, I’m begging you.”

“Tasha,” I shot back. And right as I was about to say something, I felt something on my leg. A strong pressure. I looked down, and there was Jude. He looked up at me.

“I love you, Daddy,” he said.

I looked down into those deep, familiar brown eyes that I’d been enamored with all those years ago, until they flew over the ocean to pursue a life that couldn’t involve me. Those eyes were attached to my face. It was like I was saying no to her, but also to myself.

She should have told me about him sooner, but no matter what I said or tried to convince myself of, he was my son.

“Okay, fine,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

I barely knew him. But I didn’t need to. In my heart, I knew I loved him, too.

# CHAPTER 9



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

With idiot Jackson out of the picture, I visited McDavis's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he said.

When I showed my face, he said, "What is it, Zoe? I'm busy."

"I can see that, sir." He couldn't have looked less busy. If I had to guess, I might have said that he had solitaire open on his computer screen, but after the previous day's incident, I realized I was better off not knowing what it was he was doing.

"I'm just concerned about Jackson," I said. "What with him having to watch his son, I'm wondering if it might be a good idea to have someone else handling whatever task you gave him, just in case."

He looked at me, perplexed, silently. I'd learned from past experience not to interrupt him when he was like this. Most men opened their mouths before fully realizing their thoughts. McDavis was someone who let them marinate for a while in an effort to minimize the risk of saying something stupid or, worse, incriminating.

But it was infuriating, and I could only keep the uncomfortable silence going for so long before I had to say something.

"I'm not trying to suggest Jackson is bad at his job, just that he has his hands full. A child can be a lot for someone not

used to it.”

McDavis nodded at that.

“That’s certainly true.”

“I’m up to date on my work,” I said. “I’m happy to take on whatever you told him to do as a backup, in case he’s unable to complete it in time.”

He nodded some more.

“That’s good thinking,” he said. “Always have a backup plan. That’s my motto. I would never have gotten as far as I have without having a plan B.”

He moved around his mouse and typed a few things on the keyboard then looked back up to me.

“I’ve sent you the shared folder,” he said. “It should have everything you need to put the NDA together. Nothing too fancy, but let’s keep all of this as hush-hush as possible. The last thing we need is for anything here to get out.”

“That’s an affirmative, sir,” I said. “What’s the situation?”

“Trevor Turner has called things off with his mistress,” McDavis told me. “She’s a 19-year-old aspiring actress, and he doesn’t want that leaked to the tabloids. I need you to put together a deal where we offer her \$10,000 in exchange for her silence and make it look like she’s the one getting the better deal.”

“Is this something that he does often?”

“Part of the assignment,” McDavis said, “is that you ask as few questions as possible. It’s a simple deal: can you do it or not?”

I didn’t like it. It rubbed me the wrong way to take advantage of a 19-year-old like this, but a lot of things rubbed me the wrong way. And if I didn’t do this, Jackson would, and I’d have one less argument supporting me for promotion.

“I can do it,” I said. “No problem.”

“Thanks, Zoe,” he said, returning to his work. “Close the door on the way out.”

\* \* \*

This was a standard NDA, which I managed to put together over the course of an hour or so, using the information from the documents. It helped that everything had already been clearly outlined by Erica while she was taking notes during the meeting — I more or less just had to translate all the client asked for into legalese.

My only concern was that Jackson would be able to do the same at the park. It's not that I couldn't get credit for offering the backup plan, it's that I could have gotten serious bonus points for saving his ass.

When he came back in with Jude a few hours later, I knew almost immediately I had nothing to worry about. He looked like someone who'd gone a week and a half without sleep.

Jude was, naturally, just as energetic as he had been before they'd left. The whole "tiring them out" never worked when you needed it to.

Jackson plugged in his laptop and began frantically typing.

"Daddy, I'm hungry," Jude said.

"We'll go eat in a bit," Jackson said. "Just give me a few minutes."

"But Daddy..."

"Jude!" His voice was stern and short.

"Jackson," I said.

"You too?" he asked, looking at me. "Please, not now."

"Jackson," I repeated. "I took care of it for you."

He didn't bother to look up and just continued to type. "You know that's not what this is about," he said.

And it wasn't. We didn't actually care about having this thing done, what we cared about was the credit.



But I saw Jackson neglecting Jude even though he didn't want to. So many boys didn't have fathers who cared about them. For one of those dads, it would have been so easy to just completely neglect their son in this situation, but I saw Jackson pulled between his duties as a parent — which, again, was strange to me because he'd never mentioned having kids before — and his duties as an employer.

In other words, I saw a microcosm of my life in him, and it was impossible not to feel the slightest amount of sympathy for him, if not full-on empathy.

Jude was pulling at his father's shirt, anxious. "I'm hungry, and I need to potty."

And, at that moment, I too was pulled between my professional obligations and my heart, which was going out to Jude right then. And, as much as I tried to fight it, it was going out to Jackson, too.

"Zoe?" he asked, finally looking up. "Can you show him where the bathrooms are?"

I bit my lower lip, trying to force myself not to give in to that sense of humanity that'd wrecked the careers of greater women than myself.

I couldn't do it, though. I had a tactical advantage over my enemy and, rather than embrace it, I abandoned it.

"Seriously, Jackson," I said. "I've got it. I'll say we did it together. Joint effort."

He eyed me skeptically, trying to find a break in the armor. Was this me trying to trick him? But he knew me well enough to know I was a born truth-teller, and I wasn't about to stab him in the back like that.

If I was going to stab someone, it'd be the honorable way: right in the face.

"Joint effort?"

"50/50," I said.

\* \* \*

True to my word, I told McDavis that we shared responsibility for the project. What I left out — again, lies by omission were my specialty — was that there'd be a catch.

He thanked me after we turned in the agreement and said the words that are typically just a formality: "I owe you one."

"Well," I said, "now that you mention it, I could use a favor."

Jude was spinning in Jackson's desk chair while playing on his iPad. He was entranced with whatever was going on with the game he was playing and not paying much attention to anything else. Jackson seemed relieved to have a moment's peace.

"My mom won't get off my back," I told him, "about finding a husband."

"Uh-huh," Jackson said, face blank, waiting for the part where it affected him.

"I promised her I'd go on a date. Could you take me on one?"

He smiled at that.

"Zoe Travis," he said. "Are you asking me out?"

"No," I said. "I am definitively not doing that. I am asking you to show up at my house, pick me up, and return me later."

"And what happens during the in-between time?" he asked. "After I pick you up and before I drop you back off?"

"I don't give a flying..." I stopped myself, remembering Jude was right there. "...squirrel, so long as it isn't a date."

He wasn't paying attention to what we were saying, but I knew enough about kids to know that nothing would grab their attention faster than hearing something they weren't supposed to hear.

"What am I supposed to do with the boy?" Jackson asked.

“Leave him with my mom. He can play with Cassidy.”

“Okay,” Jackson said, “you’ve got a deal. Pick you up at seven?”

“Home by ten,” I said.

\* \* \*

True to his word, Jackson came by right on time — actually a few moments earlier — and came inside to drop off Jude and meet my mother.

“Well, well, well,” my mom said. “Who do we have here?”

“Jackson Ekland, ma’am,” he said and extended a hand, that charming smile running on full blast to win over my mother.

“You can call me Vivian,” she said, entranced by him.

“It’s a genuine pleasure to meet you.”

“And this strapping young lad?”

She leaned down to Jude, who was acting shy, hiding behind his father.

“This is Jude,” Jackson told her.

Meanwhile, Cassidy was peeking in from around a corner.

“You can come in, Cassidy,” I told her. “This is Jackson and Jude. I’m going to go spend some time with Jackson, and you can play with Jude while I’m gone.”

Cassidy eyed Jackson warily. “A date?” she asked.

“No, no, no,” I said. “Just two people from work spending time together.”

“Oh,” she said, but there was disbelief in her voice.

“Cassidy,” my mother said. “Why don’t you show Jackson and Jude your room and your toys?”

She did as she was asked, and they left my mom and me alone.

“I’m proud of you,” she said. “You picked a good one.”

“I swear, Mom, it’s nothing. Super casual.”

It was amazing how sometimes the best way of lying was just telling the truth that nobody wanted to believe.

“Look how I’m dressed.”

I was wearing a t-shirt and jeans with tennis shoes.

“Well, I’m proud of you all the same.”

After a few minutes, Jackson returned to the living room, without the kids.

“As soon as she brought out the dinosaur toys, Jude was instantly won over,” he said. “Let’s get out of here while they’re distracted.”

“Have a good time, you two,” my mom said.

“You’re going to want a sweatshirt,” Jackson told me.

Wait, did he think we were actually going out on a date? Did he not understand the concept of a fake date?

“Sure thing.” I grabbed the first sweatshirt I could find in the hall closet and put it on. “We’ll be back in a bit,” I assured my mother, but she then told us not to rush back on her account.

When we got into the car, I told Jackson he could drop me off at The Grove shopping center and come back to get me in an hour or two. I was in the market for a new outfit for court and figured I could use the opportunity to try on a few options.

“No,” he said. “We’re going on a proper date.”

“I don’t think you understood the assignment, Jackson,” I said. “This is a fake date. It’s all for show. Just drop me off.”

“That’s not going to work. We’re going to come back, and your mom is going to ask you how it went. And she’s going to want details. And I know you, Zoe. You’re not going to be able to lie to her. So I’m going to need to give you some details to share with her.”

I wanted to argue with him, but he had a point.

“So what are we doing?”

“Night hike,” he said. “Glad you dressed appropriately.”

Every single word out of his mouth made me want to argue with him. He had that effect on me with that smarmy expression of his, but it was going to be a long evening if I pushed back against every little thing that he said.

“At least I’ll get some exercise in for the day,” I told him, trying my best to make lemons out of lemonade.

The sun was setting by the time we made it to the coast, and the salty smell of the ocean filled the air beneath the sound of the crashing waves.

As we stepped out of the car, I felt the sea breeze and was glad to have the sweatshirt.

“Isn’t it a little dark for a hike?”

“That’s what a night hike is,” he said. “It’s a full moon, so it shouldn’t be too bad, but I always come prepared. I was a Boy Scout.”

He popped open the trunk and grabbed a couple of flashlights out of a tool chest he had in there.

“Were you really?”

“Sure,” he said, “until I was kicked out.”

He closed the trunk.

“I was caught taking part in an extra-curricular activity with a co-ed from our sister Girl Scout troop during an overnight camping trip.”

He was smiling — the memory was as fresh as if it’d just happened the other night. And then he started laughing.

“You think that’s funny?” I asked. “What’s funny about that?”

“You didn’t see the look on the scout leader’s face when I asked if I could get a merit badge for it.”

I rolled my eyes. Some boys never grow up.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s go.”

# CHAPTER 10



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

It's amazing how memories can come shooting back in full Technicolor glory with just a simple reminder. That summer camping trip back when I was a junior was one of the highlights of my high school career. While the other boys were singing camp songs and eating s'mores, Helena Wexler and I dipped out to one of the tents and made out for about an hour. We were down to our undies and about to go further when we heard the campers coming back.

We started getting dressed so we could get out of there, but teenage hormones are a powerful force and before I knew it, we were back on top of each other, which is the position we found ourselves in when the scout leader opened the tent and shined the flashlight inside.

"You ever hear of knocking?" Helena asked, completely undeterred. She was a firecracker, the kind of girl I could never resist. I wouldn't go so far as to say I had a type, but the women who had an edge to them, who didn't take crap from anybody?

That was my weakness.

Which is what made Zoe so irresistible to me. She sent my blood boiling, and I never knew if I was pissed off or turned on around her. Probably both, to be honest.

The more evolved part of my brain recognized how high maintenance she was — everything had to be just so with her — but that didn't stop my lizard brain from firing off whenever she was around.

For the first time in my life, though, I had some level of understanding of what she must go through. One day with Jude left me completely spent. Not physically, but mentally, and the night hike was just what I needed.

“When was the last time you had a night to yourself like this?” I asked her.

“Sorry?”

We’d been moving up the trail in silence up until that point, listening to the crickets chirping and waves roaring softly in the distance. People across the country downloaded recordings to listen to this kind of thing for relaxation, but we Angelinos could completely surround ourselves with it. It was easy to forget how lucky we were.

“Just with Jude,” I said, “it’s been one day, and he’s completely taken over my life. And you’ve had Cassidy on your own for years now.”

“It’s not so bad,” she told me. “My mom helps quite a bit, like if I have to take work home.”

“Yeah, but my question was how often do you get time just to yourself to do something like this?”

The question clearly wasn’t computing to her. I imagined in her head, she had decided a long time ago that she would devote herself to others, and the idea that she needed to do something for herself every now and then was anathema to her.

“I get all the time I need.”

“Well, that’s a dodge,” I told her. “You do that a lot, you know.”

As we approached a fork in the road, my instinct was to go left, so I pulled a Robert Frost and went right. The paths were clear enough that we weren’t going to get lost, even in the dark.

“Do what?”

“See, you’re doing it again,” I said. “You think you’re being clever and avoiding the question, but you forget that



you're dealing with a lawyer here. Would you let a witness answer the way you just did?"

"Not everything's a court of law," she said. "I answered the question. I take all the time I need."

I shook my head. Was I going to persist with this line of questioning? At least in court I could turn towards the judge, who could force the witness to answer. Here we were on our own, just the two of us.

"And I take it you don't think you need much time?" I asked.

We reached a steep part of the incline, and both of us began to struggle as we made our way up.

"Life isn't just about goofing off and having fun," she said. "Most of us get that out of our systems during college. We grow up and we learn there's more to all this than drinking and hooking up with strangers."

I could see the top of the mountain. It was close — maybe a quarter mile or so — but the trail wasn't a straight shot and it was difficult to tell exactly how long it would take to get there, especially at this time of night.

"But you did have that wild phase? Because it's hard to imagine you did."

"Oh, I had my fun," she said with a slight laugh. Was that a hint of wistfulness in her voice? A longing for a time in her past that she missed.

"Really?" I asked. "Tell me about it."

I turned back towards her to see her reaction. She smiled. "Nice try, Ekland," she said. "I'm going to have to plead the fifth."

The expression on her face said everything. This wasn't a dodge, at least not like the other responses were. There was something to tell there; she just wasn't about to share it with me.

"Is this what you do with all the girls you take out?" she asked. "Get them out here and tire them out until they reveal

their deep, dark secrets? Is that your trick?"

"Nah," I said. "Actually, I've never taken a date out here. It doesn't work like that. I don't have any tricks or moves or anything like that. If I meet someone, I try to figure out what they're like and the kind of thing they're into and go do that. You seem like the kind of person who can't sit still, so dinner was out. We had to do something where we were moving. Walking dates can be good, but I figured that was too dull. You needed some excitement and to see something you haven't seen before."

"I can't see anything right now, Jackson. It's nighttime."

"Just wait," I said, worried I'd shown my hand too early. "But people used to ask me, back in school, how I was able to be such a stud. That was before I started going to the gym — I was kind of scrawny back then, but it didn't matter. They wanted to know the tricks of the trade, but there really isn't one. All you need to do is listen to the other person and actually pay attention. That's the secret, but it's surprisingly hard to do for a lot of guys."

"You?" she asked. "Listen?"

"Yeah," I said. "You don't believe me?"

"You always seemed so, I dunno, full of yourself."

"Oh, I am," I laughed, "but that doesn't mean I don't listen and take note of what I hear. Look, your mom's name is Vivian, and your daughter's name is Cassidy. I didn't spend a whole lot of time with your mom, but in the few minutes I was with Cassidy, I found out that she loves dinosaurs, and her favorite one is the stegosaurus."

"Nice try," Zoe said. "Her favorite dinosaur is ankylosaurus."

I shook my head. "No, her favorite dinosaur *was* ankylosaurus, but when she found out that it was also Renaldo's favorite dinosaur, she knew she had to change it, so now it's stegosaurus."

She eyed me curiously.

“No bullshit,” I said. “Ask her.”

“I will.”

“Anyway, someone I meet at a bar or something is tricky because I need to get an idea of their personality quickly, but we’ve been working long enough that I have a good idea of who you are and what you might like. And it’s how I know, even though you’re trying to fight it, if you stop to think about it, you’re having a pretty good time.”

She didn’t respond to that, but she didn’t have to.

“So few people stop to appreciate that they’re having fun when they are. Life can be tough. We need to remember to enjoy the good parts when they happen.” Still no response other than the sound of her feet on the dirt. “The peak should be right around that corner.”

I pointed with my flashlight, trying to maintain a steady pace. It was difficult. I wasn’t just excited to see the view for myself, but to see her seeing the view. On some level, I had an idea of what to expect — I’d been on night hikes in this area before, even if I’d probably never gone on this exact trail — but every time, it still managed to blow me away.

And this time was no exception.

The full moon reflected off of the Pacific Ocean, which spread out as far as the eye could see, revealing just how enormous our world was and how, despite being tiny ants on the surface, it all seemed to exist only for us at that moment. Even the cars driving up and down the Pacific Coast Highway were so small that they hardly seemed to represent actual human beings. Just barely visible dots of light, silently moving through the curves of the road.

Off in the other direction was Los Angeles proper, though it was a good distance away. Just bright lights as far away as the stars in the sky. People caught up in their lives while we got to appreciate the peace of being galaxies away from them.

“Oh my God,” Zoe said with the last remaining breath left in her.

Biting my tongue to avoid saying that I told her so, I stepped back and let her take in the view, all the while keeping an eye on her to ensure she didn't get too close to the edge.

In truth, the view paled in comparison to her reaction. With all the work and professionalism involved in practicing law, Zoe wasn't one to show very much emotion, which made her silent awe all the more fascinating to watch. It felt as though a giant wall had come toppling down in that moment and I got a glimpse at the real person behind the armored exterior that she hid behind.

"Jackson," she said after a brief moment's time, "this is incredible."

"It's a great, big, wonderful world out there," I told her. "You don't want to miss the forest for the trees."

I would have given anything for a brief peek into her head to learn what she was thinking. Was she internalizing what I was telling her? What had I told her about the importance of taking time for herself? Of getting out of the house and living her life instead of focusing on all the little jobs she had to do for everyone else?

"The way I see it, we get so little time here. We've got to do what we can to make the most of every single second. Maybe you call it immaturity, but I call it an appreciation of the gift we're all so fortunate enough to have received."

"I'm going to be honest, Jackson," she said. "I didn't realize you had this side to you."

She turned towards me and I saw the moon reflecting in her eyes. Looking right at me, with those soft lips just begging for me to kiss them, I had to remind myself of who I was dealing with. Zoe wasn't just a random date I'd picked up somewhere, she was someone I shared an office with. And, what's more, I knew she wasn't interested. She'd said as much a million times.

And yet, right now, her expression was screaming the exact opposite.

If she was anyone else, it wouldn't have been a question: I would have made my move already, but with her, I had to exercise a sense of caution.

"It's not sides," I said, "it's all part of the same thing."

She laughed. "It is not. The same Jackson that was dry-humping the secretary on the copier is not the same one giving me a view of the ocean and philosophizing about the meaning of life."

I shrugged. "You might see them as different," I said. "I see it as the same thing. Appreciating my surroundings and making the most of what we're given here."

"There are consequences to acting that way, you know," she told me. "You could have lost your job."

"I could have," I said, "but there are consequences to not acting, too."

Now my mouth was moving without me thinking about it. My own words were telling me to kiss her, and yet I was frozen in conflict. It would have been so easy to step forward, take her in my arms, and share a perfect kiss under the stars.

But I couldn't read her mind, and despite the signals, which seemed so obvious, I couldn't bring myself to make that move.

And so, for the first time in what felt like forever, I missed an opportunity. Because the moment passed.

"What else have you got planned for us?" she asked.

"I thought you wanted me to take you back home," I said.

"The night's young," Zoe said. "And you're right, it's been too long since I've had an evening to myself. What else have you got?"

I thought for a moment, mentally driving myself all over Los Angeles, looking for the next place to go.

"You like old movies?" I asked.

\* \* \*

Los Angeles has no shortage of movie theaters, but there's always been something special about the New Beverly, which was known for the double feature programming of old movies. Not all of these pairings lent themselves to dates, but tonight's did quite nicely: Two Audrey Hepburn movies, *Roman Holiday* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

And, what was more, we had the entire theater to ourselves. I suppose a late-night revival house showing of 60-year-old movies wasn't the most popular place to go in the middle of the week.

As *Roman Holiday* came to an end, I could feel a tear forming in my eye, though it didn't manage to escape.

"I'd never take you for an Audrey Hepburn fan," Zoe said.

"Who doesn't love her?" I asked. "There's something so pure about these old movies. They're so earnest. Everybody's so cynical nowadays, and it's nice to travel back to a time where people were allowed to be romantic."

"A closet romantic?" she asked. "How did I never know this about you?"

"You never asked," I said. "That's usually the best way to learn something about someone."

"Okay," she said, "then I'll ask about the elephant in the room."

This was it. She was going to ask about what was going on right now. Was this a real date or a fake date? Because even if it was supposed to be fake, it was starting to look indistinguishable from the real thing.

"What's the deal with Jude?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you just showed up at work today with some child that you'd never mentioned before. You don't have his picture

anywhere near your workspace, and I'm sure if you'd brought him up before I would have remembered."

I had to laugh. Of course that was the elephant in the room. A huge elephant. A mastodon.

"I didn't know I had him until last night," I said. "My ex called me over and introduced me."

I wasn't sure how much to reveal. Privacy was important to someone like Natasha.

"And now you've got custody of him? How does that work?"

"I'm just a babysitter for now," I said, "but I just learned this afternoon that I might need to watch him for longer than I thought."

"That's a lot to put on someone."

"Yeah," I said, "you're telling me. It's been a whirlwind of emotions the past 24 hours. I suppose I could drop him back off with his mother, but we talked about it and we both think, for now, it's best if he stays with me for a while. I don't know; maybe you're right about not recognizing me today. I'm not a different person, but finding out that you've got a child out there really does change your perspective, doesn't it?"

"You have no idea," she said. And she was right. I probably didn't. I was still brand new to parenting. She'd had five years under her belt.

She yawned and leaned into me.

"What do you think?" I asked. "You want to stay for the next picture? It's getting late."

I turned towards her and we were face to face, eyes locked into each other.

"No," she said. "I want to stay."

At that point, instinct bypassed any doubts I may have had and I leaned in and kissed her. And she kissed back.

Boy, did she ever kiss back.

# CHAPTER 11





\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

God, how old was I? Making out with a boy in a movie theater? This was wild. Normally, maybe, I might be self-conscious, but we were the only ones there. Moon River began playing as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* started and Jackson and I just kept kissing, the lights from the screen illuminating our faces in a soft glow.

And also... this was Jackson. Was I really doing this? With him?

It was like a weird dream, but perhaps the weirdest part was that it wasn't a nightmare. No, it was the exact opposite of that. It was a very pleasant dream, the kind you wake up from with a smile on your face, not feeling tired but still wanting to go back to sleep in the hopes that you could return to that fantasy land.

That's how the whole night felt, in fact. I'll admit that I was resistant at first, but from the moment we reached the top of that mountain and got the view of the entire world, I'd been floating on air.

These were feelings I didn't think I was still capable of. Jackson had told me that I was missing the forest for the trees in life — so focused on the day-to-day management of work tasks and Cassidy that I'd forgotten that the whole point of the thing was to enjoy myself. It was sad to realize how much of life I'd wasted on silly things I thought were so important in the moment and terrifying to think that if I hadn't agreed to go out with Jackson on what I'd thought was a fake date, I could have continued to throw it all away.

And I could tell he needed this just as much as I did.

“God, this feels good,” he growled into my ear.

“Is this where you thought the night would go?” I asked.

“No,” he said, in between soft kisses all over my face and neck. “But I was hoping for it.”

He’d asked me out before and I’d turned him down, offended that he would even ask. And he’d asked a few more times, but I was never sure if he was serious or if it was a kind of strange joke. Like, what would have happened if I’d actually said yes? Apparently this.

“I’m always after the ones who play hard to get,” he said. “I can’t tell you how much I’ve wanted you.”

When his hand moved towards my breasts, tenderly stroking them and grazing his fingers over my hardened nipples, I thought nothing of it. But when his hand moved further down my body and slipped into my jeans, I had to make a decision: were we really doing this? Because making out in a theater? I’d done that with dozens of guys, back in the day, anyway. And light fondling also felt well within the realm of acceptable.

But when we pushed towards third base, that was something else. I stiffened up for a moment when Jackson undid the button on his jeans and he stopped, then looked me in the eyes.

His serious look gave me comfort, and the stubble on his cheeks made me want him.

“Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head.

“No,” I told him, unambiguously.

“Good,” he said and gave a smile, slightly goofy but entirely sexy. “Because I need you right now.”

