

Silver Fox

BILLIONAIRE

AVA GRAY


SILVER FOX BILLIONAIRE

AVA GRAY

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BLURB

My boss hired me without realizing who I was – trouble in a short skirt.

And his best friend's daughter.

But he definitely knew he was asking for trouble when he slept with me.

I was half his age.

His employee.

And the last person he should've touched.

Let's just say he did way more than just touch me.

He lit my soul on fire.

But that left me with a secret I couldn't bear to reveal.

Especially knowing that he would leave.

What I didn't know, however, was that he would be back.

Not just in my life but also back in town.

That meant he would find out about his son.

And the reveal would force him to pick between his entire life and us...

But what if he hated me too much to even care to make that choice?

CHANDLER

“Hey, I didn’t think I’d see you today, Chandler!”

My friend Daniel Jones sauntered into the box and slapped me on the shoulder.

“Dan the man!” I held up my fist for a knuckle bump. “What makes you say that? You’re the one getting here late,” I pointed out.

“Yo, Dan!” Doug called from the row of chairs, his attention on the game.

Dan grabbed a beer from the open ice bucket and looked over the spread of food in front of us. I returned to layering cheese and deli meats onto my sandwich. It was always obvious when one of the guys was responsible for the food, versus when they got their wives involved, or bribed an assistant somewhere.

When a man was in charge of the food, it was basic, like today. Sandwiches, meat, chips, something to dunk the chips into, and beer. When a woman had a hand in the planning, there would be a slightly elevated variety to the meats and cheeses we consumed in a blind fervor as we watched the game. Typically there would be finger foods like wings, potato skins, and there would be the presence of a vegetable somewhere, either along with the wings, or as an option to go into the ever present chip dip.

Last time Doug forgot it was his turn to make sure we had food, and we ended up with pizza and hotdogs. It was great. Junk food and box seats at the game, talk about the good life.

I wrapped a paper napkin around my sandwich and grabbed my own beer. With a tilt of my head I let Dan know I was headed to my seat.

He grabbed a few slices of cheese and meat, folding them into his mouth before he followed me.

Before my ass had a chance to hit the leather I was shouting with everyone else who had suddenly launched to their feet. Score! Our team was up fifty points as the game headed into the first break.

“What have I missed?” Daniel asked.

I leaned back in padded leather luxury. I loved box seats. “A bunch of guys on ice skates with sticks beating the crap out of each other to get a little puck into the other team’s net. What do you think you’ve missed? At least we’re winning.”

Our team wasn’t doing very well during the playoffs. We had to win this game, or we were out for the season.

“I see you arrived in time to eat,” James said, as he got out of his chair and hustled up to the table with the food.

Six of us, Dan, Doug, James, McLain, Greg, and I split a box at every major sports facility. We had one at the arena for hockey, and the stadium for football, and the ballpark for baseball. But when it came to basketball, we all agreed seats on the floor were the best. Being so close to the action made it feel like we were in the game.

Other than myself and Doug, I don’t know if anyone else could actually play much anymore. Maybe Dan, he was still fit. We were all getting up there in age. Dan and I were the only ones who were single at the moment. McLain was in the process of getting another divorce. At least this time there weren’t kids involved.

At forty, I may have been the youngest, but I was feeling middle age breathing down my neck with every snap crackle and pop of my knees. Those joints reminded me constantly that I had not been kind to my body in my youth. Back then I liked to run hard and play harder. Now I was lucky to get in a

five mile loop jogging around the park before keeping my ass in front of a computer the rest of the time.

“What kept you?” I asked.

“Yeah, why are you so late?” Doug asked.

“My kid is moving back home,” Dan announced.

“Summer break already?” James asked. “That’s early. Sally doesn’t start her break until sometime in June.”

“I do not miss those days. I swear I moved this one couch Donny found on the side of the road in and out of dorms every three months. When he and his girlfriend got an apartment I was so happy not to have to move that couch any more.” Doug rubbed his lower back as if simply talking about the experience caused him pain.

“Mimi graduated,” Dan announced.

“That’s great,” James said.

“You mean high school, right?” I joked.

Daniel wasn’t that much older than me. For his daughter to be out of college, that meant I was even older than I was feeling. I had met everyone’s kids and spouses more than a few times. Doug’s son, Donny, had been tall and wiry thin the last time I had seen him. But now he was living with his girlfriend. I shook my head. Why were other people’s kids growing up making me feel like I was watching them grow while I stayed the same?

Daniel’s daughter, Mimi, was one of those quiet kids. Awkward. She wore braces, and thick glasses, and was a bit of a formless round shape. I only knew she was a female because of her dad, and her name. I knew it sometimes bothered Dan, considering how outgoing he was. She didn’t match his energy. Maybe it had something to do with losing her mother at a young age. Maybe I really knew nothing about kids, and needed to stop speculating. It’s not like I was ever going to have any of my own.

“Mimi’s graduated already? That was fast,” I commented.

“Fast? No, she took an extra year so she could get a full semester abroad. She’s moving back home until she can get the down payment on something. Apartment rental is crazy. No more first month’s rent plus a deposit, or first and last. These days everyone wants a deposit that’s equal to three month’s rent. If she can come up with that kind of money, I’ll be encouraging her to buy a condo.”

“But that’s the nature of tenancy and owning property. You have to keep up with the trends, and stay ahead on market value,” James commented.

“I’m well aware of that. But it hits differently when it’s your kid,” Daniel said.

“Just buy her something,” Doug said.

Dan shook his head. “She’s gotten very stubborn about doing this on her own.”

“You paid for college, didn’t you? Why is she being picky now?” Doug asked.

I nodded in agreement with him. Why get independent now when daddy could clearly afford to pay for things. Other than McLain and his serial divorces, everyone in our group could very well afford to support their kids. I could too, if I had kids.

“That’s why I’m late. We were having a spirited discussion regarding her future employment.”

“She wants to work, and you said she didn’t have to?” I offered an explanation.

“She definitely wants to work. She insists on it. No, she didn’t want me to do what I’m about to do.”

Everyone’s eyebrows went up.

“She doesn’t want me networking and asking if any of you can fit her into the secretary pool, or the mailroom. She’d make a good receptionist.”

The Mimi I remembered would be a horrible receptionist. Receptionists had to be attractive and outgoing. They were the face of the company. Not afraid to say hi, and certainly not some weird kid.

“Why not give her a position at your place?” Doug asked.

Daniel shook his head. “Board is coming down on nepotism hires. No more nephews of the CEO thinking they are hot shit and costing us our top client. We are still recovering from that fiasco. There is no way they would let the COO bring his daughter in to do anything. I can’t even have her come in as a temp to stuff envelopes for a mass mailing.”

“What is she interested in doing?” I asked.

“She’s interested in not living with her old man,” Daniel chuckled.

“I have MBAs fighting over entry level internships just to get their foot in the door in Venture Capitalism. There is no way I’d have anything for her. Seriously, she’d need a graduate degree before we’d look at her,” James said.

Doug shrugged. “Tell her to send her resume to my office, I’ll forward it to HR. I might have something.”

“Same,” I said. “Between Doug and I, I’m sure we’ll find her something. Don’t have her send anything to McLain, unless you want her to be the next ex-Mrs. Butler.”

Doug grabbed my shoulder. “That’s right, I forgot. The one he’s divorcing right now started off as his receptionist. Yeah, don’t have her send anything his way.”

“Why isn’t he here anyway? Greg is on a cruise, what’s McLain’s excuse?” Doug asked.

My phone buzzed with a text. At the same time Daniel’s phone pinged, as did James’s and Doug’s. We all picked up our phones.

I had a text from McLain.

‘Fucking bitch is trying to get my share of the stadium boxes in the divorce. She wants my football season tickets too. Legal says that’s not gonna happen. I might need to cash out so she can have the money. There is no way I’m not letting her get those seats.’

We all looked from our phones to each other.

“That explains why McLain isn’t here.” Doug said.

There was a roar from behind us. The game had started up again, and none of us had noticed. We all slid into the cushy expensive seats, and turned our attention to the game. It was easier than dealing with the mess of McLain’s divorce and how it was leaking into our lives.

I knew my friends, they would be thinking the same thing I was. Monday morning we’d all be giving our lawyers a call to fortify our assets against the current Mrs. McLain Butler. I almost felt sorry for her, six legal departments against her one, all for prime stadium seats.

While I was thinking of it, I sent a text note to my admin. I gave her a list to add to Monday’s already growing task list.

‘Have legal call me re: sports boxes. Expect a resume from Mimi Jones, get her a decent job.’

MILA

I was still super annoyed with Dad. I wanted to find a job on my own. When he told me to send my resume to his friends it took me a long week of rejections before I swallowed my pride and did it. My resume couldn't have been sitting in Chandler Owens's inbox more than a few minutes before I received a call to come in for an interview.

"You got an interview? That's great. Be sure to thank Chandler for me when you see him," Dad said.

It was the first solid lead I had in a month of job hunting, so of course I was going to go to the interview. But I didn't want to. After five years of spreading my wings, seeing the world—ok a semester abroad in Scotland and a well used Eurail pass got me around most of Europe—being back in the bedroom I had grown up in seemed like an abject failure.

The only interview I had managed to get came from one of my dad's friends, and not because I had a spectacular resume. My classmates had job offers, and had made arrangements to move as soon as they graduated. It felt like everyone I knew was walking into their futures. They were adults with careers. I wanted that for me. Instead, I was back home having to pretend to be the same girl I was before I left for college.

That wasn't me anymore. At least I didn't want it to be. I wanted to make my own decisions, and not have to rely on Dad for every little thing. It was embarrassing having to ask to borrow money to buy tampons because I didn't even have a throw-away part time job to give me some spending money. I hated how eager I was for this job when it was offered.

As I pulled my car into the employee parking garage at Wilson Group I felt a stab of insecurity and not belonging. Just because my car wasn't the latest and greatest, didn't mean my presence here wasn't as valid as whoever drove all of those Teslas.

I bought and paid for my car on my own. Dad had insisted he pitch in some of the money, so I let him buy me new tires and cover the insurance. But the rest of it, that was my hard earned money from the various jobs I had in high school and my first two years of college. I kind of hated just how hard it was to earn that money too. But I would not falter. I was determined to make this on my own, and not with Dad bankrolling me any longer. Or at least not paying my way any longer than was absolutely necessary.

Chandler Owen had not been present at the interview, so in the end I realized that he may have opened the door for me to get a foot in, but I was allowed to stay on my own merits.

"You are a strong and capable woman," I repeated my morning mantra as my heels clicked on the concrete flooring of the parking garage. "You deserve this job and you belong here."

I took a sip of my coffee, confirmed I had my ID badge on the lanyard in my hand, and hurried toward the elevators.

"You're early," Alana my HR rep said as I scurried into her office.

"I'm on time," I said. I had scurried so that I would walk in her office exactly two minutes before I needed to be there.

"Mila, you know this isn't fast food. No one is checking your time card."

I felt my jaw slack. Oh crap, was there a time card? I hadn't been punching in or out. "No one's showed me that yet. I've written my hours down in my date book on my phone. I didn't ___"

Alana waved her hands around, cutting me off. "Proverbial time card, Mila. We don't do that here."

I deflated with relief and sank into one of the chairs facing her desk.

“We trust you to work to the job’s requirements. Sometimes that means you’re here a little late, sometimes that means you are walking out the door at three on Fridays. I used to work for a manager who believed in the bullshit of if you’re on time you’re late. He tried to get away with wage theft by having hourly workers get started on their job before they clocked in. He’s why I went into employment law.”

“You’re a lawyer?” I asked.

“Not officially. I never took the Bar exam. I don’t want to be a lawyer, I want to make sure employees are treated fairly,” she said.

“That explains why you’re in Human Resources. Makes sense.”

“Have you ever considered working in HR?”

I shook my head. “I hate to admit it, I don’t really know exactly what I want to focus on. I like doing a little bit of everything,” I said.

“That’s exactly why I hired you to be a floating assistant. It’s easier to cross train you than it is to hire in a temp every time.” With a smile she started to flip through a file she had on her desk. “Last week you backed up the receptionists. I thought I was going to put you back there this week but I got a call from the executive group. They have an admin going on vacation next week, and they want you. So, today you’re on the front door, and tomorrow you’ll go straight to the fifteenth floor and work with Lisa Teddy. She’ll show you the ropes and get you situated for working with your exec.”

I blinked a few times. I hadn’t expected anything so lofty. And yes, an executive assistant was a high powered position, even if I was only acting as a temp.

“Front door? Okay.” I hitched my bag back onto my shoulder and stood up. “So I’ll check in with you again next week?”

Alan shook her head. “No need. Go ahead and just report to your desk. Now, I will tell you, you’re going to be working for Kathleen McDonald. She’s not big on flash and does seem to equate a certain amount of style to competence. Do not wear

color around her. She seems to be more responsive to assistants in neutral colors. Black, white, navy, gray, taupe, and designer labels if you have them.”

I paused. I had been excited, but now I was concerned. “Are you serious? I hate taupe.”

Alana nodded. “She won’t care if you aren’t at your desk at eight thirty sharp, but she will make assumptions about your aptitude if you show up in pink.”

Of course I was wearing pink. At least I wouldn’t have to deal with this McDonald woman until the next day. I thanked Alana and carried my belongings back down to the ground floor. I stored my belongings in the little closet they gave to the receptionists for their belongings before heading out to sit at the central desk in the middle of the lobby.

“Hey Mila, glad to have you with me today,” the regular receptionist said.

“Nice to see you again...” I had a moment of panic as I tried to remember her name.

“Good morning, Daphne.” A sexy deep voice said behind me.

I turned and sucked in my breath when I recognized Dad’s friend. My eyes went wide, and bit the inside of my cheek. Shouting out Chandler Owens’s name like I knew him wasn’t exactly appropriate, even if I have known him for years. At least he let me know Daphne’s name, he didn’t realize he was being helpful.

Our eyes met and I said a very quite, “Hi.”

“Mimi? Is that you?” he asked.

I grimaced and nodded. “Mila, no one calls me Mimi any more except for Dad. Nice to see you again Mr. Owens.”

“And friends don’t call me Mr. Owens. It’s Chandler. I’m glad to see we were able to find a suitable position for you. Are you settling in?”

He was a whole lot hotter than the last time I had seen him. Maybe it was the cut of his designer suit, or the way his dark hair had turned to silver at the temples.

I nodded like some kind of bobble head. “I’m only in reception for today. Tomorrow I head up to help Ms. McDonald’s assistant out. I’m officially a floater.”

“Really? So you’re going to have your fingers in everything we do around here,” he said with a light chuckle.

I was pretty sure it was my imagination, but his eyes left my face and went on a walk about over how I was dressed before returning to meet my gaze again. He was smirking when our gazes met again.

“Well I certainly look forward to seeing you on the fifteenth floor tomorrow, Mila.”