It was as if he had a homing missile attached to his fingers, with a target set on my clit. But he didn’t just jam his digits up against it like he was frantically pressing an elevator button,

the way too many men did. He was gentle, slow, and deliberate. Rubbing up against me like a bow against a violin, playing a slow, drawn-out note with a gradual crescendo until when he finally ran out of finger, I was letting out an almost silent gasp of air.

“How does that feel?” he asked.

Words failed me. I just let out a soft moan and then a light laugh, at myself more than anything.

“How about this?”

He moved his finger back forward, playing that same note again, but in reverse. His expression was completely relaxed, as if he wasn't even thinking about what he was doing. It just came naturally to him.

My eyes shut instinctively as I focused on the sensation.

*If that's what he could do with just his finger...* I thought, unable to complete the sentence when he reversed course again.

Back and forth he went a few more times, each time slower than the last, pressing down just a touch harder, edging me closer and closer to full arousal. Every time he reached the end and switched directions, it was another step up on an imaginary staircase, which seemed to grow taller and taller with every movement. The slow build sent me to a level of pleasure I'd never experienced before and didn't realize I was capable of. With anyone else getting to even half of where I was right now, my body would submit into release.

That wasn't the case here. My body allowed him to build up that sensation without allowing the cup to runneth over.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

The words came from out of nowhere, reminding me that I did exist in a physical world and not just a cloud of pleasure and heavenly sensations.

“Yes,” I said, the words coming out as little more than a puff of air.

He removed his hand from my pants and grabbed my hips, gently lifting me up and leaning me down over the seat in front of us.

With care, he slid my pants and underwear down. I heard him undo his belt, then felt him guide his way deep into my soaking pussy from behind.

As with his finger, he took his time, filling me up with his thick cock. It kept going inside me, deeper and deeper, making me wonder just how much more there was of it until, eventually, I felt his hips against my ass as he rocked back and forth into me.

It had been so long since I'd been intimate with someone that if he'd given me any time to prepare, I might have been scared. But I wasn't scared. Or self-conscious at all, which I sometimes was in the past. There wasn't any pressure on me. All I had to do was lean forward and feel his body against mine, focusing on just how good it felt.

When he picked up speed and intensity, I started to notice the sounds I was making, sweet, comforting moans emanating from the lowest parts of my diaphragm. How could anything feel this good?

I wanted it to continue. I wanted to keep going forever and let it last and last and last.

But I just couldn't hold it all inside anymore.

He was slamming against me with the strength of a truck, grabbing onto my hips and pulling me into him with such masculine control that I couldn't help myself. I had to come. My body demanded it. And with that intense tremor that shook across my whole body, I let out a scream with the volume of a train whistle, which lasted as long as I had breath.

And as that scream quieted, I heard Jackson grunt and let out an animalistic sound to mimic mine as he unloaded into me with an intense ejaculation and powerful pulsations that felt so good and reassuring after I'd reached my own climax.

Out of breath, we remained in that position and I looked up, realizing the credits had begun and the lights of the theater

were coming on.

\* \* \*

We walked back to his car, parked down the street.

“You want to come back to my place?” he asked.

It was a natural thing for him to say, and I wanted to say yes. I would have loved to go with him.

“Your mom told us to have fun, stay out as late as we wanted,” he said. “She can keep an eye on the kids.”

Motherly duties took over, though. My mom was great with Cassidy, she really was, and it never felt like a chore for her. But I had to check in on her. And I wanted to tuck her in or, since it was too late for that, at least kiss her sleeping forehead goodnight to keep the nightmares out.

“We shouldn’t,” I told him.

“Guess I’ll have to take a raincheck, then,” he said.

*Raincheck? I thought. Does this mean he thinks this is going to happen again?*

Because as amazing as this night was, I knew that so long as we were working together, there couldn’t be another one.

# CHAPTER 12



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

Why did she suddenly get so quiet after I said we'd have to take a raincheck? From the moment we first left the house, I felt like I had her attention, and it only got better. When we reached the peak of the mountain on the hike, I'd never felt more confident of how a date was going. And then, at the New Beverly? The way she was responding to me? The way she screamed in pleasure with so much passion that I couldn't hold on anymore and let loose the most intense orgasm of my adult life?

For her to suddenly go cold after that made me feel like I'd made a misstep. The first one all night. But I was so confident in the fact that the date was going well that when I got a single sign that it wasn't, it came as a surprise. Why wouldn't she want to do this again?

And from there on out, for the rest of the ride home, she gave me the silent treatment.

I pulled up in front of her house, and she reached for the door.

"Wait," I told her. "We're going to walk up to your house."

"And?"

"And your mom's going to be there, I'll have to grab Jude, and it's going to be chaos, so I won't be able to give you a goodnight kiss."

I paused, waiting for a response, but she sort of gave me a blank expression like she didn't understand where I was going.

“So let’s do that now before we get to the door.”

“Okay,” she said distantly.

I leaned across the console and kissed her. Her words may have lacked emotion, but I still felt something in the kiss. A lot of something. It lingered and lasted until I broke it off and pulled away. She stared at me afterwards as if she had something to tell me, but then looked away and stepped out of the car.

“The kids should be asleep,” she whispered, “so stay quiet.”

We tiptoed up to the doorway, where Zoe put her key in the lock. Before she had a chance to turn it, the door opened and Vivian stood there.

The house smelled like fresh-baked cookies.

“Well, hello, you two,” she said with a smile. “You were both gone for a while. It must have been quite the night.”

The time had to have been close to midnight by that point, which was why it was surprising to see the kids still at the kitchen table, coloring pictures with crayons.

I guess it was good they were getting along well.

“Mommy!” Cassidy said and ran over to the door, holding her picture in one hand, flapping it about. She hugged her mother’s leg. “Look what I drew.”

Jude took the hint and charged towards me, hugging my leg just as Cassidy had done with her mom. “I missed you!” Jude said.

I watched as Zoe took a look at the picture. “It’s a stegosaurus,” she said.

“Yeah,” Cassidy said. “My favorite.”

“I thought your favorite was ankylosaurus.”

“No way!” Cassidy shook her head violently. “That’s Renaldo’s favorite.”



I glanced at Zoe, exchanging a knowing look with her as I lifted Jude into my arms.

“I missed you too, pal,” I said. He yawned and leaned into my shoulder. “I guess I’d better take him back. I’ll see you tomorrow, Zoe?”

“Uh-huh,” she said.

Vivian handed me a Tupperware container. “We made some cookies. Why don’t you take some home?”

“They’re really good,” Jude said.

“Thank you, Vivian,” I said, accepting the container.

“Oreo chip cookies,” she said.

“Oreo chip?” I asked and eyed the cookies through the plastic.

“Yeah,” Cassidy said, practically rolling her eyes at me for never having heard of them. “You know, like chocolate chip, but instead of chocolate chips, we use Oreo crumbles.”

“Well, they look delicious,” I said and then turned to Zoe. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Zoe said with the least amount of enthusiasm I could imagine.

“Goodnight!” Vivian said to me with considerably more energy. “Drive home safely.”

I put Jude in the backseat and buckled him in securely.

“Where did you go?” he asked once I got the car started and began driving down the road.

“It’s late, Jude,” I told him. “You should go to sleep.”

“Not tired,” he said with an energetic voice. “Shouldn’t he be tired? Maybe the sugar from the cookies hyped him up.”

“Where did you go?”

“We went to the beach,” I said.

“At night?”

“That’s right,” I said. “We went for a hike with flashlights, and then we went to the movies. Did you have fun with Cassidy?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “We played dinosaurs for a while and then watched cartoons, and then you still weren’t back, so Grammy Vivian made cookies with us.”

She must have asked him to call her “Grammy,” which made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t want to dwell on it. Maybe he’d just picked it up from Cassidy.

“And then you *still* weren’t back when the cookies were done so she gave us some crayons and we colored.”

“Wow,” I said, realizing just how long Zoe and I must have been gone.

“Was it a date?” Jude asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Like Mommy sometimes goes on dates,” he said, “except she doesn’t call them that to me. It’s her meeting friends. Sometimes I meet the friends, but then I usually don’t ever see them again.”

He thought for a second.

“Dad?” he asked.

“Uh-huh?”

“Do you think I’ll ever have a sister?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like some of my friends at school, they have moms and dads in different houses, and they’ve got brothers and sisters who don’t live with them.”

“You’re asking if I’m going to have a daughter so you could have a sister?”

“Maybe,” he said. “Yeah.”

But then it clicked because I realized that wasn’t what he was asking at all.

“You mean could Cassidy one day be your sister?”

“Yeah,” he said.

That had escalated quickly.

Now what was I supposed to say to that? I didn't want to get the boy's hopes up, and at the moment, I wasn't sure what was going on with Zoe. She was getting me hot and cold vibes. Hot with her body. Cold with her words. It was strange.

But either way, marriage was not in the cards for us. I wasn't the marrying type. Honestly, I didn't understand how anyone could be. It felt constricting to me, even suffocating to limit yourself to one other person for the rest of your life. It was more my brother's thing than mine.

“I don't think so, buddy, but you two could still be friends, right?”

“Yeah,” he said, just a little bit disappointed.

“I could take you over there to play with her again sometime. Would you like that?”

“Yeah,” he said again, though it clearly wasn't exactly what he wanted.

Was this all a mistake? Had I gotten him worked up and excited, only to be disappointed? Was this what parenting was like? Making a million little decisions and hoping that they all miraculously turned out to be the right ones? Because who would volunteer to sign up for that job?

My day job was stressful enough, choosing the exact right words to avoid potential loopholes, but to do that 24/7 with the possibility of accidentally unleashing heartbreak and sadness onto an innocent soul? I didn't know about that.

“Daddy?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“When am I going to see Mommy again?”

Another impossible question. Because the truth was, I didn't know. He would see her eventually, but Natasha hadn't given me any sort of definite time frame because she couldn't. Whenever the paparazzi lost interest, that was when he would

see her again and go back to live with her, but who knew how long that could be.

And so the only answer I could give him was the truth.

“I don’t know, Jude,” I said. “Hopefully soon, but it might be a while. You’ll definitely see her again, though, okay?”

“Yeah.” It was the word he said when he understood, but he didn’t want it to be so.

I looked at him through the rearview mirror and watched as he glanced out the car window. It was impossible to tell exactly what he was thinking or feeling. Maybe this was all normal to him somehow. That was the thing about being a kid: you adapted to whatever situation life threw at you.

But that didn’t mean it was fair.

With him distracted by the images outside the car, I couldn’t help but turn my thoughts towards Zoe, wondering what she was thinking.

It was an impossible kind of game, trying to read other people’s minds. No matter how well you thought you knew them, they always managed to surprise you. I’d worked with Zoe in the office for a while now, but all bets were off after this evening. She was still the person I knew her as on the surface, but underneath was an entire other personality. That was how it was with many people — you had to crack open the surface to access their true selves, the one hidden behind the mask of the person they thought everyone wanted them to be.

# CHAPTER 13



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

“So? What happened?”

My mom was so eager to hear about the date that I hadn't even taken two steps out of Cassidy's bedroom after putting her to bed when she started asking. It was just three simple words, but each of them was drenched in subtext. She wasn't asking just to be polite. She wanted juicy details, though the Momland version of juicy details was slightly different than the ones that close friends were looking for.

Or maybe it was just the endgame was different than with close friends. Close friends might be looking to be bridesmaids. Mom was looking to be a grandmother once again.

“It went fine,” I told her, “but it's not going to happen again.”

“What do you mean?”

“We're not hanging out again.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” I told her, “for one thing, we work together.”

She looked at me in disbelief. “Honey, did you see that man? You've just gotten a winning lottery ticket. You shouldn't need me to convince you not to throw it away.”

“Also, he's not really my type.”

Another look of complete shock. “I don't think you know what you're saying, Zoe,” she told me. “That man is

gorgeous.”

“I think he might be too good-looking,” I told her. “Too good-looking is a red flag.”

She threw her hands in the air. “I give up,” she said. “Every mother wants to see their daughter happy, but it’s like what they say about leading a horse to water.”

She trailed off.

“Let me tell you something, dear,” she said. “Your father was not my first love.”

“Nor should he have been,” I said, “he was awful to you.”

“That’s what I mean,” she told me. “I had to settle. My first love was Vincent Gabrielle. He was gorgeous, sexy, loving, and went on to make a seven-figure salary. But I broke up with him because I thought I could do better.”

“Are you saying I should settle?”

“I’m saying you deserve the earth and the moon and the stars,” my mom told me, “but that’s not what’s on the table. What’s on the table is currently single men who live within driving distance of Santa Monica. And, among those men, you’re not going to find anyone better than Jackson.”

I sighed. “Then I guess I’ll have to be single. It’s not the worst thing in the world.”

“Give him another chance,” my mom said, “for me?”

“Mom,” I told her, “this isn’t about you. It’s about me and it’s about Cassidy. And I just don’t trust him to be the right one. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work in the morning. Goodnight.”

\* \* \*

I didn’t expect my mom to understand. Maybe nobody else on the planet would understand. It didn’t matter. I knew what was right for me. And I also knew Jackson. He could show a girl a good time, don’t get me wrong, but it’s like I said to my mom:

sometimes a guy could be too good-looking. It was a liability. I was long past the point where I was just looking for a fun night.

Really, it all came down to Cassidy. I could handle the heartbreak of losing a guy I thought was into me, but I wasn't about to put her through that. She was too young to fall in love only to have the man run off on her like that. I'd seen it with my own father, and I wasn't about to pass my traumas onto my daughter.

All this meant that I had to let Jackson know that whatever happened during our date, it wasn't going to happen again.

The next day, I awoke to a phone call from Jackson.

"Hey, Zoe, I'm sorry to do this," he said, "but can I leave Jude with your mom today?"

"Sorry?" I asked.

"I can't take him to work with me again."

This would have been a chance to tell Jackson that I may have given him the wrong idea the night before, but I wanted to have the conversation in person. It felt wrong to do it over the phone.

"Sorry, Jackson," I said, "but Cassidy goes to daycare. I can't expect my mom to watch her and Jude today, especially after she just watched them last night."

"No, Mommy!" It was Cassidy, who must have had her ear to the wall. She came running into my bedroom and jumped on the bed. "Can Jude come over and play again? Please?"

"You need to go to Sunlight Smiles," I told her. Sunlight Smiles was the cloying name of her daycare. I wasn't wild about what they called it, but it was on the way to work, affordable, and Cassidy seemed to have a good time there. "Don't you want to see your friends?"

"I want to see Jude," she told me.

"It'll just be a one-time thing," Jackson said. "I swear. I'll find a daycare for him over the weekend."



Cassidy probably couldn't hear him, but she must have been able to tell what was happening on the other end of the line by my expression.

"Please?" she said again. It was too early in the morning for this. I had her breaking down my defenses in front of me and Jackson doing it through my ear, not to mention the thought of Jude not having anywhere else to go tugging on my heartstrings.

"Okay," I told Jackson. "Bring him over, but just this once."

When Jackson dropped Jude off, he asked if I needed a ride to work, but I figured it was best, so far as work gossip went, if we took separate cars. Lawyers tend to be good at reading between lines, and I didn't want anyone to put one and one together to get three.

Sure, Jackson and I had a good time the night before, but that was it. I was going to put an end to things at the office and never look back.

\* \* \*

Unfortunately, telling yourself you were going to have a difficult conversation was very different from actually having that conversation with said person, and the day went by without an obvious time to pull him aside and talk to him.

Part of the problem was it was a busy day, and our schedules didn't allow us to have overlapping breaks. I ate my lunch at the desk and Jackson was in meetings, barely stopping by his. When he did eventually come by, in the late afternoon, McDavis came by to talk to us before I got a word in edgewise.

"Jackson, Zoe," he said, and we both lifted our heads to look at him. "I got a chance to look at that NDA. It's nice and clean, and when I went through it with our client he was very happy with what you've done."

"Thank you, sir," Jackson said.

“You did it together?” he asked. The answer was, of course, that we hadn’t. It was entirely my work, but I promised Jackson we could split the credit 50/50 and he honored his side of the bargain, so I wasn’t going to go back on my word now.

“That’s right,” I told him.

“Hmm,” he said, considering the idea. “I should put you two together on projects more often. You make a strong team.”

“We sure do,” Jackson said with his patented smile.

“Thanks again,” McDavis said as he walked away.

And that was the moment I realized it was now or never.

“Jackson,” I said, “can I talk to you about something in the private office?”

“Sure thing.”

There was something in his voice that hinted he was in for a rude awakening. It was clear he thought there was a certain subtext to my words, suggesting that we were going to do something other than have a mature, adult conversation about responsibilities and interoffice relations.

But I had no qualms about disappointing him.

Something about the office, with its bright, florescent lights and people in suits felt so real, whereas the night before hardly seemed like actual reality. And now that we were back in the real world, I could remember that Jackson was my mortal enemy. Did he make me come so hard that I nearly shattered my spine? Yes, but that was last night when we shared a fantasy together.

He practically lunged at me the second the door to the private office closed, and I pushed him away.

“No, Jackson,” I said and savored the confused look on his face.

“What?”

“We need to talk.”

The private office was one that we used quite a bit, generally for meetings with clients, particularly those who handled sensitive information. While the partners had their own offices, we junior lawyers did not. In order to be the most effective lawyers, we had to know as much about our clients as possible — more, in some cases, than even their spouses or therapists. And we couldn't expect them to talk if there were prying ears.

As such, the private office was isolated and soundproof, with no windows, no telephone, and magnetic shielding in the walls to prevent radio signals from getting in. It made it impossible to get an internet connection, but it also eliminated the risk of a butt dial accidentally getting a client in trouble.

“Okay,” Jackson said, leaning against the wall, giving off a James Dean *Rebel Without a Cause* bad-boy vibe.

It was frustrating that primal parts of my body still responded to his magnetic attraction even though I knew he was bad news.

A few deep, calming breaths focused my mind, as did the promise of a cold shower as soon as I got home.

“Then let's talk.”

He gave me an intense stare that was impossible to look away from, with the kind of power that turned my legs into cooked spaghetti and made me afraid that I'd fall straight to the ground.

“Last night,” I began. I wasn't sure where to go from there, but he gave me more than enough space to decide. He didn't interrupt. Instead, he continued to look at me intently, giving me full attention and hanging on every word. There was no fear of rejection in his expression, just a quiet confidence.

It was smolderingly hot.

“Last night was really great,” I said.

He nodded and gave me a relaxed smile as if to say that he knew. As if he had no idea that there was a “but” coming.

It was some kind of wizardry, though, because my lips couldn't form the words "but." Nor could my mind put together what could possibly be in the next part of that sentence. All I could focus on was that feeling from the night before, with his finger rubbing up against me, sending me to places I'd never thought possible.

Maybe Mom was right. Maybe I was stupid to let go of a guy like this.

Stability was great, but maybe I could handle the stability on my own, especially if I had a man like him in my life to ensure I was properly cared for sexually.

So there didn't end up actually being a "but" or even a second half of that sentence. Because before I had a chance to let those words out, whatever they may have been, our mouths were connecting and we were furiously tearing each other's clothes off.

"We shouldn't be doing this," I told him as I unbuttoned his shirt.

"I know," he said, working his way towards my bra. "We're co-workers."

He snapped it off effortlessly as my tits hardened in the cool air of the room. He pushed his chest up against them to warm them up, but that only made them harder.

"And we're up for the same promotion," I said.

"We are," he said, sliding me out of my pants.

"And I hate you," I said, kissing him passionately as I did so.

"I hate you, too," he said, kissing back even harder. "So fucking much."

"This is a mistake," I said, reaching my hand into his pants and clutching onto his girth, feeling it harden with my grip.

Sure, it was a mistake, but sometimes making a mistake is better than doing things by the book.

# CHAPTER 14



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

Zoe seemed flustered at first, shaking as if she was presenting a school report that she hadn't properly prepared for. I did what I could to inspire confidence by giving her my full attention and making sure not to interrupt her. But before she could get out whatever point she was trying to make, we were making out again, just like we'd done at the theater the night before.

It was impossible to say who'd made the first move. Was it me? Was it her? From where I was standing, it sure felt like both of us jumping forward towards each other at once, as if a referee had just fired off a starter pistol.

It was as animalistic as I'd ever experienced, with both of us trying to get closer to each other than was physically possible, kissing with such furious passion and need that I worried I might hurt her. But if she was in even the slightest amount of pain, she did nothing to indicate it, because she was pressing back at me just as hard as I was pushing into her.

The clothes came off and landed in a heap on the floor. I lifted her up and placed her on the mahogany table, setting her naked ass down on top of it and letting her kick off her shoes.

And there she sat in her gorgeous naked glory, right there in front of me for me to do as I wished to her.

"Lean back," I told her and rested my arm against her, guiding her down to the table so she was lying completely flat, with her legs dangling off of the edge.

But I wasn't interested in the legs, as lovely as they were. I cared about what was between them.

"I need to taste you," I said.

With care, I gently pushed her legs apart and kissed her thighs, lightly rubbing my teeth on them and feeling her tremor underneath my hands. It drove me absolutely wild. Just the thrill of touching her was enough to release that animalistic instinct that we all kept locked up inside of us, but feeling her respond to my touch was too much. I could no longer be responsible for my actions.

"I'm going to lose control," I said, practically shaking as I tried to hold myself back.

"Then do it," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

I dove face-first into her pussy, using whatever willpower I had to avoid starting out too strong. I knew as well as anyone that a kind of controlled passion was an essential skill to giving a woman the experience of a lifetime, but I wasn't feeling very in control of myself right now. My body demanded her, wanting to skip to the chase and devour her whole.

And, only being human, I could only hold myself back for so long.

"Yes!" she said. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

And that amount of time was a mere matter of seconds. I couldn't get enough of her taste. She was running her fingers through my hair and letting out increasingly loud moans, making me very glad to be in a soundproofed room.

When I put my finger inside her to feel her wetness, I could feel the breath completely leave her body, and as a result, mine left as well.

But I didn't need to breathe. Not in that moment when I was so intent on pleasing her that I couldn't waste time with such trivial things as breathing.

With a few quick darts of my tongue, Zoe grabbed my hair and let out an intense scream of enormous satisfaction that took me by surprise. Had I already managed to bring her to orgasm? I looked up at her face, covered in an enormous smile — she had come.

“Good girl,” I told her.

She may have come, but the look on her face told me she had plenty of energy left in her.

I pushed deeper into her with my fingers as I continued my oral massage of her clit and found her G-spot, as evidenced by her arching her back and exclaiming, “Oh my God!” as her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

The moans were long and intense as I continued forward, letting her legs wrap around my neck, pulling me into her. At this point, it was just a matter of endurance. Could I keep going long enough without my tongue cramping up on me to get her to come again?

My muscles were getting tired, but I was up to the challenge, especially considering the reward that was at stake.

Sweat began to cover my brow as I pushed my muscles forward even as they ached, begging me to stop. This wasn't going to end until I brought Zoe back up again to paradise.

Fortunately, that didn't take much time at all.

She let out a gasp as her legs began to shake as the pleasure I gave her echoed throughout her whole body and she collapsed back onto the table, trying to catch her breath.

I took my fingers out of her and wiped off my mouth, covered in the juices of her arousal.

She lay there completely satisfied and content — with her eyes half open and an enormous smile covering her face — and completely irresistible. Part of me wanted to give her a moment's rest after the earth-shattering orgasm she'd just experienced, but that wasn't the part of me in control right now. That part of me demanded that I take her as she was and drain the last remnants of whatever energy she had remaining in her.



I stepped back and undid my belt, letting my pants fall to the floor, dropping my briefs along with them.

That got her eyes to open wide again.

“Sorry,” she said, looking away. “I didn’t mean to stare.” She blushed. “I just wasn’t expecting...”

She turned her head back towards me for a quick peek before immediately turning back away, redder than before.

Look, some people are blessed with great hair or height or impeccable fashion sense. I just happened to have all three and also something more, once that fashion sense was no longer a factor.

Men often consider themselves showers or growers. I was fortunate enough to be both.

I stepped forward and grabbed her hips as I guided my way into her.

After the double orgasms I’d given Zoe, she was more than wet enough to handle me, but still I exercised caution and took my time, easing my way into her gently, watching her face for any sign of discomfort and seeing exactly the opposite.

Her neck arched back as her mouth opened and light, soft yelps of pure ecstasy escaped her lips.

A simple rocking motion once I’d made my way in was all it took to get her going again, and I watched her push forward past the pure exhaustion she’d been feeling to move her body along with mine. Along with the motions came the moans as she lifted her legs to wrap around me and pull me deeper into her.

She felt unbelievable and I was again fighting with my instincts, one of which was to go faster and harder to reach the climax I wanted so badly and the other which was to slow down and let it last as long as possible.