I gave Chandler an awkward little wave as he nodded and then strode off toward the elevators. Had he seriously just checked me out? I shook my head. That wasn’t possible. Chandler Owens was GQ model gorgeous in a suit. And to think I had a little crush on him when he showed up on Dad’s boat in board shorts and old sports shirts. Him in a suit and tie was going to be a challenge to not stare hard at.

I was a professional, and those thoughts were not welcome in a work environment. I was going to have to make sure I didn’t share them with anyone.

“You know Chandler Owens?” Daphne asked after he disappeared from view.

“Yeah.” I finally sat down and started getting myself ready to work. I wrapped the phone headset around my ears and adjusted my hair, so the hands-free headset didn’t mash my hair down in unattractive lumps. “He’s been a friend of my dad for years. I don’t think I’ve seen him since I left for college.”

She shook her head. “I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me. I thought we were friends.” She was laughing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“That man is the finest thing on two legs around here, and you just casually know him like it’s no big deal.” She shook her head and then took a call, ignoring me.

I liked her. She was giving me a hard time, but it was all in fun. So Daphne thought Chandler was hot. She wasn't wrong about that.

CHANDLER

“Mr. Owens,” Mila began as she approached me, a file folder extended out to me. She had been on the fifteenth floor for almost two weeks now. I shouldn’t have been looking forward to her smile every morning, but I was.

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Chandler?” I asked, reaching out for the file.

“Until I no longer work directly for Ms. McDonald. Every time she hears you, as soon as you are out of earshot, she makes sure to correct me. It’s just easier to avoid the whole confrontation,” she said.

She wasn’t smiling, and that wasn’t making me happy. Her annoyance with Kathleen was my annoyance with Kathleen.

“Do you need me to say anything to her?”

Instead of shyly smiling and thanking me for the suggestion of an effort, Mila’s blue eyes went wide. “Please don’t. I’m already on thin ice with her. Her regular admin, Lisa, must be some kind of clairvoyant. Because Ms. McDonald expects me to know what she wants me to do before she even tells me. It’s one thing to be considered barely adequate for the job, it’s something completely different to be seen as a trouble maker. I don’t want her to think I’m trying to get you involved or anything.”

She looked completely panicked.

“Hey,” I stepped in close and put my arm around her shoulder. Several things misfired in my brain, and several other things

roared to life in that initial moment of contact. I swallowed and forced my focus to stay on track. “I won’t say anything. You don’t have to worry about Kathleen. I’ve got your back.”

At that moment, I had a bit more than her back tucked in against me.

The curves that little Mimi had developed in her years away at college were enticing. I had secretly been admiring them for days, and now they were warm and soft as she pressed the length of her body against mine. Or was I the one pressed against her?

“Kathleen demands excellence from everyone. I think she’s harder on the younger new hires because she’s looking into your future and not at your present. You’re doing a great job, Mila, don’t doubt that.”

She leaned her head against my chest. It was a moment of comfort from her father’s friend. A friendly gesture, nothing more. My blood pressure surged and my pulse quickened. Something inside me did not accept this contact as simply friendly and benign.

I’d known this young woman for years, there was no harm. A throb of protest ricocheted through my balls. Mila was young. No, Mimi was young, and had grown up into Mila. And Mila was a woman, with all the right curves, and lips that brought up inappropriate thoughts in my head.

“If you’re done, maybe you shouldn’t be hugging my assistant in the hallway,” Kathleen’s sharp voice cut through the overwhelming chatter and noise in my head.

I dropped my arm and stepped away. It was almost a relief to no longer be in physical contact with Mila. My body settled and the mis-fires in my brain seemed to correct themselves.

“Mila is a family friend, nothing unprofessional was happening,” I countered.

“If I find out you so much as told a dirty joke in front of my assistant...”

“It’s all right Ms. McDonald. Mr. Owens is a friend of my father’s. It was nothing more than some fatherly support and

advice,” Mila jumped to my defense.

I smiled and nodded all while every cell in my being protested being equated with ‘fatherly.’ The thoughts I struggled to suppress were far from paternal. Fatherly my ass, I was interested in her calling me ‘daddy,’ but not in a parental way.

It was just as well that Kathleen happened upon us and doused me in a proverbial downpour of cold water. I had never really struggled with inappropriate thoughts at work. I had always been able to negotiate working alongside beautiful women and never allowed myself to be distracted by their physical attributes. This was a new, and concerning, development with Mila.

“Public displays of affection are not appropriate in the workplace.”

“Of course Ms. McDonald, I’ll remember that,” Mila said. She ducked her head and scurried away.

“Kathleen.” I stopped her as she turned to follow Mila back toward her office. “What was that all about? Are you saying you wouldn’t have hugged your niece and given her words of encouragement for her new new job?”

I had never once thought of Mila as a niece, but she was my friend’s kid. Kathleen should understand these things.

“She’s not my niece. She isn’t yours either.” Kathleen locked eyes with me and stared hard. She was trying to make a point without saying the words exactly. She turned on her heel and walked away.

My intent of explaining the familiarity between Mila and I was completely lost, or ignored. I interpreted Kathleen’s intense stare as her way of saying she knew Mila wasn’t my niece and as a male employer I had no business touching any of my employees, especially with embraces that could be misinterpreted.

I’d give Kathleen the win on that conversation. As if we were keeping score.

Note to self, keep away from Mila Jones, she made my brain stupid, and my body acted like it belonged to a younger man.

It was easy enough to avoid Mila once Kathleen's regular assistant returned. If I saw Mila, it was because she was stationed at the main receptionist desk. She was beautifully suited for that position. She greeted everyone, myself included with a sparkling smile, and a gentle speaking voice. She was lovely to look at and interact with.

She was so very different from the lump of a kid I remembered. The Mimi in my memories was barely there, and mostly as a sullen, quiet presence. Very different from the woman she had grown into.

"Good morning Chandler," she called out to me the next time I saw her.

"You remembered," I said as I paused and leaned against the receptionist desk. Today Mila wore vibrant colors, and her eyes seemed to reflect the purple hues of her clothes.

"You seem brighter this morning. What is it?" I asked.

She shook her head. Long waves of chestnut cascaded around her face. "I don't know. Maybe it's the lighting in the lobby?"

"Maybe. I like that color on you." I tapped the desk and headed to the elevators. "Have a good day."

"You too." She wiggled her fingers in a friendly wave as I left.

When I turned back to look at her, I caught her watching me. I gave her a wink and laughed as she blushed and looked away, flustered.

I tried not to think about her, but the next time I saw her was a few days later in the employee café buying coffee. She had a drinks holder packed with six medium coffees balanced in her hands.

"You do know there are coffee pots in the break rooms if you need to make coffee for meetings," I said.

"Hi Chandler. Yeah, I know, that would have been much easier. These are drinks for the staff in marketing. They are crunching on a deadline, so Mr. Williams is buying mochas and lattes for everyone," she said with a smile.

Her smile lit up her face, and made her eyes sparkle. I would have sworn they were dark blue, practically violet last time I really gazed into them, but today, her eyes were positively green, and stunning.

“Mark is making you call him Mr. Williams?”

“Until he says I can call him Mark, he’s Mr. Williams. I need to get these upstairs before they cool down too much. Apparently marketing runs on caffeine.”

“I’ll see you later, Mila.” I wanted to see her again, sooner than later. “Next time maybe we should coordinate and have coffee.”

She smiled, nodded and hurried away. She looked nervous. I reviewed my words, nothing seemed out of line. I ordered myself a mocha, and understood the need for caffeine in the marketing department. I needed some myself.

The next morning, as I expected to see my administrative assistant at her desk, I was pleasantly surprised to see Mila sitting there. Her brow furrowed as she glared at the computer. She looked down at something on the desk before returning her concerned expression back to the monitor.

“Everything okay here?” I asked.

“The log-in isn’t working, and I can’t get access to this machine. Which means I’m not going to be very good at my job today.”

She didn’t look up at me once, her attention completely on the misbehaving computer.

“Flip up the keyboard,” I said.

“What?”

“The keyboard.” I reached across the desk and lifted the keyboard up. “Heather typically leaves the password there for me.”

Mila took the device from my hands and flipped it all the way up. A green square sticky note with a collection of words crossed out and one untouched was plastered to the bottom.

“Awesome, thank you! That was going to be annoying if I couldn’t get in.”

“Where’s Heather?”

“She called in sick, and they sent me. Is that okay?”

“Yes, that’s fine. That’s great. I’ve been wanting to spend some more time with you. Maybe we’ll have to work late tonight. Should order dinner in.” I took a step toward my office, paused and then continued. That’s not what I had fully intended on saying, but it was what I had been thinking. I couldn’t decide if that had sounded as if I was propositioning her. I was, I just didn’t want it to sound that way in case she took it the wrong way.

I picked up my phone and buzzed her desk.

“That was fast, you just walked in there. What can I help you with?” She sounded perfectly fine, as if she wasn’t interpreting my words as a form of harassment or anything.

“I hope you didn’t take that the wrong way. I didn’t mean to insinuate anything...”

“You had said you wanted to meet up for coffee last week. So, if that was an invitation to work over dinner, then I wouldn’t say no.”

I let out a soft chuckle. “It wouldn’t be a working dinner, Mila.”

“I still wouldn’t say no if you’re asking.”

MILA

I stared into Chandler's eyes from across an intimately small table. His dark features were illuminated by the soft flicker of candle light.

I couldn't stop giggling. I wasn't laughing like an idiot, but small constant giggles of delight bubbled up. I played with my wine glass, my appetite for food and drink superseded by my nerves.

He picked up his wine, and let his fingers graze across the back of my hand. Another giggle at the soft tickle of his touch.

When I agreed to go out for dinner with him, I hadn't expected a tiny little out of the way Italian place with dark corners for romantic meetings. I knew he was asking me out for dinner, but part of me didn't believe it could be for a date. He was technically my boss, so I had still held onto the possibility dinner after work would be at a more public location and involve deep fried appetizers and big screen TVs around the room.

This was much better.

"Your eyes are simply mesmerizing." His voice was a low rumble.

I hadn't noticed how deep and yummy he sounded. I'd had a crush on Chandler Owens for years. Once I realized what those feelings were, everything he did I thought was sexy and cool. So his voice always stirred erotic feelings in me, I just had never realized how deep it really was. The timber and the

way it rumbled through his chest made me want to roll around in it.

“You like my eyes?”

Giggle. I bit my lip and blushed. I was a giddy idiot around the man. At work I had been able to keep my professional demeanor without so much as an extra blink of my eyes. Okay, maybe a few extra blinks. I may have batted my lashes at him and flirted more than I should during the day. I maintained my professionalism and I had not mooned over him. I did my job and kept my focus on the tasks at hand. But now, in the restaurant I was flustered. My skin tingled with dancing nerves. Everything he said was witty. And I could not keep my gaze from lingering over his lips.

His lips weren't overly plump and full. I didn't like big lips on a man, but I wasn't a fan of those thin lines that weren't anything more than a slash for a mouth. Chandler's mouth was perfectly between the two extremes. His lips were nicely shaped and I could not stop staring at them. Of course, as I stared I thought about what it would be like to kiss him, and have those lips on my skin.

His finger trailed back across my knuckles. “I've been trying to figure out what color your eyes are. Right now they are dark pools. Earlier I would have sworn they were blue. The other day your eyes were definitely green. The last time I paid attention to these things, people can't change their eyes to match their outfits.”

Giggle.

“That's because you don't wear glasses. And you're asking me for trade secrets,” I said before biting my lip again.

“Trade secrets?” He tipped his head to the side before nodding and finally taking a drink of his wine. He sat up straight so he was no longer in close as we had both been leaning over the table. “I know better than to ask a woman her age, and I never comment on her hair. Especially if it magically changes color, length, or style. But seriously, this eye trick of yours has me fully baffled. I don't like not figuring a mystery out. I'm an answers man. And this...” He gestured at me.

I giggled again at his conundrum. I liked that something I had done was flustering him. A sexy full grown man was befuddled by me. It felt like power.

“Have you honestly been staring into my eyes all night and only worrying about the color of my eyes? Seems like a waste of perfectly good candle light.”

Just beyond the edge of the wall that gave us the impression of privacy, a throat cleared loudly. It was enough warning. The waiter with our meals on a tray appeared seconds later. I sat up and back. Giving the waiter room to place the dishes. No more leaning in being close enough for small touches.

“This smells amazing,” I said as I tucked my napkin back onto my lap.

The waiter refilled our wine glasses before leaving us alone.

“What did you get again?” I asked as I looked at Chandler’s plate. Everything was doused in thick tomato sauce and a sprinkle of parmesan cheese. I had been distracted by, well, everything about him and this quaint little restaurant to pay much attention to his earlier food choices. I had stuck with ravioli, too anxious to really focus on the menu properly.

“What did you get?” He countered, glancing at my plate.

Mine was obviously pillow shaped stuffed pasta squares, his was a mysterious mountain of cheese and sauce.

“I asked first,” I complained.

“Eggplant parmesan.” He began poking his fork around his dish. “And somewhere under here is an Italian sausage. A ha!” He lifted the fork with a sliced piece of meat on it.

“I’ve never had that,” I confessed.

He put the bite of sausage into his mouth and began chewing. I took that as my cue to start eating.

The ravioli was cheesy and full of savory goodness.

“Would you like a bite?” Chandler asked.

I nodded, my mouth too full to answer. I sipped some wine to wash down my food so I could speak. “Oh, yes please.”

He methodically cut a piece and lifted his fork. Strings of cheese trailed between fork and plate.

I leaned forward, opening my mouth as he moved the fork toward me.

“No.” Suddenly the fork was pulled back, and he took the bite.

Now my jaw was open, but for other reasons, indignation.

Chandler smirked as he chewed. He made a show of dabbing at the corners of his mouth and replacing the napkin. He switched his attention from looking at me to focusing on his food.

I sat back and let out a little humph.

“I thought you wanted a bite,” he said as he held the fork up again.

“I do, but I don’t want to play keep away with you. So, I guess that means I’ll pass.”

“You’re no fun,” he complained.

“I’m plenty of fun. But teasing me to get an emotional response isn’t fun to me. My emotions aren’t for your entertainment.” I lifted a brow and took a bite of my own dinner. I closed my eyes. Let him think I was really enjoying this ravioli, when I was in fact trying really hard not to look at his face.

I should have said no when he asked me out. What was I thinking? Never get to know your heroes, they will always let you down.

“Will you tell me the secret to your eyes if I give you a bite? An even trade? No more games,” he said.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. He sounded so earnest.

“No more games?” I confirmed.

He nodded and cut another fork full of his meal.

“I wear contacts, and I got the kind that changes the color of your eyes.”

“Contacts. That makes sense now.” He lifted the fork toward me.

I leaned in and opened my mouth.

He pulled the fork back with a chuckle.

I closed my mouth and glared at him.

“Sorry, I said no more games. My bad.”