Again, it was the more animalistic of the instincts that took control and I picked up the tempo, slamming into her hard. Her teeth gritted together as she gave me the sexiest look of desire I’d ever seen in my life — a look of complete surrender

to her inner passions that I didn't even know Zoe was capable of. It was as though she'd kept that sexual side of her locked up and repressed inside until I'd come along with the key to release her.

Both of us were determined at this point, our bodies working like machines to push each other to our limits and beyond. Her low, persistent moans were driving me wild, and I did everything I could to hold on.

"You're going to make me come, Zoe," I said to her.

"Mmmm, hold on, Jackson," she said, gasping.

I felt it building fast and knew I could only keep myself from coming for so long. Yes, I could fight it and stave it off for a few seconds more, but release was ultimately inevitable.

And so was hers. It was just a matter of endurance, seeing whose dam would burst first.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!" I screamed, doing anything in my power to hold off.

I tensed my muscles as I kept pushing and pushing, refusing to allow myself to give in before she did first. And right when I thought I couldn't hold it back anymore, she broke and let out a scream so loud and intense that not even the 18 inches of sound-proofing isolation could keep it from escaping.

And as a result, I felt the most satisfying and intense orgasm of my life, letting out a deep roar to match hers as I did so. When she felt me let loose inside her, it pushed her even further into her orgasm, screaming so loud that I couldn't believe the soundproofing could contain her voice.

The mutual release lasted for what felt like forever and for a brief moment, the sides of my vision became dark. I wondered if I might lose consciousness. Maybe I'd pushed myself just a little bit too far, but even if I had, it was worth it.

I fell forward on top of her, kissing her as she kissed me back. I did what I could to hold my body up with my shaky arms, which were about to give out as if I'd spent hours at the gym.

Between the kisses, we both tried catching our breath, but at that moment, it felt like it might take days for it to finally come back to me.

We were both completely spent, in the best way possible.

# CHAPTER 15



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

Was I supposed to just get up after that like nothing had happened? I wanted to turn over and sleep for a week of bliss, but the workday wasn't even over, and we still had a late afternoon meeting we had to go to.

“That was... something else,” Jackson said, between deep breaths, as he leaned on top of me. I wiped the sweat off of his brow and kissed him one more time. I'd come in here to tell him that last night would never happen again and didn't even get three sentences in before letting it happen again.

Did I regret it? I felt like I probably should, but how could I? I felt a blinding afterglow emanating from me like I'd never seen before.

Maybe I'd jumped to conclusions. Maybe I could have my cake and eat it, too. Sure, I wasn't supposed to be in a relationship with someone else from the office, but sometimes these things just happen. As mature adults, we didn't need to descend into the petty drama that was all too common in interoffice relationships.

I smiled at the thought, looking at Jackson. That vile disgust I'd once felt towards him had melted away in the aftermath of our intimacy and I could see that in actuality, he was very cute.

My mom approved of him, and he was good with Cassidy — at least in the few minutes he'd spent with her — perhaps I was being naive, but maybe he was what I'd been looking for all along.

That's at least what was going through my mind up until the point when Jackson got up off of me and pulled up his pants.

"Well," he said, "we've got a meeting to get to."

It wasn't that he was wrong — we did have a meeting — it's that he was able to turn on a dime, giving me a sense of whiplash. He'd been so sexual and animalistic and, in his own way, loving, only to walk away from it all as if we were just discussing the weather. Did that mean nothing to him? Once he got his rocks off, was it completely out of his system and he no longer cared?

"Come on."

He half gestured to help me up off the table, but I refused his assistance, stepping forward and pulling my clothes off the floor from their disorganized pile. I pulled out my phone to check my hair and makeup — it could have used a touch-up, but it was good enough.

He'd opened the door and was peeking out.

"Okay," he said, "the coast is clear. Let's go."

That really rubbed me the wrong way. As if I was a secret he was keeping from the rest of the office. But what did I actually want? For him to go out there and announce the fact that we'd just fucked our brains out in the private room? It made sense, but it didn't change the fact that I felt cheap. Like a simple fling he didn't actually care about outside of his carnal needs.

I didn't say anything. I followed right behind him. We'd been in there longer than I thought, and we only had a minute or two to grab our things, and I obviously needed to use the bathroom. This was all before meeting with McDavis and our client, the movie producer Trevor Turner, for whom we'd written the non-disclosure agreement.

I finally got to unplug my laptop and steadily make my way to McDavis's office.

"Thank you for joining us, Zoe," McDavis said. Trevor Turner was sitting across from him. He was wearing a baseball

cap and sunglasses, which gave him away as someone trying to appear inconspicuous, but the thick beard he'd grown covered his recognizable face, so it was still possible that nobody in the office knew who he was.

Jackson had beaten me to the office and was sitting beside Trevor.

“This is Trevor Turner,” McDavis said. “Trevor? This is Zoe, who co-wrote the NDA.”

He flashed me a charming movie star smile — he may not have spent much time in front of the camera lately, but he had a winning look that screamed Hollywood to me. They were all so beautiful, albeit in artificial ways — how many men in their early 50s didn't have a single wrinkle on their faces? And his teeth were blindingly white.

Which wasn't to say he was an unattractive man, just that I wasn't sure he was real until I actually shook his hand and could tell that he was, indeed, corporeal, just like the rest of us.

“Pleasure to meet you, Zoe,” he said. Eye contact and a smile, as if he'd been trained. Honestly, it was as if I was shaking hands with an animatronic instead of an actual human being.

“Trevor was just telling us,” McDavis said, “that he was very happy with what we put together for him.”

“Wonderful work,” he said. “Truly magnificent.”

“Thank you, Mr. Turner,” I said.

“Please,” he said, “call me Trevor.” He paused. “Just not too loudly. Wouldn't want to alert everyone else who you've got in your presence.” He lowered his sunglasses — maybe if he was half his age, it would have been charming, but along with everything else, it just felt so fake and deliberate that it was difficult to see it as anything other than a performance.

But as he was our client, I had to go along with it and smiled back at him.

“So what's next?” Trevor asked.

McDavis was the most senior attorney in the room, but I suppose, as the woman, I was the one Trevor most wanted to talk to. He was addressing me and, as such, I was the one whom he wanted to answer the question.

“Well, we run this by Ms. Ballard,” I said. “Assuming she has no problem with it, both she and you will sign it in the presence of a notary, you give her the check, and we all go home.”

“That simple, huh?” Trevor asked me.

*Sure, I thought, assuming she signs it.*

To which I gave her maybe even odds. If she had a lawyer of her own, there was almost zero chance of her signing it. The monetary exchange was much too low, considering how much Trevor was worth and how much damage she could do. But my guess was that the girl — who was only 19 — was too naive to get a lawyer and would probably be happy with the \$10,000 pay-off. She wouldn't want to make waves or cause trouble.

Hopefully, anyway.

Buying a young woman's silence for less than the cost of a used car wasn't the most ethical thing I'd done, but it was what I was paid to do. If I hadn't drafted the agreement, Jackson would have. And if not him, then someone else would have.

It was a cruel world out there, and unfortunately we were all cogs in the complicated machinery that kept things running. By doing what I was supposed to do, I got a healthy paycheck. And taking care of something important for the firm — like handling a case for one of our most financially well-off clients — I was likely to get an equally healthy bonus. That money went towards Cassidy's college fund so she could go to school and make something of herself.

Every time I had to do something I wasn't proud of — which was more often than I'd like — I held my nose and thought of Cassidy, reminding myself that she was why I was doing it.



“Hopefully,” I replied to Trevor. “There’s always a chance of something coming along to make things more complicated, but every once in a while, there’s a case that’s just straightforward and easy.”

“Thank you both,” McDavis said to Jackson and me. “Let me talk to Mr. Turner for a little bit, but you’re dismissed.”

“No problem, sir,” Jackson said. “Pleasure to meet you, Trevor.”

“You as well,” he said to Jackson, and then looked back to me, giving me one last smile, which I returned half-heartedly before I stood up to leave.

The second we exited the room, Erica took Jackson aside and cornered him. It was an ambush. She’d given him the information about Trevor being our client and, as such, she wanted some gossip in exchange.

But jealousy got the better of me and as I headed back to my workstation, I couldn’t help but watch the two of them together. Was Jackson flirting with her? Or was he just being polite?

Even though it looked like the latter, it felt like the former, and I didn’t like what it did to my insides. No, Jackson and I weren’t a couple. We’d been out once and were nowhere near calling what we were doing an exclusive relationship, but I wasn’t the kind of woman who hooked up with random men for the thrill of it. If I was going to offer my body to somebody, he’d better treat it with respect. And immediately going off and flirting with another woman — even if that wasn’t technically what he was doing — wasn’t my idea of what I was looking for.

Yes, it was irrational for me to be feeling so strongly, but it was the same reaction I’d had when Jackson left the private room after making love to me, as though it meant nothing to him. As if he was instantly able to switch his mind over to something else, like what had just happened was just one option of many as he was flipping through channels on the television.

The last thing I needed, though, was for the rest of the lawyers in the office to see me react. As a woman in a man's world, it was never a good idea to show emotion in public. We had to be twice as strong and twice as serious as any of the men in the office to be taken seriously, so to save face, I marched towards the elevator as quickly and quietly as I could, hoping to avoid drawing any attention.

It didn't work.

I pushed the button and waited for the elevator to arrive. When it did and I stepped inside, I felt another person come in behind me: it was Jackson.

Out of the corner of his eye, he must have seen me walk off, upset.

When the doors closed, he spoke first. "What's the matter?"

How could I explain it to him without sounding ridiculous? We had different views of the world, that much was clear. He was a hedonistic bachelor, hoping to never settle down, whereas I was goal-oriented and serious.

"It's nothing," I said and pushed the button for the parking garage.

He nodded. It obviously wasn't nothing. For a few seconds, he considered what he was going to say next and then the words just came out.

"First thing Monday," he said.

That got my attention and I looked to him.

"That's when I'll call things off with her."

Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

"You will?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. Another pause. "That's what you want, right?"

It was my turn to nod. "Yes."

"Then that's what I'll do."

The elevator dinged and the doors opened to the garage. He gestured for me to go first and as I left, he repeated himself.

“First thing Monday. I promise.”

I couldn't have been happier.

# CHAPTER 16



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

*I* couldn't believe what I'd just said. Was I serious? Was it really what I wanted?

Against all odds, the answer was yes. I was willing to surrender the fling I was having with the hot young secretary to pursue... was it a relationship? I guess it was. A relationship with Zoe, a woman who I thought hated my guts with a fiery passion.

Of course, that fiery passion was what I loved most about her. And watching it come out of her in other ways... my whole body trembled just thinking about it.

I drove back to her house to pick up Jude, and we spoke for a moment in the driveway.

I wanted to kiss her, but she stopped me.

"Not until you call things off with Erica," she said. "I can't do this unless I know you're serious."

"Okay, okay," I said. "First thing Monday, just like I told you."

"Good," she told me. "I need to know that I can trust you. You promised to call things off with her, so I need to know you're doing it."

"One hundred percent."

"And you said you'd find daycare for Jude, too."

"Absolutely," I said. "First task on my to-do list this weekend."

“Good,” she said, and walked towards her front door.

\* \* \*

I was true to my word about the daycare. I found a place near the apartment that was a little out of the way for when I was going to work in the morning — more so than I realized as I discovered Monday when I dropped Jude off there — but close enough for the time being.

Signing up was more difficult than I thought since I wasn't technically Jude's legal guardian — but a quick phone call to Natasha settled things there, and she managed to sign off on the forms as well as list me as a “Trusted Adult” in terms of dropping him off and picking him up at the end of the day.

When I did try dropping Jude off, however, he put up a fight, attaching himself to my leg when I tried dropping him off, insisting that he wanted to play with Cassidy and Grammy Vivian instead of the new kids at the daycare.

It was the first major temper tantrum I'd seen him throw, with tears, screaming, and making a scene. It was extremely embarrassing not to have control over my own child, and I wasn't sure whether or not I should explain that I'd only been an acting father for less than a week.

The woman in charge insisted I just leave him and let them handle the acclimation process — it was always harder when the parents stayed behind. I assumed she knew what she was talking about, but it was hard to look into Jude's eyes as I turned around to leave, as though I'd committed an unforgivable betrayal and wouldn't be back to pick him up in eight hours time.

I understood that what I was doing was right — leaving Jude behind like I did — and even necessary, but it didn't stop me from feeling guilty.

And the worst part was I was headed into work about to make somebody else very unhappy, too.

Why couldn't I just let Zoe have been a hook-up like all the others? Why was it that she pulled me in so intensely? At this point in my life, I'd slept with so many women I'd lost count, and I knew I'd be able to sleep with countless more if I wanted to, so why was I willing to limit myself to only one so long as it was her? Why was I willing to throw away what I had with Erica just for the chance of being with Zoe?

The obvious answer popped into my head almost immediately, but I shook it away.

Love was so trite an explanation. So storybook and eye-rollingly silly that I might as well have believed in Santa Claus.

Sure, I'd been exclusive with people before, lots of times, but this all just seemed to be moving so fast that it was hard to catch my breath. Just like finding myself unexpectedly a parent, I now found myself in the beginning stages of a relationship, against my better judgment, for reasons I couldn't completely understand.

I had no doubt that I wanted to call things off with Erica, and yet I was terrified of the actual conversation. As such, I sat in my car for a few moments, trying to will myself to get out and actually take care of the deed so it would be over and done with. Eventually, I dragged myself out and into the office, where Erica greeted me with a smile.

"Happy Monday, Jackson," she said.

"Happy Monday," I said. "Can we discuss something in the private office?"

Her eyes lit up with excitement. She thought she knew where this was going — that we were going to hook up in there, just as we had in the past. And if that's what I needed to play along with in order to convince her to come with me, then that's what I would have to do.

There were so many ways to tell her what I needed to say, but, ultimately, it was like pulling off a bandage: the quicker I could get it over with, the easier it would be.

She reached her arms around me as soon as the door closed and I pushed her away. I couldn't help but remember how I'd been in the same situation last week when I went over to Natasha's, but now I was playing the other role: the part of the one who had to push the other person away.

"No," I said, "we actually need to talk."

I could see the expression in her eyes. The one where she knew exactly where this was going, but was wishing that she was wrong. Like watching a car accident about to happen in slow motion, knowing that the end result is inevitable, but hanging on to the fact that, because it hadn't actually happened yet, there was still hope that it might not.

"Okay," she said, forcing that smile across her face even as her eyes painted a different picture.

"I think," I said, "that it's not a good idea for us to keep doing this."

Her face started quivering, and a tear began to cover the lower surface of her eye.

"What do you mean?"

She knew exactly what I meant. There was only one way for this conversation to go from here, and denial was the only thing she could grab ahold of at this moment.

"I mean it's inappropriate for us to keep this going," I said. "It's better if we stop before one of us gets hurt."

*Too late*, I thought to myself, and so I added an amendment to that statement.

"Gets hurt too badly, I mean."

I said what I had to say, and now I was just waiting for her response. She used anger as a method of sucking those tears back into the ducts where they came from. Her face turned red with ire and I worried that I should have remembered that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. I could have workshopped how this could have gone, but I stopped myself from digging deeper by holding back my instincts and saying the first thing that came to mind.



If I had uttered the cliché that it wasn't her, it was me, she was liable to explode right then and there.

Not saying it didn't exactly keep her calm, though.

"You used me, Jackson," she said.

"No," I said. "I swear I wasn't."

"You used me to learn about the Trevor Turner NDA and now that you've gotten it, you're done with it, right? That's how it goes?"

Of course it wasn't. I had hooked up with her because she was hot, and in the process, she happened to give me useful information, which I wasn't about to ignore.

But that didn't exactly strengthen my case. As was the case so often, the best thing for me to do at that moment was keep my mouth shut.

"I'm reporting you to McDavis," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"You heard me."

She walked past me and I tried to stop her by grabbing her shoulder, but she snapped back at me: "Don't you *dare* touch me."

That was as good a warning as I was likely to get, and I moved my hands up in a defensive position as far away from her body as I could. She took that opportunity to storm out of the room, leaving me in fear for the rest of the day, waiting for the shoe to drop and for McDavis to call me into his office to reprimand and potentially fire me. I'd violated the office ethics code by pursuing a romantic relationship with a co-worker without reporting it, and if Erica was feeling particularly vicious, she could very reasonably accuse me of sexual harassment and abuse of power.

Normally, my defense against this sort of thing was to not have an ugly break-up, but I was clumsy here, and it was coming back to bite me.

I made eye contact with Zoe as I walked out of the private room. There was a questioning look on her face, which I answered with a subtle nod. She returned to her work and I returned to my desk, pretending to work as I waited for the inevitable.

At 11:47 AM, McDavis called me into his office. I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign, but with less than fifteen minutes before lunch, it was clear he intended to make this a short meeting.

"Take a seat," he said.

"Sir, I can explain," I said.

He brushed that away dismissively. His face was as relaxed and friendly as if nothing bad had happened at all.

"You banged the secretary?" he asked.

As a lawyer, I knew it was in my best interest to not answer any direct questions like that. If he already knew, then he knew. And if he wasn't sure, that would act as a confession.

"Good man," he said to my silence. "Let's be real. Every lawyer at every law firm has banged the secretary at some point in his career. You're not going to lose your job for this."

That was a relief.

"But we live in different times now, so I need to officially give you a warning to say that we at least did something. And, as part of that warning, you're going to need to complete a 30-minute online course on workplace harassment."

He sounded almost apologetic towards me, that I'd need to endure the mild inconvenience of watching a short video and answering a few short questions with obvious answers.

"That's it?"

"Yeah," he said. "For you. We'll come up with an excuse to get rid of Erica. We can't do it today, mind you, but give me a few weeks and I'll fire her."

"What?" I asked. He was going to fire Erica for complaining to him?

“Sorry,” he shrugged. “I’d do it sooner, but we need to keep at least some temporal distance between her complaint and her dismissal in order to protect our liability.”

I felt very conflicted. On one hand, I was happy to have kept my job, but on the other, Erica hadn’t done anything wrong. I was reminded of the adage that no good deed goes unpunished.

“Do we really need to do that, sir?”

He nodded. “Oh yeah. We’re not going to want to keep her around. For one thing, it’s always awkward between the two employees, and you’re too good of a lawyer to get rid of. And, for another, if she’s ratting you out, she’s too risky to keep in the office. We can’t trust her, you know what I mean?”

“I hear you,” I said, which was as neutral a response as I could give him at that moment to show that I understood without indicating that I agreed with the decision.

“We’ve done this sort of thing before, it won’t be a problem,” he said. “By the way, while I have you in here, I thought you might like to hear that you’re on the path to becoming a partner. Orderly was pushing for someone else, but with him out of the picture — rest in peace, naturally — Orville and I should be able to move you through pretty quickly.”

The one Orderly was pushing for must have been Zoe. Because he died, I’d be named partner. And I wasn’t sure how to deal with that. It wasn’t how I wanted to win.

“Anyway,” he said, “it’s lunchtime. Have a good one, and keep up the good work.”

He was telling me everything I wanted to hear, and I felt terrible about it.

# CHAPTER 17



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

I'd watched Jackson walk into McDavis's office, afraid he might not come out with a job. And, when he emerged, the look on his face gave me no indication that he still had one. He looked as nervous and stressed as I'd ever seen him, and he made a beeline straight to me.

"Meet me in the private office," he said, his voice hushed into almost a whisper. "We need to talk."

There was urgency in his voice. Even if it was lunchtime, I knew this was important enough to forgo at least part of our break.

"I did what you asked," he said once the door closed. "I broke things off with Erica, and she was pissed."

I could have pieced that together from the way she'd stormed out of the private room earlier and the nervous expression on Jackson's face ever since, particularly when he was called into the boss's office.

"What happened with McDavis?" I asked.

"Nothing," he told me. "I still have my job, but she's about to lose hers for reporting me."

McDavis wasn't stupid enough to fire Erica right away, and the proud way she strutted out of his office suggested she thought she had the upper hand. It was not the walk of somebody who thought she'd have to get to work updating her resume.

"When?" I asked.

“He said a few weeks time.”

“She doesn’t know, then?”

He shook his head.

“And what’s more,” he told me, “McDavis made it clear this wasn’t the first time something like this has happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, being as clear as possible, “we might have a class action wrongful termination suit on our hands.”

“No,” I said, “that’s not going to happen. You’re being paranoid.”

“What do you mean?” he looked legitimately confused.

“I mean, for there to be a class action suit, these women would need to get together. And they don’t know that they exist. They’re not lawyers, so they wouldn’t even know how to reach out to each other.

“And, on top of that, even if they could get together, they’d need to find a lawyer to represent them. And that lawyer would need to be stupid enough to file a lawsuit against the biggest firm in the area. It would be career suicide.”

There was a look on his face that I didn’t like. It was as if he already knew everything I’d just told him. Which would mean that I was the one who wasn’t understanding something.

It clicked almost instantly. But he couldn’t be thinking what it sounded like he was thinking.

“Exactly,” he said, when he saw the pieces coming together in my mind.

*Oh my God, I thought. He’s actually thinking about doing this. He wants to be the lawyer that unites the class for the suit and sues his own law firm.*

“Jackson, no,” I said.

“Just hear me out,” he said.

“We are not talking about this,” I said. “We could both lose our jobs for even thinking it.”

He gestured around us. “This is private. Nobody will find out. You don’t need to say anything, just listen to me.”

I was terrified to do so. And yet my feet didn’t take me out of the room. If he wasn’t so goddamned charismatic, I would have. I would have marched right out of there and potentially reported it directly to McDavis and Boyd.

“Jackson, I have Cassidy to worry about. I can’t do anything risky like this.”

“It’s not risky,” he said. “Okay, okay, it’s a little bit risky, but you know it’s the right thing to do.”

“Say it outright,” I told him. “I want to hear you say exactly what you’re proposing here.”

He looked left and right, out of habit no doubt, not out of any actual fear that anybody else could be listening to us. We were the only ones in the room and our voices couldn’t possibly extend outside the four surrounding walls.

Still, he refused to say it in a voice louder than a whisper.

“I’m saying we go rogue.”

“You really are insane,” I told him.

“Are you a good person?” he asked. “Do you consider yourself a good person?”

“Don’t pull this on me, Jackson,” I said. “I am a good person. I’m a good mother and a hard worker and I donate five percent of my salary to feeding the homeless.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Because it’s a silly question,” I told him. “Good, bad, whatever. We’re all people. And part of being in this world means having to sell a part of your soul to the devil. It’s what we do every day coming in here to defend people like Trevor Turner. And since the devil owns that part of my soul, he doesn’t get to touch the rest of it.”

“You’re rationalizing,” he said with a sly smile. It was a trick I’d seen him use in negotiating and even in the courtroom. The trick was confidence. If you could display

confidence, then you could convince a jury that you had the upper hand no matter what you said. It often even worked on judges.

“No, I’m not,” I said. “Do you really think I’m going to jump ship from the law firm right when I’m on the verge of being made partner?”

With that, the expression on his face completely dropped.

“What?” I asked. “Did you forget about that already?”

“You’re not going to be made partner,” he said. The words flew out of his mouth without hesitation, giving him no time to retract them.

At first, I thought he was telling me something about me, that he didn’t think I was a good enough lawyer to become partner, but I quickly determined that couldn’t be what he was saying. He knew something.

“What?” I asked again. “What do you mean?”

“McDavis said it was going to me,” Jackson said. “Orderly was the only one pushing for you. Now that he’s not here, Boyd and McDavis are giving the promotion to me.”

My head felt light as the room spun around me, and I needed to take a seat.

Of course that was the case. For all his lechery, Orderly was the only one of the three who seemed to talk to me with genuine respect. Both Boyd and McDavis always seemed to underestimate my abilities, forcing me to fight to get the meatier projects like the Trevor Turner NDA.

They were going to go with the man just because he’s a man.

“Between you and me,” Jackson said, “there is no way that I deserve this over you. If you forced me to be honest about it, I’d say you were the better lawyer. And that’s why I need you.”

“Flattery isn’t going to convince me to give up the one stable thing in my life right now,” I said, although I did like hearing him finally admit aloud something that wasn’t even in



doubt. Don't get me wrong, Jackson was a good lawyer, and he was more efficient than I was. It would sometimes take me twice as long to do the same task as him.

But when we both finished, and you compare the work we'd done, there's no question that I would have done a better job.

Speed is important, but for the kind of thing Jackson was suggesting — us going up alone against the proverbial Goliath — speed wasn't good enough.

And so I knew he wasn't *just* flattering me.

But I also knew it would be downright idiotic for me to go along with his Pollyanna plan, even if it was hard to argue with the fact that it was the “right” thing to do.

“Look,” I said, “I admire what you're trying to do here. But if you leave and pursue this cause, you're going to lose. And that benefits nobody.”

“But what if we don't lose?” he asked.

“Playing the what if game is stupid, Jackson. Be reasonable here.”

But that wasn't what he was going to do. Once he got a stupid idea in his mind, it was hard for him to shake it. That was part of being impulsive, I guess.

“Do me a favor,” I said. “At least sleep on it and think it over. Can you do that?”

He didn't like that.

“Humor me,” I said. “We can talk about it tomorrow. There's no reason to rush into this. In fact, if you are going to do it, it's best to keep it a secret and make sure you've got all the dominoes lined up before you let the first one fall. Erica hasn't even been fired yet. You'd need to at least wait for her to be terminated to accuse the firm of wrongful termination.”

“But the other people who have lost their jobs...”

I stopped him.

“Please, Jackson, this problem will still exist tomorrow. Can you promise me you’ll think about this for 24 hours before you do anything?”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said. “For you.”

I looked in his eyes to see if he was telling the truth and I believed he was. Or at least I believed that he thought he was.

And the problem with impulsive guys like Jackson is that they can change their minds on a whim.

# CHAPTER 18



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

She was only asking for 24 hours. And, deep down, I knew she was right to tell me not to jump head-first into things, but it was so hard to resist. Zoe was a thoughtful person who contemplated every decision before making it. And it was good to have people like her in the world. But sometimes acting from the heart was the best way to go.

Actually, acting from the heart was the only way to go.

Because rationally, nobody would act from the heart. It was always stupid. And yet the best things in life came only from the heart. Kissing Zoe wasn't a rational thing to do. It complicated everything, but I had to do it then. My heart was screaming it to me so loudly that my brain was powerless to fight back.

And a similar thing was happening now. I was witnessing a massive injustice that I was, at least in part, responsible for.

But I could wait 24 hours. I'd still be just as angry about it tomorrow.

There was the sound of the door to the private office opening, and we both turned towards it. McDavis walked in with Trevor Turner and a young woman who had to have been Danielle Ballard, his former mistress.

I must have forgotten how young 19 really was, because she looked like a child. She was a child. She was barely able to vote legally and couldn't buy a pack of cigarettes. And yet she was about to sign a legally binding contract on her own,

stupidly walking into this agreement without a lawyer of her own present.

I felt that same discomfort that I'd felt when I learned about Erica losing her job. And a thought popped into my head — something I'd seen in an old British sketch show.

*Are we the baddies?*

“Ms. Ballard, these are the two lawyers who drafted the agreement,” McDavis said. “Jackson Ekland and Zoe Travis.”

Of course he said my name first. I didn't write a word of that agreement, and yet I got listed first because I was the one with the dick dangling between my legs.

Zoe stepped forward and shook the young woman's hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ballard.”

“Likewise,” the young lady said meekly.

Following Zoe's lead, I also shook Danielle's hand. “Thank you for joining us,” I said.

Instinctively, I wanted to turn on the charm, like I did with any new client or any professional interaction I had, but it made me feel so vile. Like I was flirting with a child. Instead, I offered her a blank stare.

We all sat down and Zoe began going through the details of the agreement.

“Feel free to read the text,” Zoe said. We always said this when we knew whoever we were talking to had no chance of deciphering the cryptic legalese burying the main point. Danielle would have to rely on our summary to know what she was agreeing to. We wouldn't lie to her, but we would highlight the things that made the agreement sound good to her while moving past the stipulations that would hurt her as quickly as possible.

“But,” Zoe continued, “essentially, it's very simple. You don't discuss what transpired between you and Mr. Turner, and for your discretion and silence, he will offer you \$10,000 cash. No additional strings attached.”

Danielle flipped through the paperwork in front of her, attempting to parse the run-on sentences with inverted logic and passive verbs.

“What happens if I do talk?” she asks. “Like accidentally?”

“It’s very much in both your interests not to do that,” McDavis said. “Essentially, you’d nullify the NDA and have to pay a 500% penalty on top of the settlement money, which you would also be required to return.”

“That’s \$60,000 in total,” Zoe said, “but that’s just what we have to put into the agreement for completeness. Obviously, if you don’t commit the violation, you can keep the money, and neither of you need to think about this ever again.”

She looked visibly uncomfortable and out of place. It was easy to imagine that just a few short weeks ago, she was likely living on cloud nine and counting her lucky stars while she was up there, wondering how she’d ended up with a man like Trevor Turner, imagining that she would be living the life of a millionaire for as long as she remained here on Earth.

“It’s just...” she began. “\$10,000 doesn’t seem like very much money to me.”

*Good for you, I thought. Make Trevor dig deep in his pockets for your silence.*

“I looked it up online, Trevor,” she said. “You’re worth \$260 million.”

Trevor began to speak, but McDavis stopped him.

“What you need to understand, dear,” McDavis said, “is that all of that money is tied up in stocks and assets. Just because you’re worth a certain amount of money doesn’t mean you have that amount of money handy.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but...”

“Keep in mind,” McDavis said, “Trevor didn’t need to offer you anything. This is a good deal for you both, regardless of the money. In addition to you not saying anything, this

agreement ensures that Mr. Turner will also remain silent about your liaison. The money is just a cherry on top.”

I looked over at Zoe, who refused to look back at me. She remained focused and serious, playing the role of the ice queen in the moment.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Danielle said. “I don’t care if Trevor talks about me. I’ve been through break-ups before. None of my exes made me sign any forms like this.”

“Ms. Ballard,” Zoe said. “What happened after these breakups? Are you still on good terms with these gentlemen?”

“Well,” Danielle said, “there was Dylan who told all my friends that I cheated on him even though he was the one who cheated on me...”

“That’s right,” Zoe said. “If you’d signed an NDA with Dylan, that wouldn’t have happened. Unfortunately, when you’re a man with as delicate a reputation as Mr. Turner, it can be catastrophic for someone to spread malicious rumors. Now, he could always take said person to court for slandering him, but that’s reactive, and an NDA is protective.”

McDavis chimed in. “Exactly. Now, none of us expect you to do such things, but Mr. Turner needs to do this for everyone he sees, just in case. As I said, it’s essentially free money because you had no intention of tarnishing Mr. Turner’s image. So let’s just sign this so you can get your check and we can call it an early day. What do you say?”

All eyes were locked on Danielle as she looked back and forth between us. Psychically, I was trying to tell her not to do it. To run out and find a lawyer of her own. Or to sell her story to the tabloids for ten times what the producer was offering her.

Of course, I couldn’t explicitly tell her that. Not in front of my boss. Not after I’d promised Zoe I wouldn’t be doing anything impulsive for the next 24 hours.

“Okay,” Danielle said, reluctantly.

“Great,” McDavis said. “Let me go grab our notary so we can go ahead and do this.”

Well, to be fair, I didn't actually promise Zoe that I wouldn't do anything impulsive.

What I promised was that I wouldn't actively sue our law firm for wrongful termination in the next 24 hours. Maybe it was a loophole or maybe I was just a liar, but I wasn't sure I could live with myself if I let this agreement go through.

McDavis stepped away from the table and walked out of the room. We'd have only a moment or two before he returned with our notary and once pen touched paper, the agreement would be ironclad, and Trevor would have gotten away with a paltry payoff for another one of his countless victims, too young and unworldly to fight back.

I could either sit here and allow it to happen, or I could stop it.

Again, I looked towards Zoe for reassurance and she shot back at me with a glare, making it clear that if I did choose this opportunity to go rogue, then I'd be completely on my own.

When McDavis stepped back in with the notary, I'd made my decision: I was going to let this thing happen. But like any arbitrary decision, I immediately questioned it and wondered if it was really what I wanted. I knew that I was living a different life now that I was even a week ago. Now I had to take care of Jude, just as Zoe had to take care of her daughter. I couldn't sacrifice my job for some noble cause that I had virtually zero chance of winning.

"Well, okay, then," McDavis said. "Let's get Trevor to sign right here."

I watched as Trevor smiled and put his name on the line. Once Danielle added hers, the notary would approve it, and that would be the end. I only had seconds to change my mind at this point.

"And now your turn, Ms. Ballard," McDavis said, handing her the pen. She put it on the paper and I couldn't let her continue. I grabbed the pen out of her hand.

"You're getting screwed, Danielle," I said.

"What?" McDavis asked.



But she didn't say anything. She smiled at me, reassured that somebody was telling her the thing that, deep down, she knew was true. In place of her pen, I gave her my card.

"You could easily get 100 times what he's offering you," I said.

"That's ridiculous," Trevor said. "I would never agree to that."

"Jackson," McDavis said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm offering my resignation," I told him. "And I'm offering representation to Ms. Ballard as an independent agent, completely pro bono."

For a brief second I looked over at Zoe. The expression was shocked yet not surprised, and if I wasn't mistaken, deep below the level of fear and discomfort, was there a little bit of pride?

She refused to outright admit before that what I was suggesting was indeed the right thing to do, but she did say that the law firm was the devil she'd sold part of her soul to.

And, in that moment, I'd taken back my soul and drawn a sword on the devil.

"That is," I said to Danielle, "if you'd like to hire me as your representation."

"Think what you're doing, Jackson," McDavis said. "If you follow through with this, I can sue you for breach of contract."

And, if he did, he'd have to admit to whatever judge saw us that he was manipulating and lying to a young woman in the hope of preventing a cheapskate millionaire from paying her what her silence was truly worth.

We all waited with bated breath for Danielle's response. It was almost impossible to imagine her following through and signing the contract at this point, but was she going to take me on as her representation?

“Understand, Ms. Ballard,” McDavis said, “that this is a one-time offer. If you don’t sign this contract, you’re effectively kissing \$10,000 goodbye. The easiest \$10,000 you’ll make in your life.”

Zoe was oddly silent during this. I interpreted this as her refusing to participate but not quite on board with being antagonistic to the man who was paying her bills every month.

And that’s when Danielle turned to Zoe.

“What would you do?” she asked.

Zoe was immediately uncomfortable sitting in the middle of the spotlight, in a tug-o-war between her conscience and her livelihood. Yes, I should have given her the 24 hours to think things over, but this was something that jumped out in the road in front of us.

Was she going to join me or cower back into the corner of safety, aligning herself with the team that, as she put it, was the devil?

“I’d tear that contract up and leave,” Zoe said. “It’s a slap in the face.”

And that’s when the words popped into my head. Words I felt immediately at that moment, but didn’t dare vocalize. Words that terrified me more than quitting my job and going up against my former boss.

In fact, these may have been the scariest words I could possibly imagine as they came completely out of nowhere, too soon to possibly be true.

And yet I absolutely meant them:

*I love you, Zoe Travis.*

# CHAPTER 19



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

What did I just say? In front of my boss? In my defense, I was thrown in front of a bus by Danielle and didn't have time to come up with a way to tell her to take that pathetic excuse for a deal while still remaining truthful. And that was the catch. I couldn't truthfully tell her anything that would encourage her to sign that agreement.

And I think she knew that. Which is why she asked me. She could see I was remaining quiet through the whole ordeal, backing into a corner, trying to find a shadow to hide in, though none existed.

And it worked.

While she didn't do something as dramatic as tear up the contract, she did the next best thing.

"I would like to consult my lawyer before I sign anything," she said. "I'll be calling..." She looked at the business card Jackson had given her. "...Jackson Ekland, attorney at law, to represent me. I can show myself out."

She walked towards the exit, and Trevor was about to chase after her when McDavis grabbed his sleeve to stop him.

"Don't worry, Trevor," he said, "she's playing hardball, but we can play it right back at her."

McDavis looked at the two of us.

"Now, the both of you better get the hell out of my office before I call security."

Jackson and I made it to the parking lot before we kissed in celebration. My heart was a jackhammer at that point, and my head was in the clouds. What was I even doing? I had no guarantee of anything at this point. I didn't know where I was going to be the next morning — normally I'd be going into the office, but I'd just ensured that wasn't an option.

And, yet, I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt happier and freer.

Jackson stopped kissing me for a second and looked into my eyes. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

He gestured towards his car.

"Follow me," he said. "I know the perfect place."

We drove down the 10 freeway, onto the Pacific Coast Highway. It was a pretty day, even if it was a bit chilly, and, as such, the beaches were empty. I rolled down a window to breathe the salty air and followed him into a parking lot, right as the sun was beginning to get low in the sky.

Cassidy's daycare would hold on to her until 8 PM — a nice perk for those of us who worked late — though they charged extra for it. As a woman who was newly unemployed, maybe I should have been more considerate of the financial situation I'd found myself in — but if ever there was a day to spoil myself and try and give myself something to appreciate it, it was today.

Even as I parked the car after driving and getting as far away from the office as possible, my hands were still shaking. That was the problem with stress. No matter where you went, you could never fully get away from it.

When I got out of the car, I stood beside Jackson, who took me in his arms, protecting me from the harsh ocean breeze — relatively speaking of course, as it never fell below 45 degrees in Los Angeles.

"You realize we don't have jobs anymore, right?" I asked him.

“Sure we do. We’re still lawyers. What we don’t have is a law firm telling us what clients we can or can’t take on. We’re free.”

“But we don’t have money coming in.”

“You have savings,” he said. “I know you do because you’re a planner.”

He wasn’t wrong. Based on what I had in the bank, I could easily make it six months without changing anything in my life. If I tightened my budget a bit, Cassidy and I could probably stretch that out to a year or more. Especially if not going to work meant I wouldn’t have to pay daycare.

“Savings run out, though,” I said.

“And that’ll be tomorrow’s problem. You can worry about it today, but it’s a waste of energy. Worry about being the best lawyer you can be. We’ll get through this together and come out the other end of it thriving, better than before.”

He sounded so sure of himself. I couldn’t actually believe him because he didn’t have a crystal ball in front of him and had no better idea of the future than anyone else did, but his confidence was comforting. He wasn’t scared of what would happen, and though I was quivering with fear over what tomorrow would bring, he was as sturdy as a rock, as if he didn’t have a worry in the world.

And then he kissed me. Surrounded by the sand and the roar of the water crashing into the beach, I realized there was nowhere else I’d rather be. I could have been back in the office right then — on any other day, I would have been — but today, I got to stand on the beach, living in a fantasy world without consequences.

It was pretty nice.

Allowing myself to accept the illusion calmed me down, though I was still shaking. I realized it wasn’t from fear or stress, but from the sheer cold of the wind that I wasn’t used to.

“Here, come on,” he said, walking me towards his car.

In the backseat, his body heat remained trapped inside, forming a blanket around me as we continued to kiss each other and move our hands over each other's bodies as though we were both in our teens, breaking curfew and hiding from our parents.

The sun, setting in the west, reflected over the water, sending all sorts of colors into the sky that surrounded us, creating a surreal quality to the experience, not unlike the technicolor glow that we'd experienced in the theater just a few short nights ago.

It was unbelievable how much my life had changed in less than a week. This time, seven days ago, I was a single mom with a standard job I didn't think about and mostly took for granted. Now, I was hooking up with a sexy man who I had thought I hated, but who broke things off and ultimately gave up his job because of a domino rally of events. He may have put those tiles in place, but I pushed the first one down when I had him take me out on a fake date.

Or maybe he was the one who started the chain reaction by turning it into a real date. The law was focused on blame and responsibility, but life didn't always work that way. Sometimes, things just happened, and there was no way to parse out where the causality came from.

Like right then, why did Jackson's hand slowly move south on my body? His hand was on my face, gently touching it as he kissed me, and then it gradually made its way to my breast, fondling my erect nipple. Was this his decision, or was he just allowing the sounds I'd made in response to his touch to guide his path? Whatever the reason, that hand was soon on my torso and lifting up my shirt, which soon landed on the backseat floor. And then it kept going, removing my pants — though that required a brief break for me to help.

As I took off my pants, he stripped down too, somewhat awkwardly in the tight backseat of his vehicle, but not so tight that I couldn't appreciate his gorgeous body, those tight pecs with the small brown nipples on the edge. Even in the contorted positions we had to put ourselves in so as not to bump into each other during the clumsy dance, I could

appreciate his stomach, folded to hide the outline of his abs, but still very much there.

And through his underwear, I could see the outline of his firm cock, begging to unleash itself onto me. I wasn't one to hold it back.

We stripped down further until we were completely naked, out there in our cars in public — it might have been quite the show if anyone was around to see it.

At that moment, with the stress of the future still making its way through my system, I needed him. I needed his reassurance, and I needed him to allow me to feel anything else other than the mix of fear and excitement flowing through me which was causing my brain to bounce back and forth between the extremes.

He turned me around and guided himself into me from behind and as soon as he was in me, I couldn't think of anything else but him. As I pressed against the car door for support, he leaned over me, pushing into me and kissing the back of my neck as he held me in place with one arm and used the other for balance.

Every time he was close to me like this, I couldn't help but realize how much I'd been missing the past half-decade or so of my life. As much as I'd sworn off men, and perhaps rightfully so, the right one could make me feel incredible. And just the closeness of another human being like this was a reminder of what it meant to be alive instead of just a cog in a machine.

I'd thought going into the office every day and earning my living was important, but what good was that if it came at the cost of this?

And Jackson was unbelievably good at it, filling me with his girth as his hips rhythmically hit my ass and provided a satisfying-sounding slap each time.

My eyes had instinctively closed, but I forced them open to take in the view of the beach, right as the sun dipped below the horizon and the brightest stars began to light up the sky as



steam began to cover the windows, blurring the images around us.

When we first become intimate with other people, everything seems so important. The first kiss. The loss of virginity. The first man who actually managed to lead me to climax.

But over time, everything blends together, and we lose track of individual moments except for the few highlights that remain burned into our memories forever.

And I could tell while I was experiencing it that this was one of them. Everything was so perfect, not just in the way that Jackson was rubbing against me, hitting right where he needed to in order to build that orgasmic pressure inside me, but in the absolute and dire need that I had to feel it at that moment as well as the almost surreal image of the ocean off into the distance. I wished I could paint it or photograph everything about it, not just what I was seeing, but what I was feeling and smelling, too.

There was no technology that could do it. Only memory could bring me back there and I would cherish it forever.

I didn't try to hold back the orgasm as it took hold of me, nor did I try to force it forward. Jackson had complete control of me and I gave myself to him in that moment, trusting him to satisfy me without my needing to do anything more than sit back and let him.

He more than delivered. When I climaxed, I let out a therapeutic shriek that was just at the cusp of hurting my vocal cords but didn't quite pass there. And though I was out of breath afterwards, I was fully relaxed and collapsed into the seat, letting him fall forward and roll beside me, spooning me into his arms.

*I could live like this*, I thought, allowing the fantasy to take hold. *This could be every night, falling asleep by curling up into his arms and feeling safe.*

A tear fell down the side of my face, getting caught on the side of my smile before falling off onto the floor of the car

where it would live invisibly forever.

I almost told him the truth, that this was the best sex of my life, but I bit my tongue. After all, he was still Jackson and I wasn't about to inflate his ego any more than it already was. These instincts die hard, but deep down, I couldn't fight the most terrifying truth: I was falling in love with him.

And falling hard.

# CHAPTER 20



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

Zoe didn't say anything as she cradled herself into my arms as we lay naked in the back seat of my car, catching our breath in the thick, steamy air of the car. She felt so comfortable and I wanted to say something, but I didn't know where the two of us stood. This obviously wasn't just a casual fling anymore. Especially not with the stunt I pulled in the office that afternoon. We weren't just having fun anymore — we, in a very literal sense, were dependent on each other. In fact, we needed each other.

Eventually, I did break the silence.

“Shit,” I said. “I need to get Jude.”

What even was time? How was it already 6:30? At the same time, how was it only 6:30? Without any snow or adverse weather, winter never really felt like winter in Los Angeles, and the early setting sun was just about the only clear indicator of the season.

I began putting my clothes on and Zoe also sat up in the car.

“So what do we do?” she asks. “I mean tomorrow or the next day.”

“We wait for a call,” I said. “Let me worry about that. You take the day off. You've earned it. I'll let you know if I hear anything from Danielle.”

“What if we don't?”

“Then we have to wait to see if Erica actually loses her job,” I told her. “But, in the meantime, we can do some research and reach out to the other women who have lost their jobs and see if it was the result of similar circumstances.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“There’s not a public record of their names.”

“Why would we need a public record?” I asked. “The last year or so we lost Rachel Valdez, Nancy Kaufman, Penelope Tetra, Caroline Knight, and Hannah Zeal, though I think she may have changed her name after the wedding.”

She looked at me in awe as she put her bra back on.

“How...?” she struggled to find the words. “How do you remember that like that?”

I was almost more surprised that she didn’t.

“You talk to people and get to know them,” I said. “Once you do that, it’s impossible to truly forget them.”

\* \* \*

My only job for the next day was to wait for a phone call. As it happened, I got a phone call that night, though it wasn’t from Danielle. It was from Natasha, who wanted to know if she could meet me at a park in the morning before I had to go to work so she could see Jude.

I told her it was her lucky day because we could even make it in the afternoon as I was unemployed. We agreed to make it 10 AM.

She was wearing a weak attempt at a disguise when I saw her. A big wig and sunglasses with frumpy clothing. I could see right through it and so could Jude, but I didn’t see any photographers anywhere near us, so maybe it did its job.

“Mommy!” Jude said and ran over to her. She picked him up, though not without a struggle — she was rather petite —

and gave him a big hug. For a moment, I thought she might never let go of him. I'd never seen someone look so sad and so happy at the same time.

"Go play," Natasha said, putting him down. "I need to talk to your dad, okay?"

"Okay," he said, "but you'll watch me on the swing?"

"Sure will, champ," she said with a smile.

"Yay!" Jude said and ran off to the playground, where he jumped onto a swing and began kicking his way into a full-on parabolic movement in record speed.

"How's he been with you?" she asked as we sat down on the bench. She took a brief moment to look behind her and all around her, to make sure things were safe I imagined, or maybe to formulate an exit plan in case she needed one.

"It's an adjustment," I said, "but it's going well."

"How much damage has he caused?" There was a sly look in her eyes. The question was a joke in that she thought it was a little bit funny, but it wasn't a joke in the fact that it was a legitimate question with a real answer.

"Easily \$2000 worth on the first night alone," I said.

She wasn't smiling after she heard that. "You're joking."

"I wish I was," I said. "He took my mint action figures out of their packaging and started playing with them."

"Oh my God," she said. "Can I... pay you for them?"

The way she was asking the question made me think that she was hoping I'd say no. I remembered the thing she'd said when I'd first met Jude, that she would have gotten a bodyguard if she could have afforded one. She didn't have as much money as I might have guessed. Record executives didn't make money by giving it all to the artists.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "They're only things. At first, I was pretty upset, but you know what? It's really not that much. If I had to sacrifice them to get to have Jude in my life, then it's a pretty good trade."

“That’s a nice way of looking at it,” she told me. She looked over my shoulder and behind me. I couldn’t see her eyes too well from behind the dark shades she had on, but I imagined there would be lines under her eyes from losing sleep. The paranoia was taking its toll and was hard to ignore.

“He’s a real good kid,” I said. “You’ve done a good job with him.”

“Oh, please,” she said. “He’s succeeded despite me and the crazy life that we’ve had to live together. I’m glad he’s gotten a chance away from the spotlight with you. It might not be a normal life, but it’s closer than whatever he’s used to.”

I was sure she was being modest. Every once in a while, she became aware of her own talent — usually when it related to her musical ability — but mostly she remained meek and shy about it.

“Is it what you wanted it to be?” I asked her. “Fame?”

She shook her head. “I never wanted it,” she said. “It just happened. Some of it is nice, but mostly, I wish I could go back to before everyone knew who I was. The first time somebody recognized me and said they appreciated my music, it was flattering, but now it’s exhausting. I have to pretend it’s the first time I’ve ever heard it every time I hear it lest I offend a fan and they go online to tell the world about what a bitch I am.”

It was hard for her to maintain eye contact with me. Her head kept darting around, as if a paparazzo was about to jump out from behind a tree to photograph her. How did she even live like this? If I was in her shoes and that nervous about everything, I’d do everything in my power to get out of Los Angeles.

“Why are you still here?” I asked. “Why not run away?”

“I would if I could,” she said, “but they’ve got me locked into a contract for three more records minimum over the next six years. The benefit to that, though, is I get to tour, and that at least gets me out of tabloid ground zero.”

She shook her head.

“But anyway, that’s enough about me. What’s going on with you? You said you lost your job?”

“It’s fine,” I told her, feigning certainty, which was the only trick I knew to get through a situation like this. “A friend and I are starting our own law firm. We got sick of working for Satan and want to help people who actually deserve it.”

“There’s money in that?”

It was an obvious question, so obvious in fact, that I didn’t need to respond for her to know the answer. In fact, it was my lack of a response that gave it away.