This time I took the fork from his hand. The food was delicious. I’d have to remember to try that the next time, if I ever came back here. I passed the fork back to him.

“I didn’t think I liked eggplant. At least I never had it prepared in a way that I liked it before. That’s really delicious. Thank you for sharing. Would you like a bite of mine?”

Chandler shook his head. “I’m more interested in a bite of you.”

I stopped breathing. It was a good thing I didn’t have any food or wine in my mouth. I would have choked. Time froze and I fully panicked. How did I respond to something like that?

“I didn’t see me on the menu,” I said thinking fast. I didn’t want him to think I was desperate and throwing myself at him. It took everything in me not to say yes please. He made me work for that bite of his dinner. Keeping things even, I should make him work if he wanted a bite of me.

“The best desserts are never served at the restaurant,” he said.

I nodded in agreement.

“And if I said yes, we have to go to your place. I don’t think my father would react well if I brought some strange man home.”

“I’m hardly a stranger, Mila.”

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly dry. “Honestly, I think he’d like that even less.”

Chandler let out a hearty chuckle. “That’s an understatement. Dan is rather protective of you. If he even knew we were having dinner like this.” He shook his head and let out a sigh.

“I may be risking bodily harm, but I can’t help but to want to see where this goes.”

“And if this goes back to your place? What then?” I asked.

“Even if this goes nowhere but back out to the parking lot and we go our separate ways, I think we need to come to terms with how we deal with it at work.”

I took a long drink of my wine. “We both know this is going to end up with a nightcap and dessert at your place. So yes, we need some ground rules. First work and then my father.”

“Dan is easy. We don’t say anything,” Chandler said.

“Work is equally easy, same. We don’t say anything. Everyone already knows we know each other because you’re Dad’s friend. We can leave it at that. Maybe watch the flirting. I think the last thing either of us wants is Kathleen McDonald to bring HR in on something. She already watches me like a hawk whenever I’m on the fifteenth floor.”

He held his hand out to me across the table. “Deal?”

I shook his hand. “Deal.”

He didn’t let go of my hand when I expected him to. Instead he pulled my hand to his lips and began kissing my knuckles. My insides flipped and I couldn’t think. My core throbbed.

“I couldn’t resist getting a taste of what is yet to come.” When he winked, I thought my core would explode.

CHANDLER

I handed my credit card to the waiter before he could think about clearing our plates or bringing me the bill. “Add twenty percent for a tip,” I said.

I was helping Mila with her coat when he returned with my card and the ticket to sign. I scribbled something vaguely like my name. I was in a bit of a rush to get Mila home. I led her to my car.

“Nope.” She pulled me to a stop. “I’m driving myself so I can leave.”

“Fair enough,” I grumbled. “Follow me?”

“Of course. But I need your address in case I lose you.”

“You are not going to lose me,” I growled. I wasn’t thinking logically and she was.

“Chandler, give me your address.” She handed her phone out to me.

I typed my address.

“Thank you.” She twisted and pointed to an older red sedan a row over from my car. “That’s me. If you do more than ten miles an hour over the limit you will lose me.”

I kept checking my rearview mirror to make sure she was still back there. I couldn’t believe Dan had let her get away with buying her own car, and an old junky one at that. When I was her age, fresh out of college, cocky as shit, I drove a Corvette. It was all Trust Fund money anyway. If I didn’t spend it, who would?

I pulled into my drive. Mila was not behind me. I got out of the car and waited. When had her lights vanished from my mirror? When did I stop paying attention? Fuck. I should have told her that I would have driven her back, or paid for a car to take her back so she could get her own car. She pulled up a moment later.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t lose me?” She teased as she closed her car door.

I stepped forward and held my hand out to her. “Come in, let me make it up to you.”

“Are you going to offer me a drink?” she asked.

“Do you want one?”

“A little wine would be nice.”

She followed me into the kitchen where I poured us each a glass.

“You can take your jacket off and put your bag down anywhere,” I said.

“I’ll keep them with me. I don’t want to not be able to find them later.”

She lifted her glass to me. I touched it with my glass and they made a soft clicking sound. “This is nice, but it’s not what I’m here for is it?”

“You said you wanted a drink. Would you rather have a tour?”

“Only if you plan on showing me all the furniture you intend to bang me on.”

I choked and had trouble swallowing. She was not being shy at all.

“So the bedroom then.” I put my glass down. I didn’t have to wait for Mila to put hers down. With her hand in mine, I led her upstairs.

She put her things to the side once through the door, and began toeing off her shoes.

I slid my arm around her waist and spun her until she was pressed against me. My lips melded against hers. I had been waiting to kiss her mouth for hours, for days. For weeks if I was completely honest with myself.

She moaned and slid those plump lips against mine. She was warm and soft, and I wanted to claim her body, her entire being. My cock was already rock hard. I filled my palm with her breast. More warmth, more softness.

I was fucking glad she hadn't insisted on wasting time chatting, or drinking more wine. We were here for this, and this alone.

She pushed me back, and I staggered a few steps away. Before I could protest she was pulling off her clothes. Not one to miss a blatant clue, I sped through the buttons of my shirt while I kicked my shoes off at the same time.

She slipped her bra off, and I stumbled. Her gloriously round breasts were bared to me. Fuck my clothes. With a low growl, I closed the distance between us and buried my face against her, sucking one perfect nipple into my mouth. Her other breast was hot and heavy in my grasp.

Sharp fingernails grazed against my scalp as Mila dug her fingers into my hair. Someone moaned, maybe it was me with the glorious mouthful of her flesh, maybe it was her as she pressed against me. I consumed her breasts, peppering kisses over the mounds as I shifted my attention from one nipple to the other. I licked until that little nub was hard and begged for my attention.

She pulled my hair, until I lifted my face away from her delights. She gave me her mouth, and began pushing until I stepped back. The bed hit the back of my legs and I fell onto it. Mila followed me, crawling over my body. She grabbed the front of my pants and finished opening them. She pulled them down my thighs, freeing my erection.

“Oh, that's lovely. And it's all for me,” she giggled wickedly and then she wrapped her mouth over me.

I couldn't think anymore. Mila's mouth was so warm and slick. Her tongue swirled around the thick under vein on my cock. I let out a gasp of air. This was unexpected and so very appreciated. At first I wanted to touch her skin, but I contented myself by running my hands over her hair, and pressing the silky strands against my abs and over my skin.

My balls clenched and my hips bucked. Oh I knew that sensation all too well. I wasn't willing to play that game tonight. I wanted to make her scream my name, and I needed my cock full and ready for that to happen,

I pressed her head away. It was a difficult choice, her fellatio skills were exceptional.

She faced me with a pout on her lips.

"Come here." I gathered her up to me and kissed her. Those magical tongue skills of hers were put to good use as we kissed.

I slid my hand between us and found her pussy. She was soaking wet. Someone had fun sucking on my dick. I slid my fingers around and located her clit. I was rewarded with thrusting hips and a groan.

"My turn." I rolled her over and pressed her back. I slid my tongue against her folds and sucked at her clit.

Mila grabbed my hair again and bucked against my face. I guess she appreciated the reciprocation of action. Her inner walls clenched down on my fingers when I slid them deep into her. She pulsed, and I guessed she was close.

I left her body long enough to grab a condom. When I returned she smiled up at me and held her arms up to me. I sank into her embrace, and pressed into her body. She kissed me frantically as I thrust hip to hip. We rocked and raced toward the pinnacle of desire.

I don't know what it was about this woman, but my body responded to her like I had never been touched and would explode at any second. She came all around me, muscles clenching, fingers digging into my shoulders. Her head arched back and she moaned loudly.

I continued to rock into her until I couldn't move. I didn't scream or roar. The breath was gone from my body as my world turned inside out and I exploded into her.

I rolled to the side and pulled her against me. That had been remarkable, she had been worth every moment leading up to that.

Mila made a satisfied moan and kissed me before rolling away and scurrying off to the bathroom. When she came back she gathered her clothes from the floor.

“Are you leaving already?” I asked

“I told Dad I wouldn't be terribly late. Early day on the boat.”

“You'll be there? And he doesn't know you were out with me?”

“On the boat? It's expected of me. Tell Dad? Oh. hell no. I'm not that dumb. We agreed, this stays a secret.” She wriggled into her clothing. It was almost as sexy as a strip tease.

“Your hair is a mess.”

She reached up and touched it before glancing over at me. “Well that's your fault. I don't suppose you have a brush and ponytail holder do you?”

With a groan I sat up and swung my legs to the floor. “I can help you out with a brush, but I don't have any kind of hairbands.” I padded across the carpeting and into my bathroom.

“Nothing? Not even left over from your last lover?”

She was being so completely poised over the entire ordeal. Not clingy, not begging to stay the night. Mila was completely matter of fact about it all. It was refreshing. I needed a little refreshing in my life.

“I have nothing left over from my last lover.” I admitted. I crossed back through the bedroom and handed her my brush. I never understood why some women got squirmy over sharing things like hair brushes. Especially not after having my face buried between their legs. A brush was much less intimate.

She took it with a nod and a soft, 'thanks,' before running it through the long tangled strands.

When she was done she dropped it onto the bed.

"You're fun. We need—"

She stood up and put her fingers over my mouth.

"Stop there." She cut me off. "Fun is good. Fun is enough for now, okay? As far as anyone outside of this conversion is aware, this never happened."

I tried to suck her fingers into my mouth. My hands slid over her hips and I pulled her against my body. Fun was exceptional. "Agreed, this is our secret. And yes, fun is good. Do we get to have fun again?"

"I'm game. I guess that depends on you." She pushed up on her tip toes and kissed my mouth. "Good night, Chandler. I'll see you later at the marina." She picked up her jacket and bag and left.

MILA

I walked out of Chandler's house as if that was something I did every day, had mind blowing sex and then left. My legs could barely function, but if I didn't leave at that point, I'd stay.

I wanted to stay. I wanted to wrap up in Chandler and tell him that was everything I had ever dreamed of, and better. Because a real life Chandler Owens was better than my fantasy of him any day. So I had to leave, if I didn't I would have made a fool out of myself, and Chandler would have realized he had made a mistake with me.

"Have a good time?" Dad called out when I got home.

I was trying to be quiet, but that didn't make a difference. My heart started racing and I had to calm my breathing. He had no idea what I had just been doing, or who I was with.

"Aren't you supposed to have gone to bed by now?" I asked.

"I'm just finishing up this chapter." He peered at me from over the top of his book.

"Well, I'm gonna take a shower so I don't have to take one in the morning. What time are we leaving?"

When he told me I confirmed I would set my alarm fifteen minutes earlier.

"Cutting it close, aren't you?"

"I'll roll out of bed and into my clothes and be ready. Why do you think I'm taking a shower now?"

I climbed the stairs and dumped my things on my bed before going to the bathroom. As I took my clothes off for the shower, I kept checking places on my skin where Chandler had seemed rather aggressive. I didn't want to spend the day in shorts and a swimsuit if I had fingerprints on my arms and legs, or bite marks on my neck.

There was a bruised hickey on my left breast. My arms, legs and butt looked clear of marks. I'd keep a t-shirt on, that wasn't out of character for me as far as Dad was concerned. I had stopped trying to hide my body years ago after I went away to college, and I even wore a bikini the last time I went to the beach.

In the morning, my swimming wardrobe was a little different than I would have preferred. But there was no way my swimsuit top would cover that mark, and it was fairly obvious what caused it. I didn't wake up fifteen minutes before we left, but I was still tired and dragging when I did get up.

"Can we stop so I can get a mocha?" I asked as I climbed into the passenger seat of his SUV.

"You could have gotten up twenty minutes earlier and made coffee at home."

"Dad, we only have decaf at home. I need caffeine," I whined.

"You wouldn't need caffeine if you had been home earlier."

I glared at him before crossing my arms in a huff and looking out the window the entire drive to the marina. He could be a stubborn old man. I could be stubborn too, after all, I was his daughter.

"Do you see the boat?" Dad asked as we drove up.

"I can't tell from here," I admitted.

Dad had our boat in a dry stack storage facility. The marina staff used a giant forklift to move the boat in and out of the water, and to put it in its place on a giant metal shelving rack. When I was younger he would tow his boat— a different boat than what he owned now— to and from our house to the launch ramp. This way was much easier, and it made me

giggle. Even though it seemed to make Dad cranky when the boat wasn't already in the water when we arrived.

"I think that's us," I said. I jumped out of the car before Dad put it in park and shut off the engine.

Shielding my eyes from the sun, I watched as the giant fork lift moved another boat out to the water.

"Mimi? Is that you?"

I turned and smiled in the direction of the familiar voice. "Hi, Mr. Butler, I didn't know you would be joining us. Dad said you've been busy."

"You could call it that," Mr. Butler grumbled.

"Is that my boat?" Dad asked as he joined us.

"It's the April Showers II. That's got to be your new boat," Mr. Butler said over his shoulder. "Hey Dan, why didn't you tell me Mimi got all grown up?"

"Stop looking at my daughter," Dad barked.

"I don't use that nickname any more, Mr. Butler," I said.

"You can call me McLain. You sure you wouldn't be interested in being the next ex-Mrs. Butler?"

"Is your divorce even finalized yet? Stop hitting on my admin," Chandler said as he approached our little gathering.

"Mimi didn't say she was working directly for you," Dad said as he gave me an accusatory look.

"I told you, I'm a floater. I've been in Chandler's office all week."

"You're calling him Chandler now, too?" Dad asked.

I rolled my eyes and went to pull the cooler and my tote bag out of the back of the SUV. The boat was nearly ready.

"The papers have been signed, just waiting for the judge to give them the okay, then it's the mandatory waiting period. I'm as good as legally single," McLain continued the conversation between him and Chandler.

“Don’t proposition my daughter, you’re too old for her,” Dad grumbled.

“You need some help with that?” Chandler asked quietly, he slid up next to me as I leaned into the back of the SUV. Dad and McLain continued to banter about my age versus his.

“Thanks, can you get the cooler?” We were practically whispering. It felt like we were keeping a secret from everyone else, and we were.

Chandler lifted the heavier item and I let a little groan escape my lips as I admired the way his arms bunched and flexed. The man was built like a Greek god. Moved like one too.

“I still live at home,” I said, rejoining Dad’s and McLain’s conversation. “Maybe that should be a better gauge of my availability than my age.”

“I’m younger than your father, and if you just graduated, that makes you twenty two,” McLain said. We all started walking toward the boat.

“Twenty three,” I corrected.

“You’re twenty three?” Chandler stopped.

I nodded.

“See, that’s perfect. I’m only forty. That’s a perfectly decent age difference. Wait, Dan, how old are you? I thought you were only forty two? That means...Oh, oh”

McLain seemed to get the math figured out in his head pretty quickly. Chandler caught up from behind.

“Is anyone else coming?” I asked.

“Your father told us to be here by ten. I’m sure if they’re coming they’ll be here,” McLain said.

“It’s only nine thirty. You’re early,” I countered.