“I see,” she said. “How’d you convince someone else to join you? What’d you tell him?”

With almost surgical precision, she asked the other question I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer for her. It had been a while since we’d been seeing each other, but again, the fact that I didn’t immediately respond gave her the answer better than any words could.

“Ah, so it’s not a him I’m to gather?”

“No, it’s not,” I admitted, wondering if that was going to upset her. It didn’t.

“So was it your idea then, or hers?”

“It was mine,” I said. “She kind of got sucked up into it.”

“Mommy!” Jude shouted. “Look how high I am!”

He really was doing well, especially for a kid who didn’t seem like he knew how to use a swing a week ago.

“Wow, honey!” she said. “That’s amazing!”

His face lit up from the compliment and he started kicking even harder, though I wasn’t sure it was possible to get any higher than he already was without flying off into space.

“She’s got a kid, too,” I told Natasha. “I feel bad about that.”

“About her having a kid?”



I laughed. “No, but that’s how I used to feel. Now I feel bad about leading her off a cliff with me when she has Cassidy to worry about. They really do change your life when you realize you don’t have to just think about yourself anymore.”

“They certainly do,” Natasha said. In that moment, she looked over at Jude and got suddenly serious. I could see it on her face, even through the disguise.

“How much longer do you think you’ll need to be away from him?”

“Jackson, I wish I knew. Honestly, it’s this thing with VIR. Once we finish up the record and I get a new producer, I think they’ll leave me alone.”

“So nothing’s going on with you two, then?” I asked.

She sighed. “Honestly, it’s just a thing. He happens to be convenient. You know, like you and me were. We’re having a good time. We like each other. But if he disappeared off the face of the earth tomorrow, I’d be able to go on.”

“Is that all I meant to you?”

“Oh no,” she said, reaching forward to touch my shoulder and calm me. A week or so ago, that touch may have meant something to me. I might have thought I could act on it and try and make my way back into her good graces, but with Zoe in my life, I just wasn’t feeling it. I could honestly say that I had zero interest in Natasha as anything more than an old friend. “You were special, but you weren’t that kind of special, you know? I had to go on tour, and we called things off in an instant. I could do the same thing with VIR.”

She snapped her fingers and then looked over at Jude. “There’s only one guy I couldn’t do that with. And, unfortunately, for the time being, that’s pretty much exactly what I’m doing.”

One more check of her surroundings. She half stood up as she did so and then sat back down when she realized it was safe.

“I’m glad to see he’s in good hands,” she said. “I just wish I could give him what he needed to grow up normal.”

She thought for a second and looked at me. “Jackson, I know you need to do this thing, whatever it is, and I’m not in any position to control your life, but do me a favor.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Whatever you do, make sure that you can provide for Jude even if I can’t. Even if that means getting on your hands and knees and begging for your job back. I’m stuck in this thing whether I like it or not. If you’re making a mistake, you still have a chance to get out of it.”

“I’m not making a mistake,” I told her.

“You sure about that?”

She looked right at me when she asked that, deep into my eyes, and I knew that, whatever I said or even if I said nothing, as I hadn’t before, she’d see right through me and know the true answer.

And that was that I wasn’t sure at all.

In fact, I was absolutely terrified.

But there was one thing I was sure of, regardless of what happened with Zoe and me and our attempt at acting as independents.

“I won’t let anything bad happen to our son,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear.”

# CHAPTER 21



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

“One million cash to be deposited in escrow and released annually to Ms. Ballard over the course of ten years,” I said. “If Ms. Ballard violates the order, the payments are immediately cut off and your client reserves the right to sue for damages. If Mr. Turner violates the gag order, whatever money remains in escrow is released to Ms. Ballard, and this contract is null and void.”

Trevor looked over to McDavis, who was now handling the case on his own, independent of Jackson’s and my help. Both of them looked nervous.

Danielle sat quietly between Jackson and me and, as we advised, remained completely silent, folding her hands over the table and looking straight ahead, refusing to reveal any hints of weakness.

“This will be our final offer,” Jackson said.

“What if I don’t agree to it?” Trevor asked, speaking out of turn. With lawyers in the room, it was never a good idea for the client to say anything, lest he reveal something he didn’t intend to. Lawyers were always dancing with the facts and often saying things that needed to be read between the lines. Interrupting that dance was a very stupid thing to do. Danielle was smart enough to know to let us do our jobs. Trevor, based on what little I knew about him, was probably too much of a narcissist to keep his mouth shut. He was the kind of guy who always thought he was smarter than anyone else, which made him just about the worst client one could ask for.

“Mr. Turner,” I told him, “this deal benefits you. The only reason we’re here in this room right now is you want to stifle Ms. Ballard’s speech. She’s agreed to do that, so long as you pay her what her silence is worth. You and I both know that you’re getting off easy here, considering how much the tabloids would pay Ms. Ballard for an exclusive of this story, including all the lurid details that she knows about you and your, shall we say, specific predilections.”

Danielle hadn’t told us anything specific about her tryst with Trevor, but if I knew one of these power-hungry megalomaniacs, I knew all of them. There was always a very specific and embarrassing kink they had that they’d hate to see made public.

And, judging by his reaction, he was no exception.

“So maybe her silence isn’t worth a full million to you,” Jackson said, following my lead, “that’s no skin off of Ms. Ballard’s back. Truthfully, as her lawyers, we’d advised her to go straight to whoever would pay her the most. But she wanted to at least give you a chance to keep your dignity in this and so that’s what we settled on.”

“I’d like a minute to confer with my lawyer,” Trevor said.

McDavis leaned into Trevor’s ear and whispered something, to which Trevor nodded.

“Okay, fine,” he said, “I’ll sign.”

It was too easy. We could have probably asked for even more. Live and learn, I suppose.

McDavis got the notary, and then we all took care of the signatures. Trevor left, and Jackson escorted Danielle to her car. I was about to join him, but McDavis asked me to stay behind.

“I have no interest in talking to you, sir,” I said. “There’s nothing more for me to say.”

“Just hear me out,” he said. “Then tell me, ‘no,’ but at least give me a chance to offer you something.”

I looked to Jackson, who nodded and then left with Danielle. He trusted me to be on my own with McDavis. I didn't need his supervision.

McDavis began speaking the second he heard the door latch shut.

"Let's cut through the bullshit," he said. "You know this is the part where I make you an offer to come back, but I want to be clear, this isn't coming from a place of fear. It's true if you two are on your own, we're going to end up back in court together, and all things being equal, I'd rather we be on the same side instead of opposite sides. You're a damn fine lawyer, Zoe, and I want you on our team."

"What about Jackson?" I asked.

"He's a damn fine lawyer, too, but he's also a powder keg. He just cost my client \$990 thousand with his noble antics, and I can't risk something like that happening again. You, on the other hand, usually play by the book and just got dragged into the middle of this by him."

He wasn't entirely wrong, though it felt, to me, more like Danielle was the one who brought me into the middle of things. Still, if Jackson had just played by the rules, she wouldn't have bothered to ask for my input in the first place.

But there was something more to his expression. A glint of something that hinted there was more to what he was asking than just the words.

"What aren't you saying?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"If you want me back, you're going to need to be honest with me," I told him. "Put your cards on the table and tell me what you aren't saying."

He smiled. "Very good," he said. "We know about the pending lawsuit you two are cooking up."

"And that's what you're afraid of?"

"Zoe," he said, "I'm afraid of nothing. I sleep under the boogeyman's bed. This quixotic attempt at heroics on

Jackson's part is going to come back and bite him in the ass. And that's exactly what we want. We're ready for him, and when he finally makes it to court, he's going to fail so spectacularly that he'll never get a job in this town again. It seems to me, though, that it's not worth it to let two good lawyers go to waste."

I could see it in his eyes. He wasn't scared. And if he knew what was coming and wasn't bothering to do anything to put a stop to it, then he was confident. His strategy was to let Jackson fail.

"I'm willing to let bygones be bygones and welcome you back into the firm," he said. "I spoke to Orville and we crunched the numbers." He gave me a sly look, pausing for dramatic effect and wanting me to hang on to his every word. I'd be lying if I couldn't say I was curious. "We're prepared to offer you a 25% raise to sweeten the deal."

That was more than what I'd expected. Considerably more. Usually, raises were capped at around 3%.

"Again, I want to make this clear: this is not an act of desperation. We're not worried about going up against you in terms of whether or not we'll win in the future. You may have won today, but this was an isolated case. And the house always wins. David may beat Goliath in the Old Testament, but this is the world of law, where he doesn't stand a chance."

Like most lawyers, McDavis loved how his voice sounded and would always use at least twice as many words as necessary to get his point across, waxing poetic for dramatic effect and also to ensure the spotlight remained on him as long as possible.

"Still, you're a good enough lawyer that we'd rather be fighting with you than against you."

I was between a rock and a hard place at this point. I didn't want to take McDavis's offer and abandon Jackson, but Jackson was walking right into a trap. I was going to warn him about it, but I knew him and how he felt — he was going to go down in flames before he gave up.

It didn't make sense for me to lose my job over this. Not when Cassidy depended on me. But maybe I could negotiate for just a little bit more.

Because there was still one thing McDavis wasn't mentioning in all his words, and that was the invisible elephant in the room. Invisible because he didn't know I knew it was there: the fact that I was in line to be made a partner.

"If you want me on your team," I said, "then make me partner."

With that, McDavis let out a quick smile that he instantly hid behind his poker face. "You know I can't do that without talking to Orville."

"Then talk to him," I told him, "but it seems to me that you're one named partner short now that Orderly is gone. And, if you want to be fighting with me so badly and keeping me around, a change in title'll do much more than just a raise."

"You spoke to Jackson," McDavis said, letting that smile sneak out a bit more.

"Of course I spoke to him," I said. "We've been working together the past two weeks."

"You know he was in line to become a partner," McDavis said, not as a question, but to make it clear that he knew why I was saying what I was saying. "With him gone, there's an opening for you to sneak in and take it."

"That's your business," I said. "If you have the opening, great, but what I'm saying is that that's what it'll take for me to join back onto the team."

I could see the gears in his head working.

"But you said you weren't going to bullshit me, so let's drop the pretense. You don't need to talk to Orville about any of this. You know you have an opening to make one of your lawyers a partner, and I know that if it wasn't going to be Jackson, it was going to be me."

Now he let the smile out completely.



“That’s why we want you,” he said. “You’re drive a hard bargain.”

I appreciated the compliment, but I felt like he might have been manipulating me. Was this how he expected the conversation to go? Switch it around from him asking me to work for him to me telling him what he’d need to offer for me to come back?

Because when I walked into the private room initially, I had no intention of working with McDavis ever again. Now, however, I was seriously considering it. The last two weeks had been fun and exciting, but deep down, I was still worried about Cassidy’s future. And McDavis was right: We may have won this case, but it was a case that Jackson had stupidly taken pro bono and given her an absurdly good deal where we’d only be walking away with ten percent of whatever she won in the negotiation. And while ten percent of a million sounded like a lot, it had to be split two ways between Jackson and me and then spread out over ten years.

It was not enough to sustain Cassidy and me for any meaningful amount of time.

And we had to work ridiculously long hours devoted to a single case in order to work that deal out. This was not a long-term plan.

If McDavis accepted my offer, I’d be back within the safety net that the firm could offer me and so, too, would Cassidy.

And now, even though I hated it about myself, I was hoping he’d say yes, and was waiting on his word just like he wanted me to.

In other words, I’d taken his bait, and he knew he had me.

“So 25% raise and being made partner?” he asked. “That’s what it’ll take?”

I wanted to turn him down. I really did. I’d finally gotten my soul back from the devil, and now I was negotiating for him to buy it from me once more at a slightly higher price.

But that 25% was just so tempting, as was the promotion, which I might not ever get if I turned it down at this moment.

“Yes,” I said.

He nodded. “I’ll talk to Orville. But I’m pretty sure we can make it work.”

And, with that, he extended his hand. I looked at it cautiously and reluctantly took it, shaking it as firmly as I could. And I felt disgusted in myself for doing so. Like I was letting down myself and letting down Jackson. But I’d get over it.

After all, what was parenting without making a few sacrifices every now and then?

“Welcome back, Zoe. We’re glad to have you.”

The feeling wasn’t mutual. I had to turn on Jackson in order to ensure the safety of my daughter. Even if it was necessary and I knew I’d made the right choice, that didn’t mean I had to be happy about it. In fact, at that moment, I absolutely hated myself.

## CHAPTER 22



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

I walked Danielle to her car for her safety. I was afraid that if she encountered Trevor one-on-one, things might get ugly, but so long as I was there, he didn't cross paths with us. She and I said our goodbyes, she gave me a hug, and then she drove off. Hopefully, I'd never see her again. Such was the nature of being a lawyer. Assuming your client gets what they want and the agreement works out, you won't encounter them ever again.

There was a time when that struck me as sad, but at least there was a finality. With so many people in your life, you end up saying your last goodbye without realizing that it's goodbye for good. At least in a lawyer-client relationship, you know that's it.

My mind contemplated the nature of saying goodbye as I waited in the parking lot for Zoe, but after a few moments, it moved to the question of what was taking so long.

*She's not seriously considering going back, is she?*

The past couple of weeks with Zoe had been unbelievable, not just for our personal relationship but also for our professional one. I always considered myself something of a solo lawyer, trying to do as much as I could on my own without a partner. But the way she worked with me made me better. She wasn't afraid to challenge me or push me to work harder than I might have done by myself.

By the time we went in to finalize the agreement, I knew that what we had was going to work. Obviously, the non-

disclosure agreement we came to was airtight, and there was little doubt that Trevor would sign — though I didn't expect him to be quite so willing and wished we'd pushed him to give us Danielle more money. After all, it wasn't like he couldn't afford it. A million dollars to him was like fifty bucks for me. I'd pay it reluctantly if I had to, but it wasn't like I was going to miss it.

But that was neither here nor there. I checked my watch. She'd been in there for a full ten minutes. That didn't bode well.

If it was me in there instead of her, I'd let McDavis give me his offer, but only to see just how much he thought I was worth to him. And then I'd offer him a pair of middle fingers in exchange, along with a "Fuck you, sir," for good measure before walking out of the office and heading back to Zoe, where we could go back to my place for some celebratory sex up until the point where we absolutely had to leave to pick up the kids from their respective daycares.

But five more minutes passed without Zoe emerging. And, by my watch, it was an additional three minutes after that before she came out of the elevator and went straight towards her car, practically ignoring me in the process.

"Zoe," I said, following after her. "What happened?"

"Jackson, I can't," she said without looking back. "Not now. Let's talk about this later."

I jumped in front of her and lifted her chin so she'd look me in the face. Her eyes were watering, but she managed to keep the tears at bay.

"What do you mean let's talk about this later?" I asked. "We just won our first case. Can't you see he's scared of us?"

"Wake up, Jackson," she said. "He's not scared of us. He's got a huge law firm. At worst, he's annoyed by us."

I saw it in her expression and heard it in her tone. "Oh my God," I said. "He knows what we're planning, doesn't he?"

"Yes," she told me. "We're walking into a trap. We are going to lose."

“We are not,” I said. “We have the truth on our side.”

“And he has endless resources to battle us with,” she told me. “He will prolong that case until we’re bled dry. And nobody will ever hire us again.”

“So you’re working with the enemy?” I asked. “Tell me, what did he offer you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she told me.

“Of course it does,” I said and repeated my question. “What did he offer you?”

“What he offered me was security,” Zoe said. “He offered me the promise that Cassidy will have food on her plate every night. And when she gets older, she’ll be able to go to college. When she has a baby of her own, the baby will have a financially stable grandmother in early retirement who can spend every hour of the day loving and doting on her to make up for the time that she couldn’t spend with her own daughter because that’s the sacrifice I needed to make.”

That was a lot.

“Cassidy is six years old, Zoe! College is a lifetime away. And grandkids? We’re two weeks into this endeavor, and they’ve gone better than we could have possibly imagined. You really want to give up now?”

Now the tears started coming down. Slowly, one at a time, but they were there. I hated seeing her so sad, but she was making a stupid mistake, and I couldn’t let her do this to herself.

“We can be a force for good,” I said. “Look what we did today. We kept a young woman from being completely taken advantage of by a millionaire bully. Imagine what we can do going forward?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” she asked. “We’re all just ants in the scheme of things. One in a colony of eight billion. The best we can do is help only a handful of them over the course of our careers. And we probably won’t even be able to do that. I really wish that wasn’t true, but it is. And so I need to look

out for *my* ant. And you have your baby ant to look after now, too.”

My baby ant. Jude. He was still staying with me and though I’d been in contact with Natasha, it didn’t seem like he would be leaving any time soon. Even when she was eventually able to take him back — which she would be doing as soon as she felt comfortable — I couldn’t imagine my life going on without him in it. I may have been able to say my forever goodbye to Danielle, but I wasn’t about to do the same for Jude.

And, the way Zoe was talking, it felt like she was trying to say her forever goodbye to me. When that thought popped into my head, I realized this was even bigger than I thought, and I no longer cared about the independent practice we were forming.

“Wait, Zoe,” I said, “let’s drop this for a second. What does this mean for us?”

With that, she turned away and towards her car. Was it that she didn’t know the answer or that she didn’t want to tell me the answer?

Because our relationship still hadn’t made its way out of the verbal taboo stage. We’d told each other we *liked* each other, but couldn’t quite beat around that and say the other L-word. The bigger one.

Maybe it was dropping an atomic bomb when a simple hand grenade would do, but I had to pull out all my stops if it meant keeping myself from losing her.

“I love you,” I said.

The words came out before I could fully realize what I’d said. And after they came out, it occurred to me that I couldn’t remember the last time I’d actually said them. Maybe not since I was a child, saying them to my mom as in, “I love you, too.” But this was different. This was very different.

This was me throwing my heart at her in a last attempt to save what we had, both personally and professionally, too, I suppose, but how could I care about that at a time like this?

It did get her to turn around, though. She looked me up and down.

“No, you don’t,” she said.

But I did. I absolutely did. I’d never been so sure of anything in my life.

“I do,” I said. “I swear I do. And I’m not going to let you go unless you can tell me you don’t feel the same way.”

I waited for her to say it. She even began to form her lips together, but she couldn’t do it. The words wouldn’t quite come out. Because Zoe wasn’t a liar. She didn’t have it in her, and she knew if she tried, I’d be able to see right through her.

“I know you care about Jude,” she said, practically giving me whiplash by changing the subject so fast, “but if you want to make sure you can care for him in the future, I suggest you go back into that office and beg for your job back. Do it now before it’s too late, while you have the upper hand since we just won the case.”

No, I wasn’t going to do that. I was a good lawyer and wasn’t about to let my skills fall into the wrong hands. I’d rather fail as a person trying to do the right thing than sell out and be some pawn to men who were ruining the world for the rest of us.

“Give me one more chance,” I said. “See this through at least until we take them on with the wrongful termination cases.”

“By that point, it’ll be too late,” she told me. “Once we’re seen as backstabbers, nobody will want to hire us.”

She sighed.

“Good night, Jackson,” she said. “I made my decision, and I gave you advice. What you want to do with that is your business.”

She made her way to her car and opened the door, then slammed it behind her before I could say another word. I watched as she drove off out of the parking garage.



The silver lining was that, since she took the job, I would be seeing her again. Unfortunately, it'd be from the other end of the decision table or possibly on opposite sides of the courtroom.

And I'd almost rather never see her again than have to see her back in the role of my enemy.

# CHAPTER 23



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

Jackson did me a huge favor. He didn't keep his class-action suit a secret for long. My first day back, he sent over an email indicating that he would be pursuing legal action on behalf of the women who had lost their jobs at the company in the past year, as well as any others who were also wrongfully terminated. This meant that I didn't need to keep it a secret from McDavis and Boyd, though I think they knew my loyalties may have been a bit shaky at that point.

After a week or so, I fell back into the usual groove at work and everything seemed ordinary, except for the fact that Jackson wasn't there. Honestly, there was a lack of energy on the whole at work. On top of that, people seemed wary of me, as though they couldn't trust me.

As if that wasn't enough, Cassidy began asking if she'd ever get to play with Jude again. I told her I didn't know, which was technically true, but the fact was I was pretty sure the answer was no and I only hoped that, in time, she would forget about him. It was too early to say.

I fought McDavis not to be on the case, but he insisted upon it and said I couldn't very well refuse my first big trial as partner, especially when it was something as important as actively defending the firm itself against what he deemed legal harassment, insisting to me that the charges were unwarranted and vindictive.

I bit my tongue at that. As a lawyer, it didn't matter what I actually thought. I just had to defend my client. And, in this case, the client was our very own law firm.

It was three weeks when we scheduled the initial hearing, where the judge would look at the basic facts of the case, determine if it had merit to proceed, and then announce a final trial date based on the apparent complexity of the case. Chances were slim that the judge would side with us on the issue of merit, but it was the quickest and easiest way out of dealing with the issue and so we had to at least try.

From the moment I woke up that day, I felt sick. I wasn't sure to attribute the illness to a virus, food poisoning, or just nervousness. I didn't have a temperature, so I assumed it was just nerves, though I'd been at the job long enough I no longer should have been worried about a simple initial hearing.

Maybe it was the stakes involved. Or maybe it was the fact that I'd be seeing Jackson for the first time since I ended things.

The last time, when he had told me he loved me. It was obviously an act of desperation, but I was too shielded to tell him the truth: I loved him too.

And not a day went by since then that I didn't think of him and wonder if I'd made the right choice.

McDavis drove me to the courthouse. It made it easier to find parking and we could go over some last minute details before standing before the judge.

"I'm not feeling great," I told him. "You mind if I open a window?"

"Go right ahead."

He paused for a second and said, "You know, I've been thinking, Zoe. I think you should take the lead here."

I did not feel like taking the lead. I kept my eyes focused on the horizon in order to quell my stomach and prevent breakfast from coming back out my mouth.

"I'm not so sure about that, sir."

"I am," he said. "This whole case is about how poorly we treat women. If you take the lead, it undercuts the prosecution quite a bit."

“You don’t think the judge will see through that?” I asked.

“No, but it certainly won’t look good to have you silent through the whole thing.”

“Sir, I’m really not feeling well.”

“It’ll be a simple thing. No more than five minutes. And that’s the other thing, every word I say could be treated as testimony. It’s probably best if I take my own advice and remain silent through this thing. You know what they say about a man who represents himself, right?”

“Yeah. He has a fool for a client.”

“I’ve been doing this long enough to know how not to catch myself in a trap, especially since we’re innocent here, but why chance it?”

He sounded like he was trying to convince me, but both of us knew that the firm was far from innocent in this regard. What happened between Jackson and Erica was minor compared to some of the other complaints. With those two, it was pure primal attraction. In other cases, with other lawyers, raises were promised, and other lies were used as coercion.

I knew that the only reason McDavis picked me for this is that he knew he had to have a woman on his side. And, of the partners, I was the only option. Failing that, he’d have to pick one of the few other female lawyers at the firm, none of whom had more than a year or two experience practicing law.

The more I thought about it, the more clear it became that I was on the wrong side of this case. Not necessarily the losing side, but the wrong side of it ethically. But even monsters deserve proper representation in court, and I was doing my job. It didn’t matter if I believed in my client or not: I’d defend him to the best of my ability.

And it didn’t sound like he was going to let me get out of leading this court hearing.

“Okay, sir,” I said. I would suck it up and hold in the vomit for just long enough to do this, and then take the rest of the day off as soon as I was done, lying in bed and ordering in some chicken soup to give myself the sick day I deserved.

The queasiness hit me harder once I got out of the car and had to walk all the way to the courtroom. In the elevator, I couldn't help but lean against the wall for support. I felt weak, and it was clear to me that this wasn't just nerves. It was as if I had to devote all of my energy to keeping what little food I had in my stomach from reemerging. So much of my job was about looking professional — tossing my cookies in front of a judge would be so devastating, I'm not sure how I'd ever be able to show my face in there again.

Once we finally made it to the courtroom and were about to take our seats in the back to wait for our turn, I was still wondering if I was going to make it.

We'd drawn Judge Amanda Tetra, who was tough but fair. It would have served us better to have a male judge, but we didn't have a choice in the matter unless, down the line, we wanted to appeal. With the limited number of judges in the Los Angeles court system, we got to know each one in their own way. They each had their own style, and Judge Tetra liked to keep things relatively casual. More than once, she'd gotten on me for using too much legal speak and asked me to just sum my points up as simply as I could.

And then, across the aisle, I saw Jackson, looking presentable as ever — nobody looked better in a suit than he did. He had that serious, lawyerly look on his face that he put on when he had to pretend that, deep down, he wasn't a man child. It was a convincing act, and I don't think most people who knew him professionally could see through it.