“It’s your dad and a boat. On time is late,” Chandler said.

It took us a few minutes to get everything that we had carried down onto the April Showers II. Dad had to run up to the SUV

and get another bag of supplies. I started to check the water boarding equipment, and the giant inner tube. It was squishy.

“Here, I’ll get that inflated,” McLain grabbed the tube and climbed out of the boat leaving me alone with Chandler.

He grabbed me around the middle and pulled me against his chest.

I glanced to see what Dad was doing. I didn’t think he could see us where we stood. I kissed Chandler.

“Dangerous,” he chuckled.

“You grabbed me first.”

“But I didn’t kiss you,” he said in a low rumble.

“Hey you left marks all over my breasts last night.” I pulled down the neckline of my t-shirt to show him the bruise.

He grabbed my hands and fumbled my shirt back into place. “Put that away.”

“Aren’t you even going to apologize?” I teased.

“Not one bit, but don’t go flashing that around.” He said with a very pleased tone.

“Hey look who I found!” Dad walked down the dock with another one of his buddies. McLain was with them, inner tube fully inflated.

“Doug, you remember Mila. Don’t look at her, I’m warming her up to the idea of being my next wife.”

“McLain,” Chandler grumbled, “that joke is getting old.”

“You have your eyes on her?” McLain asked.

“No one has their eyes on me Mr. Butler. Sorry, but the prospect of being your next ex is vaguely less interesting than living at home for the next five years.”

Doug made monkey-like sounds and smacked McLain on the shoulder.

“You tell them, Mimi,” Dad said.

I got busy making sure all supplies were locked down and in place while Dad and the guys talked about the last game— baseball from the sound of it— and checked their phones to see if anyone else was coming or not.

With a loud clap of his hands, Dad announced, “It’s just us.”

He started the engine and engaged the throttle. The April Showers II pulled away from the dock and began to putter out of the marina.

“So you don’t plan on living with Dan the rest of your life?” Chandler asked. He joined me sitting in the prow of the boat.

I shook my head. “No, but I also want to try to do stuff on my own. It’s hard. Apartment rents are crazy high, and I hate to tell you, but your company barely pays a livable wage.”

He opened his mouth to protest.

“Nobody pays a live-able wage, that’s the problem, Chandler. You pay me better than most entry level jobs. I just don’t think you guys running the companies realize what things actually cost.”

“Then why not let your father cover your expenses, and buy you a new car?”

“Did you let your father buy your first car?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I honestly didn’t care. But you seem to.”

“Yeah, I do.” I got up. I didn’t feel safe sitting this close to him. More concerned about what I might do or say, than anything Chandler would do.

“Hey Dad, can I drive?”

CHANDLER

The day on the boat was an exercise in frustration. I had to pretend that Mila in a bathing suit wasn't sexy. I spent most of my time thinking about raw chicken, and glaciers. Something gross and something cold to keep from popping a boner.

And on top of it all, I had to laugh every time McLain did or said something to or about Mila. Yes, we were all aware that she had grown from an awkward child into a beautiful swan. And I was reminded all day long that those comments were not appropriate. Mila was the daughter of my friend, and I had known her for years.

Instead of having any pangs of guilt for what I had done with Mila, I had to deal with my possessive tendencies. Mila was mine. How dare my friends look at her with eyes that appreciated her curves. Mine.

Monday morning, she sat at the receptionist desk. I was disappointed to see her there, and not in my office.

"Good morning Daphne, Mila," I greeted both women as I strode in.

Daphne waved, she was on the phone. Good, I wasn't exactly interested in talking with her anyway. However, I was very aware of appearing to play favorites.

"Did you have any fun this weekend?" I asked Mila.

"Not nearly as much as I would have liked. I had to go out on my dad's boat with his pervy old friends."

“Pervy?”

“Yeah, one of them kept trying to hit on me. Kept teasing about being his next ex-wife. It was super uncomfortable,” she said, as if I hadn’t witnessed it.

“Did you mention it to your father?” I asked. Thinking back, Dan really hadn’t said or done much to deter McLain from making those comments.

“I did, after we headed home. He said the guy was being funny.” She stopped what she was doing and put her hand on my arm. “If the person the joke is about is uncomfortable, it isn’t funny. And it shouldn’t be funny to anyone else. Do you get what I’m saying?”

I looked into her eyes. They were a beautiful golden brown color today. She hadn’t been happy having to put up with McLain’s bawdy sense of humor.

“I think I understand. When they saw that you weren’t laughing, the joke should have been over,” I explained back to her what I thought she was telling me.

She nodded. She glanced over her shoulder quickly. “I have to get back to work. But the joke wasn’t ever funny, and shouldn’t have been made at all. Sorry, you just wanted to know if I had fun, not listen to the issues I had to deal with this weekend. Have a nice day. I’ll see you later.”

“You have a good day, Mila.”

I kept thinking about what she said the entire elevator ride to the fifteenth floor. It wasn’t funny to her, and he never should have made those remarks. What did she think about me? About us? I was the same age as McLain. I had the same essential thoughts as he did, Mila was gorgeous, and the age difference between us was so drastic as to be impracticable.

But she was Dan’s kid. And I had felt certain fist in face urges when McLain kept going with it. Those possessive urges returned and formed a tight knot in my chest.

“Heather!” I called out as soon as I approached my admin’s desk. “I hope you are feeling better.”

“Good morning, Chandler. Sorry about last week. I got smacked hard with the flu. I still feel weak, but I’m better.”

I continued into my office and powered up my computer. I had a full schedule. After a quick review of my upcoming tasks, I sorted emails, now, never, later. The list was longer than I wanted to deal with. I got up and headed out to Heather’s desk.

“Glad to have you back. We have a busy schedule, I’m out of town Thursday night. We need the Gottleib presentation updated for Ledbetter.”

She nodded and took notes. She looked somehow like a deflated balloon. There was no way to describe it. The remnants of illness clung to her looks.

“You don’t want to come with me on this do you?” I asked.

She let out a big sigh before answering. “I honestly don’t know. Do you really need me, or do you just need an onsite assistant?”

“Call HR. See if they can get Mila Jones for this. She kept up with me better than anyone else they’ve ever sent up here when you are on vacation. I think she’ll work out.”

“You aren’t planning on replacing me, are you?” Heather teased.

“Never, but, and I hope you understand this comes from a place of concern, not criticism. You look exhausted, like you’re still sick. I’m almost afraid to ask you to travel.”

She nodded. “I feel fine. I look worse than I feel, so that’s a good thing, right? But, yeah, I don’t think I could do an overnight. It would wipe me out.” She even sounded tired.

“It’s a done deal then. And I want you to take Friday off. I won’t be here. Mila can do double duty.”

I didn’t see Mila for another couple of days. She came up to my office.

“Knock, knock,” she said as she rapped her knuckles against my open door. “Heather said I could come in.”

“Yes, come in.”

As Mila approached my desk, I ran my eyes over her hungrily. My body surged as if I hadn't seen her for months, years, instead of a day or two. It had felt even longer since I had touched her skin.

She handed out a sheet of paper. “Is this correct? Am I going on a trip with you tomorrow?”

I took the printout from her. It was an email with her flight confirmation and a brief note for HR explaining she was to accompany me on a trip.

“Yes. I had expected them to discuss this with you. I need an assistant for the presentation, and Heather is too weak to travel.”

“Why me? I'm a floater.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. Why her? Was she really asking me that question?

“I mean...” She bit her lip and leaned in close to whisper, “How are you getting away with this. I mean the business trip, don't you need to take someone more official?”