Judge Tetra called the first lawyers up to present their cases so she could schedule them. When the lawyer first started speaking, it was clear this could go a while and I started to stand up, thinking maybe I could purge those butterflies from my stomach, but McDavis pulled me back down.

“She'll cut him short,” he said. “She keeps things efficient.”

True enough, Judge Tetra cut the lawyer off and asked him to explain his point in thirty seconds or less. A man sold

another one an automobile with a faulty engine part. She allowed the other lawyer thirty seconds as well to counteract that. Then, she scheduled them for two months out and pounded down her gavel, ready to call whoever was next.

That whoever happened to be us.

“Sweeny et. al. v. McDavis and Boyd,” she said.

God, I was nauseated, but I forced myself forward.

“Let’s not waste anyone’s time. Mr. Ekland, give me a brief summary.”

Jackson cleared his throat. “It’s a standard cut and dry case, Judge. My six clients were improperly dismissed from the Law Offices of McDavis and Boyd following sexual relationships with higher-ups at the firm.”

“Your honor,” I said, “let the record show that Mr. Ekland was a higher-up engaging in one of these sexual relationships.”

He shot me a glare, and the judge’s eyes perked up.

“Is this true, Mr. Ekland?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I wasn’t the one responsible for the termination. Mr. Brendan McDavis initiated it after I disclosed said relationship.”

Judge Tetra looked at him and paused. “Do you believe this to be a conflict of interest?” she asked.

“I do not,” he said. “Upon hearing of her pending termination, I subsequently resigned. I do have a personal interest in the case, but purely from a moral and ethical standpoint, and I do not believe that to be a hindrance to my ability to represent my clients.”

“Okay,” Judge Tetra said.

“However,” he said, “I would like to point out that Ms. Travis also resigned around the same time I did and was working on this case until Mr. McDavis hired her back at the law firm.”

“Oh?” Judge Tetra looked at me.

“Judge,” I said, my voice weak even as I forced it to be strong, “I was brought back on at the firm during the very early stages of the case, before we’d even officially filed any paperwork. I am confident that any information I obtained would not give the defense an unfair advantage.”

“Mr. McDavis,” Judge Tetra said, “how many lawyers are employed at your firm?”

“Thirty-four,” he said.

“And yet you want me to believe that none of the other lawyers could be put on this case? That you had to rehire Ms. Ekland back to work with you?”

“The defense should have his choice of counsel, Judge.”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, no, that’s not going to fly in my courtroom. This is an obvious violation of ethics and standards. I’m rescheduling this hearing tomorrow afternoon, and you’d better come back in with a lawyer who did not happen to work with the opposing counsel where she was privy to inside information.”

“But Judge!” McDavis said, though he didn’t get both words out before Judge Tetra pounded down her gavel, indicating it was time for her to look at the next case.

I wasted no time, rushing out of there and into the women’s room where fortunately the nearest stall was open and available. I leaned my head over the toilet and let the nervous vomit fly into the bowl.

It didn’t make sense to me. I’d certainly had nerves in the past, but never anything like this. I couldn’t remember the last time I threw up. Maybe when I was sick with the flu in fifth grade?

I wondered if maybe it was the ethical qualms I’d kept buried inside me, festering and causing me to get sick, but that didn’t quite sit right with me, either.

I stood up, still feeling light-headed and woozy, but at least I’d gotten the worst of it out of my system. I’d go home and relax, just like I’d promised myself. After splashing some



water on my face and fixing up my makeup, I came out of the bathroom where McDavis was waiting for me.

No, he did not ask how I was doing. He jumped straight into business.

“We can still use you behind the scenes, Zoe,” he said. “Judge Tetra just doesn’t want you arguing in court.”

“Whatever you need, sir.”

“Let’s go back to the office and figure out our next plan of attack. We need to decide who’s best to put on this in your stead.”

When he said that, my heart sunk. I was so looking forward to being done for the day and the way he was talking, it sounded like we were in for a long night.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but I’m really not feeling well.”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “Let’s go back and give ourselves a half hour break. Then we can get started.”

He wasn’t about to take no for an answer. It was times like these that I wondered if I’d made the right decision going into law to begin with.

“Look,” he said. “I understand you need some time off, and normally, I’d be more than happy to give it to you, but you need to understand that this is a tremendously important case. The future of the firm is dependent on our success.”

Between trying to keep up with his quick stride while I was in heels and me focusing on what he was saying, I accidentally knocked into a woman.

“Excuse me,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Quite alright,” she said, holding her belly, which was protruding so much it was hard to imagine she was able to remain upright without toppling over. “I’m carrying quite a load here.”

I smiled at her and looked at her, seeing how very pregnant she was.

At that moment, I realized it wasn't nerves that were making me sick, nor was it flu or food poisoning.

I was carrying Jackson's baby.

# CHAPTER 24



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

Getting Zoe off that case wasn't just strategy, it was compassion. It was me protecting her soul so that she didn't have to defend her evil law firm against their inexcusable and verifiable illegal acts. Maybe someone would argue that it wasn't my place to decide that for her, but I was planning on getting bloody with this one, and I couldn't allow her to get caught up in the carnage.

With the delay in the scheduling hearing, I had the early part of the day to myself and Jude. "Do you want to go to the park today?" I asked him.

"Nah," he said. "I'm sick of the park. I want to go to Trampoline World."

A quick internet search revealed what he was talking about, and it looked like a series of lawsuits waiting to happen. Kids jumping back and forth on trampolines, undoubtedly colliding with each other.

"I'm not sure this place is safe," I told Jude.

"But I want to go."

I called my brother and asked if he wanted to join me with his daughter. I figured the more parents we could have with eyes on the kids, the better off it would be.

When I arrived, my niece Olivia saw me from a distance, jumped off the trampoline with a kind of back flip, and ran over to me, leaping at the last minute into my chest and nearly knocking me over with her hug.

“Uncle Jackson!” she screamed.

“Hey, girl!” I said. In truth, I was as excited as she was. I didn’t get to see her as often as I wanted to and every time I did see her, it felt like she was twice the size she was before. She was only six years old, but I still thought of her as a tiny little baby who could practically fit in the palm of my hand.

“I want you to meet someone,” I said. “This is Jude. He’s my son, which means he’s your cousin.”

“I have a cousin?”

“Cousin?” Jude repeated. They stared at each other in awe, not quite sure what to make of each other. Deep down, there were similarities in their face shapes and their ears — Kiefer and I had to grow into our ears growing up, and it turned out our kids would have the same experience — and that must have been a strange experience for them.

“Yeah, Jude,” I said, “this is Olivia. She’s your cousin.”

My brother Kiefer came over to say hello along with his wife, my sister-in-law, Melody.

“And this is Uncle Kiefer and Aunt Melody.”

Melody blushed at that. “I wasn’t sure you’d ever make me an aunt, Jackson.”

I gritted my teeth. It didn’t seem like the best of ideas to mention that Jude was an accident right in front of him.

“Why don’t you two go play,” I told the kids.

“Yeah,” Olivia said, “come on!”

“But I want to play the games,” Jude said. He pointed past the trampolines to an arcade area with flashing lights and ticket-spewing games along with a prize wall.

“Maybe in a little bit,” I said. “Go to the trampolines for now.”

“But I want to play the games!” Jude said.

It was embarrassing to be on the verge of a temper tantrum with him, and as he’d become more accustomed to living with

me, he was more likely to snap. Kids were amazing at knowing how to push your buttons, and I could already feel my blood pressure rising.

Fortunately, Kiefer jumped in and knelt beside Jude.

“Jude,” he said, “I bet you can’t jump on every single trampoline.”

“Yeah, I can.”

“Even the big one? I don’t think you can.”

This was a man who’d clearly had more than a little bit of experience with children.

“But I can.”

“Fine,” he said. “Prove it.”

He took off in the direction of the trampolines and Olivia went running after him.

I looked at my brother in awe. “You offer classes in that?”

“It becomes second nature after a while,” he said.

“You make it look easy,” I told him.

“The last thing it is is easy,” Melody said. “I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve needed to remind myself that I was getting bent out of shape by an argument with a six-year-old. That’s the thing that they don’t tell you. If you’re fighting with a six-year-old, you won’t win. It’s impossible.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” I said. “I spent four years getting my law degree and another ten years practicing, but I’d lose if you put me up against Jude in a trial. No question.”

We all shared a brief laugh, though I’m pretty sure we were all aware that it wasn’t a joke.

“So, how’s everything going?” I asked. “How’s the Vaquero?”

Melody came out to California seven years ago from Texas to open a food truck supplying the people of Los Angeles County with the best TexMex vegan food this side of the Rio Grande. It ended up being wildly successful, which allowed

her to open a proper brick and mortar restaurant in the Larchmont area, followed by another location earlier this year out in Calabasas.

“Keeping me very busy,” she said. “It’s a shame because I want to be in the kitchen and with the customers, but I end up having to manage the business ends of things.”

“I keep telling her she doesn’t need to do all that stuff,” Kiefer said. “The food speaks for itself. The restaurant is successful. She can be doing what she loves, and find someone else to manage the finances.”

“Yeah, well,” she said, “old habits die hard, I guess. There was a time when I really did need to count pennies. It’s hard to get that out of my system.”

“It’s doubly unnecessary,” Kiefer said, “since Gen Z just rediscovered ‘Storms a Comin’” and it’s all over TikTok so we’re getting massive residual checks from the streaming services. We could almost support ourselves entirely off of those, at least for the time being.”

The music industry, of which Kiefer was a part, was a wild world that I could never see myself in. It was tough enough when I’d dated Natasha, who was, hands-down, the most talented person I’d ever met in my life. Even with her musical ability, there was no guarantee she would continue to make it in that crazy world.

Kiefer was also unbelievably talented, though I also remember how obsessive he was with his guitar when we were kids. He would shut his door and spend hours practicing, often playing through the same riff over and over again, long past the point where it sounded perfect to me because he had to have it just right in his head. It was a party trick of his to be able to play literally any song he wanted on an acoustic guitar at social gatherings. If he’d heard it once, he could instantly pluck out the melody, and the girls at school went wild for it.

This felt like cheating to me, since I had to rely on just my good looks and charm to get female attention.

“What’s going on with you, then?” Melody asked.

I told them what was going on with quitting my job, only to turn around and sue my firm, and how Zoe had been sucked back in.

“I hate to say it, bro,” Kiefer said, “but it sounds like Zoe had the right idea.”

“What?”

“You gotta do what you gotta do. You know how many bubble gum pop records I had to put together over the years?”

“That’s hardly the same thing,” I said. “Back me up on this, Melody. You went and did your own thing, right?”

She was biting her lip — the expression she made when she was trying to say something but couldn’t find the tactful way to do it.

“Here’s the thing,” she said, “you’re doing the right thing, like in the way that Superman does the right thing. But this is the real world, you know?”

“But you went and opened your own food truck,” I said. “Wasn’t that stupid?”

“Incredibly stupid, but at least I wasn’t antagonizing anybody, least of whom someone who could destroy me with the snap of their fingers. I started small. I didn’t jump out of Texas and immediately kick the first hornet’s nest I could find.”

I looked back and forth between them, and they both looked visibly uncomfortable.

“Look,” Kiefer said, “if you want me to tell you what you want to hear, I can do that. But it sounds like you’re doing something extremely reckless.”

“You’ve got good intentions,” Melody said, gently putting her hand on my shoulder, “but good intentions have a habit of backfiring on people. I’m worried you’re not going to help these women and will lose your career in the process.”

“I know it’s a little risky,” I said.



“It’s not risky,” Kiefer said. “Skydiving is risky. There’s always the chance that the parachute doesn’t deploy. What you’re doing is skydiving without even bothering with the parachute.”

“Thanks for the support,” I said, glibly.

“I’m not a lawyer,” Melody said, “but from what I’ve seen, the law isn’t about what’s fair or who’s right. It’s about who has more money and resources.”

She wasn’t wrong. I could have argued that what I had going for me was tunnel-visioned focus on the case, whereas Boyd and McDavis were spread across several lawsuits. But surely that wouldn’t be the situation when they were actually the defendants.

“I’m sure you know what you’re doing, bro,” Kiefer said, though there wasn’t much confidence in his voice.

Before I could answer him, Jude came running into me from behind.

“Daddy, daddy!” he said. “Guess what?”

“What?” I asked, happy for the distraction.

“No,” he said. “Guess.”

I wasn’t in the mood for games, but maybe that was part of the thing that kids could do for you. Force you to have fun even if you weren’t quite feeling it.

“Okay,” I said. “It’s raining chocolate cupcakes.”

Jude laughed. “No.”

“There’s a unicorn spaceship right behind me.”

He shook his head and laughed again. “Not even close.”

“Okay,” I said, “I’m out of guesses. You’d better just tell me.”

“Cassidy is here!” he said, joyously.

The blood rushed out of my head and I instinctively looked around.

“Where?” I asked.

Jude pointed across the way. There she was, bouncing up and down on one of the trampolines beside Olivia. If Cassidy was here, it was pretty likely that Zoe was, too.

“Can you give me money for the games?” Jude asked.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet, handing him the first bill I could feel, but didn’t take the time to look at it. It could have been a five, but was probably a twenty and, for all I knew, could have been a hundred. At that moment, I didn’t care.

Jude took the bill and ran off in Cassidy and Olivia’s direction.

“Who’s Cassidy?” Melody asked, but I didn’t answer. “Oh,” she said, reading the silence correctly.

I walked away from Kiefer and Melody, completely ignoring the fact that we’d been in the middle of a conversation. My mission at the moment was much more important now. I had to find Zoe.

It didn’t take long. She was sitting at a table with her back to me, typing on her laptop.

I walked up behind her.

“Hey,” I said and watched her jump five feet into the air.

When she realized it was me, she immediately shut her laptop — she must have been working on the case she’d been thrown off of.

“Hi,” she said sheepishly.

I walked around the table and sat down across from her.

“Let’s talk,” I said.

# CHAPTER 25



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

What were the odds of me running into Jackson? They couldn't have been high. In fact, considering how big Los Angeles is, they had to have been astronomically low. But they weren't zero.

In order to prevent Judge Tetra from getting wise, McDavis put me on temporary paid leave. But it was paid leave with a wink. I'd still be able to access the office's VPN and he still expected me to be doing work, though he knew that he couldn't explicitly ask me. Not if he wanted to keep his hands clean.

I could almost hear the line of questioning.

“Did Zoe go into the office during this time?”

“No.”

“And was she providing input to the case?”

“She was put on temporary paid leave.”

So I was stuck working from home, and what was I supposed to do? Spend the entire day locked up inside? I didn't take Cassidy into daycare if I was working from home because what was the point? I could supervise her and work. Or at least that's what I thought. The problem was she was too much of a distraction — in the best of ways — and I think she was feeling cooped up inside also.

So I took her to Trampoline World, where she'd recently attended a classmate's birthday. She seemed to have fun there, and a tired child is a happy child, so off we went.

But I tempted fate. I should have just stayed inside.

He snuck up on me and at the first sound of his voice, I was startled. Could I have told him to go away before he sat down at the table with me? Of course, but I didn't want to create a scene in public. And truthfully, there was a part of me that wanted to talk to him. Even if he wasn't happy with me, I found him reassuring and comforting. While also nerve-wracking. It was funny how some people could do that to you.

Or maybe not funny.

Terrifying was a closer word to it.

Because on top of everything, I'd just found out I was pregnant with his baby, and the longer I spent across from him, the more likely it was that I was going to blurt it right out.

No, he absolutely did not need to know about that now that he was no longer in my life (unless fate insisted on us running into each other everywhere I went).

"Let's talk," he said.

I shook my head. "We probably shouldn't."

"Does that mean you don't want to?"

It must have been instinct the way he flashed that smile at me. A whole life of learning that he could get anything he wanted so long as he had that particular glint in his eyes as he gave off that perfect smile. I knew he was bad news and that we could both get in trouble for talking when he was up against my firm in a class-action lawsuit, but none of that mattered as much as my aching heart, which longed to be back in his arms. Not to mention that there was a part of him growing inside of me.

*But don't tell him that,* the voice in my head reminded me.

Without me participating in the trial, I could stay out of sight from him even when the pregnancy became more visible. And, depending on how long this thing lasted, maybe I could even stay out of the office long enough to avoid questions related to that.

But that was months in the future. Right now, he'd asked me a question of his own, and I still hadn't provided an answer. And so long as I wasn't comfortable lying to him, I probably wasn't going to give him one. Because the truth was that I absolutely wanted to talk to him, but I refused to admit it.

"I just want you to hear me out with this," he said. "I'm going to lay it out as clearly as I can, and frankly I'm worried it's a bit pathetic, but it's the truth."

I wasn't sure where he was going or what he was going to say. Obviously he was trying to get me back, but in what context?

"I need you," he said as I waited for any sort of clue as to whether he meant personally or professionally. "I'm not sure I can do this all by myself."

Jackson was clearly begging for me, but until he specified what he needed me for, I couldn't begin to give him an answer.

"In what context?" I asked, hoping to get him to cut to the chase. "Do you need me as a lawyer, or do you want me as... something else?"

The directness of the question knocked him down a peg.

"Does it matter?" he asked.

I wasn't sure that it did. "Either way," I said, "I don't think we're good for each other. It's best we stay out of each other's way."

"See," he said, "I don't understand how you can possibly actually believe that. Because we're amazing for each other. Being around you forces me to be a better lawyer. I work twice as hard with you around, and on top of that, you're not afraid to point out my blind spots."

He wasn't wrong. I was able to see it when we were working on the non-disclosure agreement. The guy who always clocked out at 6 PM to go drinking was staying up and working past midnight, focused on his work.

“And as for you,” he said. “You kind of have a stick up your ass when I’m not around, you know what I mean?”

The words came out of his mouth before he realized what he’d just said, and he had to backtrack.

“And I mean that in the nicest way,” he said. “We all have a stick up our ass sometimes.”

“Mine was just lodged up there deeper?” I didn’t break with a smile. I just looked at him deadpan with the question, watching him dig himself into a hole he wouldn’t find a way out of.

“It just wouldn’t come out, you know? That thing was like King Arthur’s sword.”

I had to laugh at that.

“I’m sure I wasn’t the first guy to try and get it out of there, but come on, you’ve got to admit that we were having fun, and it was the most fun you’d had in years. Tell me I’m wrong.”

*Your honor, I thought to myself, I would like to invoke my fifth amendment rights.*

But I still had that smile on my face. A slight smile, but one I couldn’t will away completely. Just enough for him to be sure he knew what he was seeing — his tactic was working.

Because that’s what it was: a tactic. It was easy to see why he became a lawyer. Most people thought lawyers like to argue, and maybe that was true. But the best lawyers liked to coerce. It wasn’t a matter of logic, necessarily, but being more likable and giving the jury or judge an excuse to side with you.

When I’d first met Jackson, I saw right through this. It’s very easy to see through it when somebody’s using it on somebody else. And it’s why I formed an instant dislike for him. It wasn’t even because he was a bad person — if anything, it was because he was a likable person, and I wanted my logical brain not to fall into the trap he was setting.

So I had to flip that switch back on to protect myself. The two of us were going to be enemies again, and so much the

better.

“We had fun,” I told him. “But that fun’s over. It’s best we go our separate ways.”

“Again,” he said, “I don’t know that it is. Or maybe it is for you, I don’t know. But what I do know is I can’t handle this case on my own. I need you back on my side.”

Now he was getting really desperate, resorting to begging. It wasn’t a good look for a man who practically bathed in confidence.

“Judge Tetra said I wasn’t to participate in this anymore.”

“That’s what she said,” Jackson told me, “but I know McDavis isn’t sticking with that. Sure, you won’t be in the courtroom anymore, but he needs you. Let me ask you something: did he tell you that he needed you?”

Of course he didn’t. He just said it would be easier having me working for him. He could get by without me in his own words, but even that didn’t make much sense. Judge Tetra had a point: there was a reason he was using me as his council instead of one of his other lawyers.

“He’s a manipulative asshole. You’ve worked with him long enough to know that. And he doesn’t appreciate you. You and I were both up for that promotion, but he was going to give it to me.”

“But he gave it to me,” I said.

“After you forced him into a corner. He absolutely needs you for this trial, but he’s too proud to admit it. Maybe it’s pathetic of me, but I’m not above admitting the truth, which is that I need you back on my side. Not ‘I want you back with me’ or ‘It’d be real helpful for you to come back.’ No, I, in no uncertain words, need you in order to win this case. And so do those women we’re representing.”

He was trying to guilt me into this as a woman. As if somehow I was stabbing other people of my gender in my back. But as any lawyer knows, sometimes you need to stab some people in the back to protect your own. Was I proud of that? Absolutely not. But it was the truth.



“I hear what you’re saying,” I told him, “but we’ve been through this before, and I’m not changing my mind. I have too good of a deal with the law firm to leave again. I’d been working my whole career for this kind of thing and if I left now, I’d need to start all over.”

I left out the piece about how stability had only become more important since we’d last spoken about it the other night. Now, I didn’t have just one mouth to feed; I had two. And I was tighter in my resolve to keep that second mouth a secret from him. If he couldn’t even handle the burden of responsibility for his one son, how could he be trusted to do it for his other child? The one that was half mine?

Jackson was nothing if not persistent, but I saw he was beginning to lose steam.

“I said it before, and I’ll say it again,” I told him. “It’s in your best interest to drop this case and beg McDavis to reinstate your position. It’s also in Jude’s best interest. You’re a talented lawyer, and we could use you on our team.”

“Is that what I’d need to do to get you back?” he asked.

And that’s when we locked eyes, and I realized the truth: I was the one holding all the cards here. He was acting desperate with respect to the case because he thought that would be the easiest side of me to appeal to.

“All things considered, Jackson,” I said, “in light of what happened to the last woman in the office who had an affair with you. I think the best bet is for us to just not see each other anymore.”

I watched his heart break into pieces right in front of my eyes. It was painful to see, and yet I couldn’t look away.

“Zoe,” he said, “I need you to understand—”

But he didn’t get to finish that sentence before he was interrupted by Cassidy.

“Mom!” she said, screaming and running towards me.

At the same time, I heard Jude yelling for his father.

“Look what Jude did!” she was furious at him, and I heard the sound of a tiny fist smacking against an equally tiny shoulder.

I turned towards them.

Jude was rubbing his shoulder, and Cassidy was bright red with anger. A third child, who I didn't recognize, was following behind them, giggling to herself. And I could see why: Jude and Cassidy had managed to somehow handcuff themselves together.

## CHAPTER 26



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

The first thing that came to my mind was probably the least relevant: *What exactly happened here?*

Cassidy and Jude had managed to handcuff themselves together. Several questions immediately presented themselves, like where did these handcuffs come from? Who handcuffed whom? And at what point did they realize they'd gotten themselves into a pickle they couldn't get out of? Or did they even realize that this was a problem? Because both of them were still smiling in spite of their anger with each other.

And even these questions were irrelevant. Because the most important question was, in fact, how do we get them out of the cuffs?

And, along with that question, what time was it? Because I was due in court after lunch. And with the way the morning flew by, the afternoon was fast approaching.

"That's very funny," Zoe said to Cassidy. "Do you have the key?"

Cassidy looked perplexed.

"Well, how did you expect to get those off if you don't have a key?"

More confusion. She lifted her arm towards Zoe, yanking Jude in the process. "You open," she said.

It was a command. And, in Cassidy's mind, it made perfect sense: her mom could fix any problem, so why not this one?

“Handcuffs need a key to open, Cass,” Zoe said. “I can’t open them without the key.”

“That’s what I said,” Olivia said. She was stationed off beside them, talking in a faux adult voice as if her extra year on this earth past the other two children had imparted her with infinite wisdom that Cassidy and Jude would never manage to reach. “I told them they should’ve been more careful with it.”

“Maybe there’s an emergency latch,” I said, taking the cuffs.

“I said that, too,” Olivia noted.

“Yup,” said Jude and showed me a small metal piece. “It broke off.”

“Yeah,” Cassidy said, showing a similar metal piece. “So did mine.”

I examined the cuffs.

“Where did you even get these?” I asked.

“Prize box.”

Jude pointed across the way. There was a vending-type machine with “REWARDS” written across the top. It was too far away to make out details, though.

“Cassidy got like a zillion tickets,” Jude said. “And we got these with them.”

I’m sure that that machine was filled to the brim with candy and cheap plastic toys that would break within a second of making its way out of the machine, but our kids decided to go for the option made of hardened metal where the only breakable part was the thing that allowed you to unlock them.

Sounded about right.

“What’s going on over here?” Kiefer had made his way up to the table with Melody. “Oh,” he said.

“Give me your hand, Jude,” I said and gave it an inspection. He was just a kid, so I would have thought his tiny hands could slide right out, but these were clearly designed for

small wrists. I tried squeezing him through, but it was just too tight.

“What happened to the key?” Melody asked.

“Got stuck,” Cassidy said.

“We know you’re stuck,” I told her, “but what did you do with the key?”

Olivia let out her long, grown-up sigh, as if she was the responsible, mature one in the situation. “They thought the key would open the prize box door. I told them that was a different key, but did they believe me? Noooooo.”

“Oh,” I said, “so you still have the key.”

Olivia held up the key, which had been twisted and bent out of shape from being forced into the wrong slot.

I looked to Melody. “Unbelievable,” I said.

“I’ll go ask for help,” she told me and rushed off before I could respond.

So we didn’t have a key. And we couldn’t slide their hands out of the cuffs. Unless...

“I know,” I said. “Let me go to the car and get my lube.”

Kiefer smiled at that.

“You’re not bringing that in here,” Zoe said. “You’re going to look like a pervert.”

“It’ll be fine,” I said.

“You are not rubbing AstroGlide all over my child’s arm,” she told me.

“What’s AstroGlide?” Cassidy asked. Her childish curiosity picked up on her mother’s embarrassment. She didn’t know what it was, but it was clearly very interesting if Zoe was practically whispering it to keep her daughter from hearing it.

“It’s slippery water,” Kiefer said.

“Okay, then at least we can get Jude out,” I said.

“No,” Zoe said. “Come up with something else. Besides, didn’t we finish it off the other week?”

I shook my head. “I bought some more.”

“That’s right,” she told me. “You’re always prepared, right?”

“He tell you he was a Boy Scout?” Kiefer asked.

Zoe rolled her eyes, appearing even less interested than she had the first time she’d heard that. “Can we please stay focused on this?”

Melody arrived back with a guy who was at least two years off from registering for the draft, wearing a shirt that was roughly the colors and pattern of a circus tent with a flywheel cap on his head.

He looked like an absolute idiot. Even without the uniform, he would have looked pretty stupid. He had a perpetually dumb look on his face. But looks could sometimes be deceiving.

In this case, they were not, however, and he made that abundantly clear as soon as he opened his mouth.

“What seems to be the problem here?” he asked, as if it wasn’t abundantly obvious.

“Stuck,” Cassidy said. She lifted her hand.

The teenager stared at it in awe, then moved his hand to his chin, stuck in thought.

I expected him to say something sooner or later, but he remained in that position for an uncomfortably long time, and I wondered if somebody needed to reboot him.

“Do you have a replacement key?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said as if he just remembered that he was in fact a part of the corporeal world, interacting with other sentient beings. “No. No, we don’t have that.”

“Has this happened before?” Melody asked.

“Uh-huh. You just use the emergency release.” He grabbed the cuffs and leaned into them. “Oh.”

“The kids snapped them off,” Zoe said.

“Then no, this has never happened before.”

I didn’t know exactly how we were going to find our way out of this situation, but as much as I hated to admit it, this guy’s role and experience made him our only possible source of useful information. Unfortunately, getting it out of him was going to be like pulling teeth.

“The key,” I said, “do you know if the handcuffs all use the same keys?”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “They’re interchangeable.”

It was the first answer he sounded confident on, which led to a series of questions that were better left unanswered.

“Okay, great,” I said. “Can you get us another set from the machine?”

He shook his head.

I didn’t have time to take my time with this guy — if I wanted something, I was going to have to cut to the chase. I pulled out my wallet and grabbed a fifty dollar bill — I thought I had a hundred, but I imagine that’s what I’d handed the kids before. What had they done with it? Impossible for anyone to say. It was not the problem of the moment, and I had no immediate interest in learning the answer nor the energy to ask the right questions so that the kids would tell me the answer.

I put the fifty in arms reach of the teenager and asked again. “Can you get us another set of cuffs from the machine?”

He looked at the fifty dollar bill with confusion. Did teenagers not know what cash was anymore?

“No,” he said. “They don’t let us have the key to the prize machine. Not after what Blake did?”

Zoe must have seen I was beginning to lose my cool, so she stepped in. “Can you get us someone who does have a key,



then?”

“Trish, yeah,” he said, “but she doesn’t come in until five.”

At that moment his eyes lit up.

“You know what you can do?” he asked.

There was another impossibly long pause as we assumed the question was rhetorical, but this guy wasn’t familiar with such a concept.

“No,” Melody said. “Why don’t you tell us?”

The practiced parents had infinitely more patience than I did. I don’t consider myself a violent man, but I was two steps away from punching his head from off of his neck.

“You can win the handcuffs. They’re only five hundred tickets.”

I checked my watch. A quarter to noon. I suppose I could have left Jude with Kiefer and Melody to look after him, or maybe with Zoe if I offered her a pretty please with a cherry on top (which she still likely would have declined), but I was involved now and I had to make sure my son was going to be safe. I couldn’t imagine telling Tasha that I’d left Jude alone, handcuffed to another kid, no matter who I’d put in charge.

“I call dibs on Down the Clown,” Melody said.

\* \* \*

I ended up on Skee-Ball, adopting the strategy of tossing in tokens, throwing balls as fast as I could with no focus on accuracy, and then tossing more tokens in once I ran out. It proved to be slower than I liked, but when I did try to actually aim the balls, it ended up working out even worse for me.

Eventually, I just saw a kid of about eight or nine walking around with a big bucket of tickets and offered him a twenty — the only cash I had left at that point — as well as the rest of my tokens in exchange for his winnings.

He took the deal.

“Got ‘em!” I shouted and the rest of the team lined up behind me to load the tickets into the prize box, as Cassidy called it. I misjudged how many tickets that kid had — it ended up being closer to 800, but it was better to overshoot than undershoot in this situation.

I pressed the button for the handcuffs and watched as the spiral unspooled them and they began to angle over the edge.

They did not fall. They remained there, stuck between the coil and the tight sides of the row they sat in.

I slammed my fist into the side of the machine. “Oh, come the fuck on,” I said, no longer even caring about the fact that there were children around.

“Language,” Zoe said, lightly hitting my shoulder.

“They’ve heard worse,” I said. “If ever there was a time that called for swearing, this is it. I think I’m teaching them all a valuable lesson.”

“They don’t know the context,” Melody noted. “They just see a whiny adult throwing a fit because he couldn’t get the toy he wanted. You’re not teaching the lesson you think you are.”

I slammed my fists into the machine again, which caused the cuffs to jiggle, but the bottom part of their box was in too tight, and it was going to take more than a slight shake to get them loose.

“Here,” Zoe told me. “I’ll tilt it from the other side, and you keep it from toppling.”

She didn’t wait for me to agree to her plan, just did exactly what she described and hoped I’d be ready to catch it before it fell on top of me.

I was, in fact, ready, but I didn’t realize just how heavy the machine was. Or how quickly Zoe would manage to angle it. She was stronger than I assumed, I guess.

Right when we passed the 45-degree angle, the cuffs fell over the edge and onto the glass. When I pushed the machine

back upright, then fell down to the prize catch below and Jude reached his uncuffed hand into the machine to grab it.

I immediately took them from him and opened the box, grabbing the key and freeing him and Cassidy from their restraints. They rubbed their wrists as they cheered, happy to be out.

“See what I mean?” I told Zoe. “We make a good team. You angled the machine, I caught it. I couldn’t have done it without you, and you without me.”

She smiled at me after I said that and, for a second, I thought we might kiss and make up. As I leaned forward towards her, though, her lips gave me a much bigger surprise.

“I’m pregnant!” she blurted out.

And that was the moment I realized this was the moment I’d wished I had five years ago with Natasha. I’d gotten someone pregnant again, but now it was early enough to actually do something about it. And I knew what choice I was going to make, too. From that moment on, my life would never be the same.

# CHAPTER 27



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

The way the words came out of his mouth sounded so genuine. It wasn't an act, he truly meant them: Jackson and I were a good team. And did I agree with him? Unfortunately, as much as I tried to fight the idea, I knew it was true.

I'd had guys tell me that they loved me before. So many times, in fact, that it'd had completely lost all meaning and, in some instances, felt like failed manipulation. I've had guys tell me that they needed me, but so what? It wasn't my job to be someone else's support. I had my own life to live, and I wasn't going to spend it being the better half of a failure of a man.

Is that why I had to blurt out the secret that I kept telling myself not to share? Nobody needed to know that I was pregnant. And especially nobody needed to know that I was pregnant with his baby.

But now, the entirety of Trampoline World in Topanga knew that he was going to be my baby daddy.

And I was becoming more and more comfortable with the idea. Of not just having his baby, but co-parenting with him.

Because we made a good team. We really did.

On the surface, Jackson might have seemed to me to be one of these losers, and that's probably why I hadn't had any interest in him. But deep down, beneath his boyish ways, he was a deeply sincere and a good-hearted person. He, more than almost anybody I'd ever known, saw every individual person around him as a person.

And it's why he couldn't keep working for the law firm. He had to quit for his own sanity.

He left to go to court and I headed back home after telling Kiefer, Melody, and Olivia that it was nice meeting them and I wished it had been under better circumstances. I stopped myself before telling them I hoped to see them again soon.

Not because it wasn't true.

But because it was true.

It seems impossible that one simple statement was what changed my mind, and maybe it wouldn't had it not burrowed itself deep into my brain and kept repeating itself over and over again as I drove home.

“We make a good team.”

The words were so intrusive that they played over and over again in my mind like an animated gif online. I wouldn't let it stop. It was simultaneously annoying and comforting.

I got Cassidy to lie down for a nap and I tried to do the same, but all I could do was stare at the ceiling, repeating those words in my head as I imagined the future that he and I could have. But, actually, it wasn't even the future. It was just our past, but played again in a different context.

It was him telling me that I needed to make sure I was doing something for myself, exactly the way he had on our first date, but he was doing it when I was holding the baby on a late night after work. It was him telling me that I was helping him be a better lawyer, but as we were working in an office that we would rent in the future, once we got a few more successes under our belt. It was him saying we made a great team, but instead of at a children's play place, it was at the altar as he slid the ring on my finger. And I was very pregnant under the wedding gown because that's how strong the feeling was at that minute: I wanted to marry this guy, and I wanted to do it even before the baby was due.

*What has gotten into you?* I thought to myself, but I knew the answer: he'd rubbed off on me. He'd brought out an impulsive desire in me that was once barely a spark, but now it

was a full-blown burning hearth, warming me with comfort and daring me to take a huge plunge without looking back.

*Okay, I thought to myself. It's a nice idea, but maybe we don't need to get married that fast.*

My phone began to buzz on the counter. It was McDavis. I let it ring a bit more, wondering if I should pick up. He'd told me to remain on call so he could tell me the results of the hearing and we could plan our next steps forward. And I told him I would.

But, at that moment, I didn't much want to hear what he had to say. Either he'd say that we'd made it through the hearing and the case was thrown out on standing — always a possibility, though not particularly likely in this instance, particularly with how the judge reacted the other day — or we'd have a date set for final trial.

No matter what the final date was going to be, he would insist we were behind schedule and would need to work eighty hour weeks until then. And, while in any other time of my life, I would be thrilled at the prospect of getting to work one-on-one with the main partner of the firm, right now I wasn't feeling particularly motivated.

Because it sounded so boring to me.

The truth was I didn't know what the future would hold, but I'd rather it be exploring the possibilities of what could be instead of sitting back and doing the safe thing, making a decent living, but never having a chance at doing the things I really wanted to be doing.

So I pressed the "Ignore" button on my phone. And when he tried calling again, I pressed that button again. After the third attempt at him reaching me, I just turned the phone off.

He was the kind of guy who just didn't know how to take a hint. And no matter what he was prepared to offer me to incentivize those extra hours, he didn't have anything I actually wanted. The only thing I wanted was standing on the other side of the courtroom from him.

If I was going to have to be on anyone's team, it was going to be Jackson's. I wasn't going to settle for anything less.

I continued to daydream about our future for a while, staring out the window towards the rest of the neighborhood. My trance was broken when Jackson drove onto my driveway and pulled in to park.

I didn't think he could see me. If he could, he wouldn't have stayed there in the driver's seat with the car running, his mouth flapping silently. At first, I thought maybe he was talking to Jude, but there wasn't anybody in the car seat in the back.

*He's talking to himself*, I thought. But why would he be doing that in my driveway? It took me an embarrassing amount of time to come to the theory that he was trying to come up with what he was going to say when he came to the door.

I tried reading his lips, but couldn't do it. All I could see was the frustration in his face as those words I couldn't hear didn't quite come out the way I wanted them to. Part of me felt bad, but the other part of me was endeared by him, this sexy man trying to come up with the exact right thing to say to me, not knowing that he already had me. All he had to do was come to the door.

Jackson was a guy who'd lived his life convincing people of things. And so he thought that this was his big moment — the one in which he had one final chance to win me back. But it wasn't.

Because life isn't always about big moments. Sometimes it's about tiny steps that build up until one day you realize you're at the top of Mt. Everest, and you wouldn't climb back down for anything in the world.

I wondered if I should put him out of his misery. Should I go out there and tell him to just come inside and kiss me?

*Maybe just a little longer*, I thought, but that was when he finally got out of the car.



Which left me with a decision: was I going to tell him what I'd been thinking about? Or was I going to play just a little bit hard to get?

*Let's play it by ear*, I thought.

As he came to the door, I realized he was going to ring the bell. And then he'd wake Cassidy. We couldn't have that, so I intercepted him and opened the door before he had a chance.

He looked startled.

"Hi," I said.

It took him a second. "You were watching me," he said.

"Yes," I admitted, feeling my face flush.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure thing," I said.

He walked in and sat at the kitchen table. "Look, I just want to—"

"How did it go?" I asked.

"How did what go?"

"The hearing?"

He snapped his head back in position as he realized where he'd just spent the whole afternoon. "That's the thing I wanted to say. It doesn't matter. That's not what I want to talk about. Sit down."

He smiled at that. "Sorry," he said. "That came out more forceful than I meant it to. Could you *please* sit down?"

"Absolutely, but before I sit down, do you want some tea?"

"No," he said. "I just... just sit down. *Please* sit down and let me talk for a minute."

"Sure thing," I said with a smile. Oh, it was fun to torture him for a bit. "So you're not going to tell me how the hearing went?"

"Just listen to me for a minute," he said. "Zip up your lips, and let me say my piece."

I mimed zipping my lips up, locking them, and swallowing the key.

“Thank you,” he said. “I know that we’re supposed to say that we are what we do and that’s the most important thing, but it’s not. I don’t want to be fighting against you, whatever side you’re on. I get that you’ve got to look out for Cassidy, and so if that means you need to stay with McDavis, then I’ll drop the case and pass it on to a friend from law school.

“I care about what happens with these women, but not so much that I’m going to let it get between us. What I care about is you and Jude. And... and... you’re sure the baby’s mine, right?”

What did he mean, was I sure? He was the only guy I’d had sex with in years. If it wasn’t him, then it was a miracle that defied all scientific explanation.

But my lips were locked shut and I promised I’d let him talk, so I just nodded, and he smiled.

“Then that’s what I want,” he said. “I want you and everything that comes along with you. And whatever I need to do... anything I need to sacrifice to get that? Well, I’m willing to say goodbye to it. Because nothing else could possibly be as important.”

At that moment, I couldn’t have been happier that I’d let him speak. He was so vulnerable in front of me and the fact was that I didn’t actually want him to give up anything, but the fact that he was willing to, meant the world to me.

I couldn’t let him suffer a minute longer. I leaned across the table and kissed him and kissed him and kissed him again, wrapping my arms around his head and pulling him closer to me. But I couldn’t get him close enough with the table in the way, so I got out of my seat and rotated around the table before jumping in his lap, trying to keep our lips as close together as I could during this entire time.

We were making out like we hadn’t seen each other in years as I eagerly tried to get that hot suit off of him, vaguely remembering that my daughter was asleep in the other room

and trying to work out a strategy of getting him in the bedroom without moving my body away from his.

Fortunately, he gave us a brief time-out as he held my shoulders and said, “So that’s a yes, correct?”

I nodded.

“Am I going to need to hand the case off to my old roommate?”

“No, but you are going to need to help me write my resignation letter for the firm.”

“How much help are you going to need?” he asked. “Dear Mr. McDavis and Mr. Boyd, Go fuck yourselves. Signed, Zoe Travis.”

“P.S. Eat shit, you chauvinistic assholes.” I said.

“See? You don’t need my help.”

“No, I guess I have that under control,” I said. I stood up and grabbed him by the tie. “How ‘bout you join me in the bedroom and help me with something else, then?”

“Whatever you need, co-counsel.”

# CHAPTER 28



\*\*\*JACKSON\*\*\*

So Zoe and I were back on the same team. Well, sort of. Not officially. Behind the scenes we were working together, but after the lashing that our former boss got in court, I made an effort to keep her as far away from everything as I could, at least on paper.

And we had to be careful about this, too, since McDavis was actively pursuing whatever he could to try and get a mistrial. Zoe thought she was being paranoid when there was an unfamiliar car that remained parked across from her house for several hours one day, but it got even more suspicious when it drove away the second I began approaching it.

That wasn't the only thing, either. There was the time at the farmer's market when I noticed a guy in sunglasses tailing us. If we didn't have the kids with us, I might have just ignored him. But the combination of him and Zoe put me in a situation where I was on edge, in full-on protective mode.

I bought everyone burgers and sodas and then made a point of spilling mine all over the man, during which time I had a brief conversation with him under the guise of helping him clean himself off. He was visibly uncomfortable with all this, but I eventually managed to get his phone number by telling him I would text him my number so I could pay for the dry cleaning.

A reverse number search confirmed that he was, indeed, Sam Giles, private detective. Was the McDavis and Boyd law firm one of his clients? Impossible to say, but it seemed likely.

We didn't have definitive smoking gun proof, but we had enough for me to ask the court for an emergency hearing. After listening to what we had to say, Judge Tetra asked McDavis point-blank if he was spying on me. He denied it at first, but she wasn't buying it and put him under oath, letting him know that perjury was very much an offense that could get him disbarred. That loosened his tongue and he admitted that he had, in fact, hired Mr. Giles.

"Mr. McDavis," Judge Tetra said, "between attempting to hire Mr. Ekland's former associate as your counsel, hiring a private investigator to invade his personal life, and then attempting to lie about it to me, you're on extremely thin ice. I'd suggest you work with Mr. Ekland and his clients to settle because at the rate you're going, I doubt you're going to like the verdict you end up with if you pursue a trial."

"This is outrageous," McDavis said, jumping in front of his lawyer, a woman who was clearly in over her head with this trial. "I move for a mistrial."

"On what grounds?" Judge Tetra asked.

"Biased judge," he said.

"When you walked into this courtroom a few weeks ago," Judge Tetra said, "I had no feelings towards or against you. The only bias I have comes from your own actions. Motion denied. There will be no mistrial."

Before McDavis had a chance to respond, the judge set her gavel down and ended the conversation.

"Sir," I said to McDavis as we walked out of the courtroom, "let's discuss a settlement."

He wasn't happy about it, but he agreed. At the very least, he could get this over and done with quickly.

Ultimately, I convinced him to give my clients a shared settlement of \$15 million. Considering the annual net profit of the firm, it was significant, but wouldn't put the company in any kind of danger, especially since we all agreed to not discuss the final monetary resolution. As far as the public at large knew, nobody won or lost the case, which meant that

McDavis and Boyd got to keep their reputation, at least for the most part, and my clients got to experience a very generous windfall for their troubles.

And, as their lawyer, I took home 15% of that. I felt bad for taking as much as I did, though that was on the very low end for what a law firm might take in a class action lawsuit. I tried to take even less, but the clients agreed that they would have ended up with nothing had it not been for me, and they wanted me to take more.

That included Erica, who had gotten over her anger with me after the breakup. At least in part that was because the weekend after I'd called things off, her friends took her out to a bar where she met the guy she'd been seeing ever since. He was a better match for her than I was, and she agreed that Zoe and I made a cute couple, too. She even said that she hoped I'd invite her to the wedding.

“Well,” I said, “we’ll see about that.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean, if there’s a wedding, I’ll invite you.”

She laughed and repeated the word “If” as she rolled her eyes. Then she gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, wishing me luck.

\* \* \*

It was shortly after this time that I got the phone call I'd been expecting, but half-hoping wouldn't come. It was Natasha asking me to come by her place with Jude. She could take him off my hands.

She fixed a nice dinner for Zoe and me, who brought Cassidy with her.

When the two kids went to the living room to play Mario, we were able to talk like adults.

“So what changed?” I asked. “Why is the press over you?”

“It was really simple,” she said. “VIR came out as ace/aro.”

“Ace/aro?” I asked.

“Asexual and aromantic,” Zoe said.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Like he doesn’t have sex?”

“He has zero interest,” Natasha said. “Not with women. Not with men. He’s fine with having relationships and I guess we sort of had one, but it was completely platonic. It’s fine for a friendship, but a girl has needs, you know?”

Zoe blushed. An ex-girlfriend talking about her sexual needs was probably not proper dinner table conversation. Natasha picked up on that quickly and moved on.

“Anyway, I’d been pushing him to come out for forever,” Natasha said, “but he said he wasn’t sure if his masculine image could survive it. I was happy to be his friend, and the media interpreted that as a romantic relationship. And no matter how much we tried to deny it, it only made them more sure that that’s what was going on. I’d been begging him to come out, and eventually he finally got the courage to do it on Late Night.”

Part of being an adult, especially one who had been stuck in a court case for the past several months of his life, was missing out on celebrity gossip that I didn’t really care about. Ordinarily, such an event would have been impossible to avoid, but I guess I’d been working so hard that I hadn’t heard anything outside of the case.

“Suddenly, it was clear that we *were* telling the truth and we were just friends,” Natasha said, “but he’s the face of the ace world right now, so they want to talk to him. He’s getting all the publicity he could possibly want while I get to stay in the shadows. It’s win-win.”

“And Jude gets to see his mother again,” I said.

“Right,” Natasha said. “I really can’t thank you enough for this. You saved my life.”



I gave her a look. “You know, it didn’t need to go this way.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have told me about Jude from the beginning. Let him know his father from the minute he was born.”

Natasha sighed, and Zoe stood up.

“I need to pee,” she said and walked away without waiting for a response. Even in the early stages of pregnancy, her bladder had seemed to be a bit overactive, though I had a sneaking suspicion that that wasn’t what this was about. The conversation didn’t pertain to her, and she was doing what she could to ensure that it remained between Natasha and me.

After all, I could handle myself on my own and it wouldn’t be fair to Natasha if two lawyers teamed up against her.

“Look,” she said, “in retrospect, you’re right, but I made the best decision I could.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell me about him? Send me a postcard or something, and let me make my mind up for myself?”

She thought for a second. “I’m going to tell you the truth,” she said, “and it might come out a little mean, but that’s just the truth tax, you know? If you want the truth, it’s going to need to hurt just a little bit. Can you deal with that?”

Maybe a few months ago, I wouldn’t have been able to, but I was as confident in myself as I’d ever been in my life at that moment, what with just having settled the case and gotten Zoe back.

“Do your worst,” I said, half-joking, which she acknowledged with a half-laugh.

“I don’t want to be with you. You were just a fuck boy, you know?”

To that, I had to laugh. “That’s you being mean?” I asked.

“Don’t get me wrong, Jackson, you’re a great fuck boy.”

I laughed even harder.

“I didn’t want to marry you,” she said, “but like at the party, if you were around, I was going to fall into bed with you.”

If this was her being mean, it was the nicest mean thing anybody had said about me.

“But that’s only because it was comfortable. We weren’t a good match. My love songs were never about you.”

“That’s good!” I said. “Your love songs are all depressing as hell.”

“Yeah, Paste said the same thing about my last album,” she said sardonically. “You made me happy, but it never felt like love. Just contentment mixed with horniness.”

I didn’t even disagree with her.

“I couldn’t have you in my life,” she said, “because I didn’t want to fall lazily into that. And so I couldn’t let you know about Jude back then. You would have tried doing the responsible thing and been there for me. If I saw you being a father to him, I might be tricked into loving you. And then what would happen? We’d get bored of each other, and a few years down the line, we’d be looking at what we both put in our prenup.”

Was she right? I couldn’t say for sure. But it didn’t matter. What was past was past.

“But what about now?”

“What do you mean?” Natasha asked.

“I know he exists. He knows I exist. We can’t just erase each other from our lives.”

She nodded. “Well,” she said, “what do you want?”

“If it’s okay with you,” I told her. “I’d like 50% custody.”

That took her by surprise. “You would?”

“He’s my son,” I told her. “Why wouldn’t I?”

She remained silent for a moment, considering it, and then said. “Okay.”

“You serious?” I asked. “Just like that? You don’t want to consult a lawyer before agreeing to something like that?”

At that point, Zoe walked back into the room.

“Hey Zoe,” Natasha said. “Do you think I should let this bozo have 50% custody of my kid?”

“This bozo?” Zoe asked, kissing me on the forehead as she sat down. “You’d trust him with your kid?”

“That’s what I’m asking.”

I thought that it was going to be Zoe and me against Natasha, but it seemed the two of them had teamed up against me.

“Yeah,” she said. “So long as I can keep an eye on him.”

“That settles it, then,” Natasha said. “You put together the agreement, I’ll have my lawyer take a look at it.” She nodded towards Zoe, who winked back. “If she says it looks good, I’ll sign.”

“Sounds like a deal,” I said.

\* \* \*

Between the settlement and gaining custody of my kid half the time, I was on cloud nine, but Zoe seemed a little lost. I asked her if everything was okay during the dinner, but she said she wanted to talk about it later. Later ended up being that night, when we were laying in bed and she was so restless that it was keeping me up.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Can’t get comfy.”

“How’s this?” I asked, taking her in my arms and spooning her.

“Better,” she said.

We tried resting in silence, but I could tell she was still feeling fidgety, particularly in her legs. Still, she held onto my

forearm and clearly had no interest in letting go.

“I’m happy for you,” she said and though there was genuine emotion behind it, I felt a but coming on. “It’s really great that you’ll get to see Jude. And it’s really wonderful that we won this case, especially considering how big the settlement was.

“And Jude is overjoyed that he’s got a dad and that he gets to see Cassidy more. And Cassidy is happy that she gets to see you and Jude more. And Natasha finally has some breathing room to herself, away from the press. And it seems like everybody’s happy.”

“But you’re not?”

“I mean, I have you,” she said, “and that makes me happy, but for the first time in my life, I’m unemployed, and I don’t know if anyone who will hire me again after the way I stabbed Boyd and McDavis in the back, only to somehow get my job back and do it again.”

“You can always work with me,” I said.

“I know,” she said, “and for a moment, I thought that could work. It is what I want to do, I just worry that that’s not the responsible choice.”

She let out a breath that I could feel on my arm.

“Well, hear me out,” I said with absolutely no idea of what I was going to say next. “This is the second case we won against the law firm. One of the best law firms in Los Angeles.”

“Well, they were,” she said.

“That’s right,” I told her, squeezing her, “they were until they lost their two best lawyers. But nobody else needs to know about that because both cases were handled out of court. We’ve still got the surprise attack on everybody else out there.”

“Everybody else?” she asked.

“That’s right,” I told her. “The other Goliaths of the world. It’s a sea of them. They’re out there stomping on the little guy,

and they're about to get more than they bargained for. Because among those little guys is the two of us: an unstoppable team of badass lawyers."

"We are a good team," she said.

"That's right, but not just in the courtroom," I said. "In everything. Because no matter what happens out there, I'm going to make sure that you have all the support you need. You're going to get to live the life you want, and I'll make sure you'll never be hurting for money or help. That goes for you. That goes for Cassidy. And that goes for the little one you've got growing in your belly."

I could feel the glow of joy from her body, but it lightly dimmed for a moment. "I still feel pretty stupid for giving up the partner position with Boyd and McDavis," she said. "That was just so cushy."

"Cushy, but evil," I said. "And you're not giving anything up because we'll both be full partners. Hell, to sweeten the deal, I'll even put your name first. 'Travis and Ekland: Attorneys at Law.' How does that sound?"

I waited longer than I would have liked for her response, but she was thinking. Or maybe teasing me a little bit.

"How does that sound?" she repeated. "It sounds amazing!"

She turned around and kissed me as I held her close against my body.

"You know, Jackson?" she asked. "I bet you could convince anyone of anything."

"Yeah," I said. "That's how I know we're going to be successful."

We kissed some more, again and again, eagerly awaiting the next one as we finished the last.

The two of us would have an entire lifetime of kisses ahead of us, and that wouldn't be nearly enough time for all the kisses she deserved.

# EPILOGUE



\*\*\*ZOE\*\*\*

It's not like on TV. The law firm didn't just open with a ribbon-cutting ceremony while I oohed and aahed at how amazing it was. No, it was a gradual and seemingly endless process of us looking for the right office that was close to home — but not too close, because then what would even be the point? — affordable and large — but not too large, of course, since it would just be the two of us for the time being. We did eventually find a suitable place, and once we did, we had to negotiate over the price, pay for an inspection, and sign all the paperwork.

But even then it wasn't ready. Because we had to repaint the interior, order the furniture, and put some of it together. The fact of the matter is that even when we supposedly finished, there was still more work to be done in terms of the design — I wanted to get a few more plants, whereas Jackson wanted to put in some high tech and unnecessary gizmos like automatic doors and a wireless PA system.

It only felt right to offer the secretary position to Erica, who had lost her job because of Jackson. Other women might have been intimidated by the fact that we hired a hot, young secretary who had previously had a fling with my boyfriend, but there was never any doubt in my mind that Jackson's eyes were only for me. That woman could have spread her legs and jumped on top of him and he'd still turn her down.

All in all, though, the process didn't take too much time. Three months in total, and I was just entering my third

trimester when we had our celebratory party in honor of our opening.

We'd invited everyone we knew to the party — all our friends and local relatives and even McDavis and Boyd, neither of whom never sent RSVPs or showed up. I suppose they still had hard feelings over the settlement that we'd forced them into and weren't in any mood to celebrate with us.

Their loss, because the catering was quite good.

Of course Jude, Cassidy, and Olivia were there, and by now they'd become the closest of friends and were virtually inseparable. This was a wonderful thing to see, of course, though it made ending playtime nearly impossible, and we practically gave up on bedtime when they'd have slumber parties. I suppose there were worse problems to have.

With all the chaos, it was nice that I got a chance to talk to Natasha one one-on-one, which was fairly rare for us.

“You two really are a good fit,” she said. “I'm almost jealous.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Not that you have him, of course, but... it's just hard to meet anyone who's as good a guy as he is. And, if you do, they're never very much fun. I don't want to be with him, but I wish we had the compatibility to make it work.”

It was funny she was saying this because several months back, I wouldn't have thought Jackson and I were compatible at all. We seemed like polar opposites, but then again, that was what worked best about the two of us. I hadn't been looking to date when we got together, but if I had been, I would have expected to find someone just like me, career-focused and serious. And what a boring relationship that would have been. I honestly would never have known how much I was missing.

“Don't take this the wrong way, Tasha,” I said, “but I'm glad you didn't.”

We shared a laugh, but it was interrupted by a screeching “Mom!” from inside one of the offices.



“What do you need, honey?” I asked.

She was whispering, but it was more of a stage whisper that could have carried across the room if not for the voices of everyone else in the room. “We’re playing hide and go seek, and I need a place to hide.”

“Hmm,” I said and looked around the room. “Under the desk.” I pointed. “I’ll sit in the chair, and nobody will suspect you’re under there. How’s that sound?”

She nodded her head furiously.

“Excuse me,” I said to Natasha and as I walked away, Cassidy looked at her and made a “shhh” gesture with her index finger.

Jude came racing out of the side office as soon as we were in place and I sat comfortably at the desk, my hands folded in place as I looked around the room. For any adult, I would have looked about as conspicuous as possible, but maybe a five-year-old wouldn’t be able to tell yet.

And, for about three and a half seconds, he wasn’t able to tell. After that, he darted straight over to me.

“Zoe,” he said, “is Cassidy under there?”

I contemplated trying to lie to Jude and even got to the point where I was about to, but I just couldn’t do it. I remained the ever-honest lawyer. Perhaps one day I’d learn how to lie, at least for my own benefit, but for now I was stuck with the curse of the truth. If there was ever a case that required dishonesty, my hunky man would have to take it on.

“Yes,” I said.

“Mom!” Cassidy shouted.

“Sorry,” I told her as she came out from under the desk. “I’m too honest for my own good.”

“You’re it!” Jude said, and the two of them ran off into the other office.

Now where was my hunky, dishonest man? I looked around the room and couldn’t find him. For a split second, my

heart began to race — where could he have gotten off to? Surely he hadn't left me here on my own, right?

He hadn't.

He came up behind me, and I felt the cool, sharp sting of metal on my left wrist.

“What the hell?” I asked.

Looking down, I saw that he'd placed a handcuff on me, and the other one was attached to his right hand.

“Everyone quiet down,” he said, clanging the metal rings against the desk in an effort to get the party's attention.

“What are you doing, Jackson? Do you have the key?”

He just smiled at me with just a hint of playfulness. It was the look he gave me when he was trying to tell me that I was being too uptight and I needed to loosen up. The old me would have been resistant, but he tended to always end up being right.

And the current moment was certainly not a time that called for gravity. It was a party. If ever there was a time to loosen up, it would be now. Unfortunately, my very pregnant state kept me from using any social lubricant in order to help with the loosening up.

“I'd like to thank you all for being here to celebrate with us,” Jackson said. “It really is an honor to have so many people here to support us and who believe in what we're doing. You know, I've been talking to my partner, Zoe, about this, and we determined that our core principle is to fight against injustice.

“Now, I've told this to several of my old friends from school, and they think that this is an absolutely wild concept. Lawyers don't fight against injustice. They fight against whatever they're paid to fight against. And oftentimes, they're paid to fight against justice itself.”

He looked at me, smiling.

“We're a little bit crazy,” he said, “and we're probably very naive, but if anyone's going to restore justice to the legal

system in America, it's going to be Zoe Travis, undoubtedly the best lawyer I know."

He was flattering me, but I could tell when he was lying, and this wasn't it. He honestly believed that I was a better lawyer than he was, which was mind-blowing to me, because he was an exceptionally good lawyer.

"And I'm happy to be along with her for the ride," he said, raising our hands, cuffed together. "Wherever she goes, so will I. Do you have anything to say, Zoe?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Do we need to be chained together?"

The crowd laughed. Some of them were, of course, familiar with the history of the handcuffs and that day at Trampoline World, where I realized how silly I was to be running away from Jackson instead of towards him. When he told me we made a good team together, and for whatever reason, those words reverberated throughout my head like an old church bell until the idea finally sank in, and I realized, against all odds and despite what I would have expected, we were a perfect match for each other and better off together than apart.

Most of the people in the crowd, however, did not know the connection and were probably very confused. They'd agreed to come to an office opening, not some kind of public display of kinkery.

I looked over to the side office and saw the three kids poke their heads out, one at a time. When they saw the handcuffs, they started to giggle to themselves.

"No, we don't," Jackson said. "I'll make you a deal."

I rolled my eyes. "What are you talking about, Jackson?"

"I will take that metal off your wrist," he said. "If you'll put this metal on your finger..."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet case, flipping it open to reveal a modestly-sized diamond that reflected in the office light. It was absolutely beautiful.

"...And keep it on your finger for the rest of your life."

I have to admit, it took me by surprise. One thing Jackson was very good at was multitasking. Even though I thought we'd been focused on opening the firm and finalizing the office, he obviously found time to size my finger and pick out the perfect ring for me.

It was just one of the million reasons that I loved him.

“Zoe Travis, will you marry me and never let me go again?” he asked.

“I promise I will never let you go,” I said with tears in my eyes. “It's the biggest yes I could possibly imagine. Of course, I'll marry you!”

He jumped up and kissed me, but the cuffs made it difficult for him to give me a proper hug. He reached into his pocket and brought out the key, unclasping the cuff from my wrist and not even bothering with his. Then he put the ring on my finger — a perfect fit — and wrapped his arms around me.

Then he gave me a long, passionate kiss to the cheers of everyone in attendance, except for the three kids who made exaggerated sounds of disgust.

We ignored them all and just kept kissing.

And, in the back of my mind, I was hoping that he'd hold onto the cuffs for later tonight, when we finally got a moment alone to ourselves in order to celebrate.

\* \* \*

Hope you enjoyed Jackson and Zoe's love story! Are you looking for another enemies to lovers romance page turner?

**Bossy Mess** is the steamy story about Dynasty Realty's totally grumpy boss-hole Wesley Hartford, and his completely off-limits, excessively cheerful, employee Sloane Saunders. Find out what happens when these two opposites collide, and there is a secret that Sloane just can't keep...

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### **Bossy Mess**

***They say never mix business with pleasure.***

***Well, they have never met my irresistibly gorgeous, completely forbidden boss-hole...***

Wesley Hartford is a brooding mess of damaged goods, with the jawline of an Italian underwear model, and not to mention my office nemesis.

Nothing about us fits. We are beyond opposites.

Mr. Hartford is an emotionally stunted work-o-holic that never wanted love or a family.

He sucks the joy out of every room, and not to mention, I don't think that silver fox has smiled since 1986.

Me on the other hand, I make it my life's mission to leave a trail of unbridled joy everywhere I go.

And well love? That's all I have ever been searching for.

But I've kissed one too many frogs trying to find it, and Mr. Hartford seems like the biggest toad of them all.

See how kissing my boss screams bad idea?

But instead, in my usual fashion, I run straight into his arms, and apparently his pants...

Worst...best... mistake of my life.

Because that dark horse, and me the human unicorn, we have the type of passion that well.... broke a friggin' bed.

But seeing those two pink lines after falling for that emotionally stunted, off-limits, unbearably grumpy toad,

Makes me wonder if this is one secret that will end our fairytale...

## **Chapter One Sneak Peak of Bossy Mess!**

### **SLOANE**

“I don’t rate wines by cost,” he told her. He affected an upper-class accent whenever he discussed wines, his deepest passion. “The greatest ones are truly priceless. This bottle might go for a few thousand dollars, though it was given to me by Francois Blanche himself, as a gift when I visited him last summer. He told me to save it to share with someone special.”

The young woman blushed and let out a small titter as he poured the wine into her glass.

Every word out of Bradley’s mouth was all utter and complete bullshit. Despite his obvious interest in the subject, he didn’t know the first thing about wine, except a few words he’d picked up from the videos he watched on-line. And far from a thousand-dollar bottle of red that had been waiting in his closet for over a year for the perfect occasion, this was a

five dollar bottle he'd picked up earlier that day from Trader Joe's.

"But the taste of the wine," he said, "is nothing compared to the taste of you."

He took the glass from her and kissed her, making a grotesque sound as he moved his tongue into her face like a man using mouthwash.

"Mr. Burke," the girl said, "aren't you worried your wife is going to come home?"

He didn't have a wife. He had a girlfriend. And, though he didn't know it, he didn't even have that anymore.

"She's at the office," he said. "She won't be home until late."

That wasn't true. "She" was in the other room, ear against the door. And I know it because I was her.

I'd left the office early to pick up a nice bottle of wine and a reasonably-priced steak for our anniversary dinner, which would have been a waste of money even if he wasn't fucking his secretary because he could never remember when our anniversary was, even after I'd put it on his calendar and spent the past several weeks reminding him it was coming up.

I walked in, was about to say his name, but I smelled the candles and heard the irritating moans of a smooth jazz saxophone coming from the other room. For a split second, I thought maybe he had remembered and had set up a surprise, but then I heard her voice. I'd recognize that Boston accent anywhere.

Worried that they might make a sound on the wooden floors, I removed my heels after I put down the groceries and held them in my hands, remembering that movie from the 90s where the woman stabbed the guy with her stilettos. When I first saw it, I thought it was pretty gruesome. Now the image of Bradley running around naked with a shoe coming out of him struck me as quite funny.

\* \* \*

“What movie was that?” Courtney asked. She was my best friend at the Dynasty Real Estate company — a woman to whom I’d taken an instant liking.

“You know,” I said, “the one with the woman who gets the roommate who starts dressing like her and stuff? Then goes psycho?”

“*Single White Female*,” said Vince, one of the older men who was also listening in on the story. “It’s totally gnarly.”

“She kills a guy with a shoe?” Courtney asked.

“Right through the eye,” Vince said, reenacting it.

“Can we focus? I’m getting to the good part.”

“You kill him, right?” That was Abigail. The sweetest girl who, bless her soul, just wasn’t especially smart.

“Yes, Abigail,” I said. “I’m confessing to the entire office.”

She blushed, picking up on the sarcasm.

“You know, with the right jury,” Courtney said, “I bet you could have gotten away with it. I would have acquitted.”

“Murder’s still technically illegal in the state of California,” I said. “Even when the victim is a cheating son of a bitch who lies about wine to nineteen-year-olds to get them in bed.”

Courtney shrugged. “All I know is if he ends up missing, anybody asks I’ll tell them you were with me that night.”

“Thanks,” I told her, “But I’m over it. I’m done with him, and he can bang all the secretaries he wants now.”

“She was his secretary?” Vince asked, noticeably excited. “That’s so...” He looked around at the women in his vicinity. “...unethical. Very unprofessional of him.”

“Yeah, and he was my boss, too,” I said. “I would have been doing the world a favor, but I kept that door between us. As long as it was there, I wouldn’t be able to kill him.”

“Not with a shoe anyway,” Courtney said.



“Not with a shoe,” I said. “And that was the weapon I happened to be holding.”

“So, what happened?” Courtney asked.

I looked around. This story was about to get very office inappropriate, and I was still relatively new to Dynasty. I had a captive audience of three, but I didn’t want any eavesdroppers to hear and report me to HR.

“Now as little as Bradley knows about wine, he knows even less about pleasing a woman,” I said. “This is a guy who needs Google Maps to find the clit. His hands were all thumbs, he’d squeeze my tits like he was man handling fruit. The one time he went down on me, it was so bad I told him to stop. I’ve had more sexually fulfilling Pap smears.”

The memory of that sent a bit of nausea into my gut. I honestly didn’t know what I was thinking being with him. I suppose it was buying into his bullshit. He was so convinced of his greatness that it was hard not to get swept up in it. It was like he’d used a Jedi mind trick. Instead of asking if that was good for me, he’d tell me, and I didn’t have the heart to give him feedback.

It was actually upsetting for me to think about it and, sure, I might have been exaggerating for comic effect, and embellishing a few of the details, not to mention leaving out the tears in my eyes as I listened to him and the secretary from behind the closed door. Leaving him was the best thing I’d ever done, but it still hurt to be cheated on. It still hurt to have spent as long as I did with him knowing how little he actually cared about me.

But my audience was loving it and I wasn’t going to stop now. From the looks on their faces, I should have brought popcorn.

“And the sounds that he’d make,” I said. “You know like when a dog is about to throw up? Imagine that but nonstop for like two to three minutes, broken up by some of the worst dirty talk I’ve ever heard.

“So, after I’d had enough of that—”

“No, no, no,” Courtney said.

“What?” I asked.

“You can’t just tell us that and not give examples,” Vince said. “What did he say?”

I looked around. Nobody was nearby. I kept my voice low.

“He refused to call his penis his dick,” I said, “or his cock or his Johnson or anything reasonable like that. He was really into D&D and Tolkien and stuff, so he called it his ‘dragon.’ So, everything he’d say was like ‘Oh, you make my dragon blow fire.’”

The three of them laughed at that. Abigail was blushing, “What did he call your... er, um...?”

“My lady bits?” I asked.

Abigail blushed a little harder.

“That was the weirdest thing,” I said. “He called it ‘the Dragon Slayer.’”

“No!” Courtney was downright shocked.

“That’s so weird,” Vince said. The look on his face was what you’d expect from a man witnessing a horrific car accident who refused to look away.

“So, I’m hearing these ungodly sounds coming from behind the door and the most half-hearted attempts at moans from her and I figure the kind thing to do would be to just put her out of her misery.”

“Were you mad at her?” Courtney asked.

“Heck no,” I told her. “I felt bad for her. Nobody should have to endure what she was going through. As I see it, she and I are the victims in this story.”

That’s at least what I told myself. She was young and stupid and taken in by Bradley. It could happen to anybody. He was a narcissistic prick no matter how you slice it and it’d be impossible to put a number on the amount of women that probably ended up in therapy because of him.

“So, I barged in there to put an end to it,” I said, miming the activity and making sure to show that I still held that high heel shoe in my hand. “She was leaning over the bed, and he was giving it to her from behind, wheezing like he was knocking on death’s door.”

I had gotten so good at telling this story from various parties that I was practically on autopilot, making sure not to rush the payoff.

“I stepped forward and I threw the shoe at him.”

I acted the activity out in slow motion, throwing that imaginary shoe just as I had that day.

“Bullseye,” I said, “Four-inch heel all the way up his asshole.”

The three of them simply exploded in laughter.

“All the way up there,” I said, raising my voice just enough so that they could hear me over the laughter. “And he screamed like a tea kettle, jumping around the room waving his hands in the air with half a hard-on and a red stiletto coming out of his ass.”

That part of the story usually killed, but the faces of my audience were deathly serious. Had I offended them?

Their eyes weren’t even looking at me. They were focused above my head and behind me. I turned and there was my boss, Wesley Hartford — the darkly handsome boss of the company, with his slightly graying hair and angular face — wearing his typical bulldog expression, not the least bit amused. His icy blue eyes expressed a clear disapproval only echoed by his small lips, which I’d never seen stretch out to become a smile.

“Mr. Hartford,” I said. “I didn’t see you there.” There was fear in my voice. I knew he didn’t like me to begin with and it always felt like I was on thin ice with him, as if he was the school principal and I was the problem child of the school.

“Miss Saunders,” he said, “Come see me in my office.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a demand.

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NOW!**

### About the Author

Thank you all so much for reading my books. Being able to write for readers who love the same toe-curling romance novels that I love to create is beyond a dream come true!

I got my love for writing romance novels when I was 13 years old and found my mother's stash of harlequins. Ever since then, washboard abs, forbidden love, and-if-looks-could-kill men have been etched in my mind. When I ran out of books to read, I began to write my own and as the fates would have it, became a published author.

My favorite books to write are witty page turning romances, with grumpy, brooding, irresistible men who make you want to take extra-long showers. When I am not lost in the written word, you can catch me by the pool with my family, reading a book, and eating something delicious that someone else cooked for me.

I hope you keep enjoying all the panty melting, heart racing, love stories I revel in creating. Stay sexy babes!

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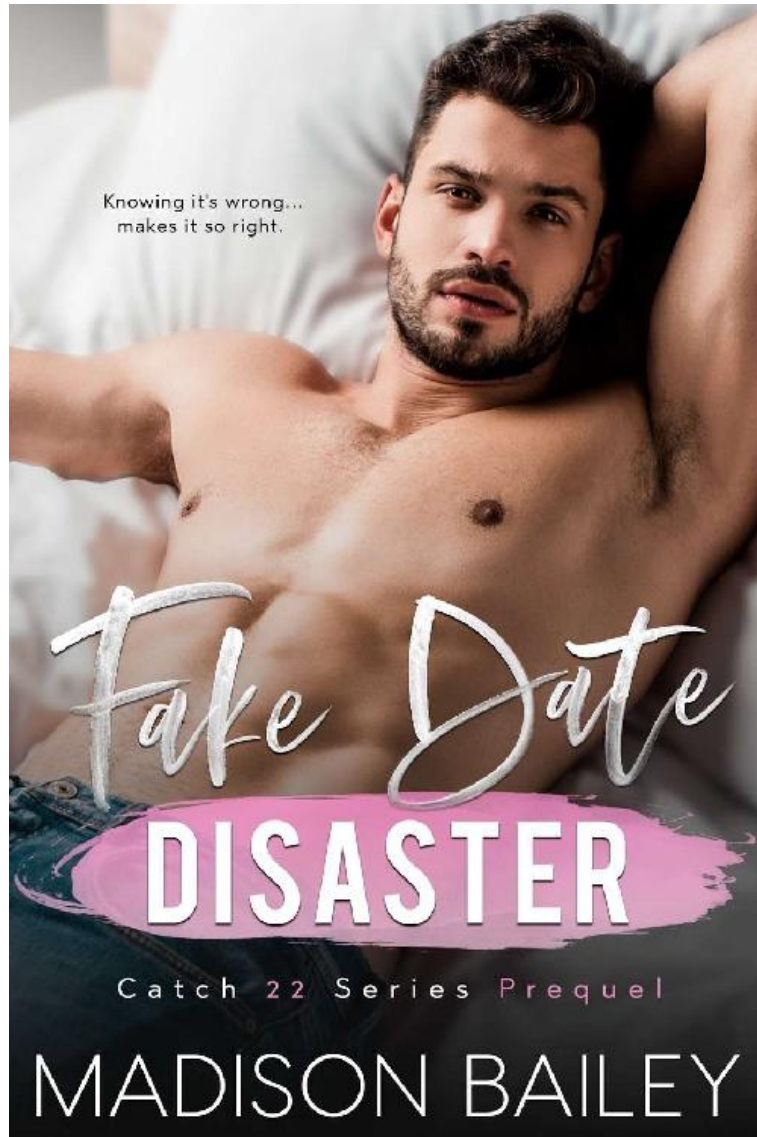
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