“Don't you want to go?” I asked.

“Of course. It will be fun. Right. We'll have fun?” She emphasized the word.

I knew exactly what she meant when she said fun.

“I'm hoping you'll have lots of fun on this trip Mila. And learn a thing or two.”

She lifted her eyebrows at my comment.

“About the business,” I said. “Have you ever gone on a business trip?”

“What do you mean? I've been on an airplane.”

“Not that, I mean have you travelled for work? Do you know what to do?”

She shook her head. “I figure I'll spend the morning packing and meet you at the airport.”

I nodded. “Make sure you get a laptop from IT and get the presentations we’ll need from Heather. Email them to yourself, and make sure you know how to access the email system from a remote computer if the laptop doesn’t work. I’ll need you to run the presentation and take notes. Pack light, and dress comfortably but professionally on the airplane. It’s only overnight, and we fly back after the meeting. Everything needs to be in a carry-on. We will not be checking luggage.”

She nodded as I spoke.

“Any questions?”

“I have to pack tonight, because I’ll have to come in and take care of all that stuff tomorrow morning, won’t I?” She looked substantially less thrilled about the prospect of traveling with me than she had a moment earlier.

I nodded. “Most likely. HR should have told you about this on Monday. You’ll have to make up the slack.”

“This had better be fun, Chandler,” she said as she turned and left my office.

I didn’t see her until the next afternoon. Heather had arranged for a car to pick us up at the office and take us to the airport. The entire time in traffic, Mila was focused on her laptop.

“You know you can do that on the flight.”

She nodded. “I know. I have at least two hours worth of work to get done. I only have about an hour’s worth of work time during the flight. I don’t know how much time I’ll have once we arrive. I want to get as much taken care of ahead of time.” She paused and looked up at me. “I don’t want to miss a minute of fun by having to work, if you know what I mean.”

“Sound plan,” I admitted.

I appreciated her work ethic. However, it made for dull conversation as we waited to board, and on the flight. Once we arrived, Mila continued to ask pertinent questions for the presentation. She was in work mode.

She stayed in work mode through check in, and during a short dinner in the hotel’s restaurant. I was beginning to think that

maybe she had missed the intention of us being able to have some time alone.

“I’m going to switch out of work mode, hopefully relax a little tonight. I’m in room four-thirteen,” She said as we exited the elevator on our floor.

“I remember from check-in,” I said.

“Good, didn’t want you to miss out on anything fun.” She walked away. The little tease. She had been perfectly professional the entire time.

I gave her about thirty minutes before heading down the hall and I tapped on her door.

She opened the door wearing a sheer robe edged in fluffy fur. My brain shut down when I saw the dark tips of her nipples through the barely there fabric.

“Mr. Owens, what brings you to my room this evening? Was there something you needed to go over for tomorrow’s presentation?”

I swallowed. It felt as if a very dry rock lodged in my throat. I took my time looking at her. I wanted to savor every second of this. I wanted to remember this look of hers, because the second I stepped into that room and the door closed, she’d be in my arms, and that little robe thing would be gone. I wanted to remember that Mila had dressed up just for me.

“Oh, I thought I might see if you were up for a little fun tonight,” I said.

She stepped back, and I followed her into the room.

MILA

Monday morning I reported to Alana in HR just like I did at the beginning of every week when I didn't know what my assignment would be.

"You have made quite an impression on the execs," she said as I stepped into her office.

"Oh really?" A stab of panic pierced my tummy. Had someone figured out that Chandler extended the overnight an extra night, just so we could have another night of naked fun times? I sat and hoped my face didn't express the professional guilt that suddenly overwhelmed me.

I didn't have a reason to be guilty. We were adults, and what we did with our free time was no one's business. Even while on a business trip.

"Mr. Owens wants to get you added to his team as a junior associate executive. He wrote a glowing review of your professionalism and multi-tasking skills on a recent last minute trip. Technically there is no job position for you to step into, so we'll have to create one for you."

I stared at her for a moment before I started blinking. "Did you just say you're creating a job for me?"

Alana nodded. "I don't have a job description or a list of your duties and expectations, but be prepared to travel. Chandler Owens likes to travel with an entourage. An assistant at the very least. This all came in early this morning, so I'm not exactly sure what to do with you. There isn't a desk for you, and I don't even know who you should report to."

“Do you think Heather, his assistant, would know? Maybe I need to—”

Alana started to shake her head, but then tilted it before nodding. “That’s possible. Let’s give her a call.”

Alana reached out to her phone and hit a few buttons. The phone rang.

“Chandler Owens office,” the voice through the speaker said.

“Heather, this is Alana in HR. I have Mila Jones with me. We were wondering if you had any more information on this junior associate idea that Chandler had?”

“Oh, yeah. Okay, he gave me a very brief recap of his thinking. He’s on a conference call and will be for at least an hour. Why don’t you send Mila up and we can brainstorm what to do with her. There’s got to be a corner up here where we can put a desk. Or maybe one of the offices on fourteen?”

“I can check with facilities, if they know of any empty offices. That’s mostly accounting and legal, I can’t imagine anyone would let an office sit empty without claiming squatter’s rights,” Alana said.

“Yeah, good point. Look, we’ll figure it out. We’ve got a place for you somewhere Mila,” Heather said.

“Okay, thanks.” Alana ended the call. “Well, you heard her. Head on up and I guess the two of you will figure it out.”

I was a little stunned when I left her office. I went from receptionist floater to some kind of junior executive over a weekend. I hadn’t thought I did that much on the trip. I made sure the client’s name and logo were in the right places on the presentation. And I worked with their IT guy to make sure my laptop fed into their projector system.

Chandler had done the rest. He gave the presentation, I took notes.

I kept thinking about it all the way up in the elevator.

“Good morning,” I said as I approached Heather’s desk.

“Welcome to the fifteenth floor, I think,” she said with a light chuckle.

“What should I do with my things?”

“That’s a good question. I don’t even have a chair for you. This is going to sound weird, but let’s set you up in the break room for now. You can put your purse in my drawer to keep it safe. You still have that laptop you took on the trip?”

I held up my computer bag. “Yeah.”

“I’ll let IT know you’re keeping it for now.”

“Do you know what prompted all of this?” I asked.

Heather nodded. “That might be my fault. I was so relieved not to have to go on last week’s trip. I know I was still wiped out from the flu, but in general, I’m just done with it. It’s not as glamorous or as fun as it used to be. You know when I started, we would always take a few extra hours and hit the town. And then with budget cutbacks we had to stick with getting it done in as little time as possible. Dinner, working meetings overnight. Sometimes we would even just do day trips. Now those are long days.”

“Sounds like all that travel got old,” I commented. I still thought business travel was glamorous and fun. It was invigorating to be that person in first class with the laptop and focused on something that occupied my mind, instead of just another person trying to get comfortable and pass the time.

Heather nodded. “So old. And my husband hates it. He’s pretty good about picking up the slack when I have a planned trip, but Chandler’s last minute meetings, like last week. Those take a real toll on us. Having to scramble to find child care. I’m very over it. So I might have said something like he needs a travel assistant, that’s not me. I can be here keeping track of things at the home office, while whoever he goes off with can handle the on sight issues. Next thing I know he’s sent out an email to HR, and you’ve got a new job.”

“Wow, I’ve got a new job. How much travel does he do?” I asked as we walked across the floor to the break room. The

tables really weren't meant to be work tables. They were small and round.

Heather looked at everything with her lips twisted up in concentration.

"It comes in waves. We're headed into trade show season. Expect a lot. Some of those will be long weekends, a few are a full week. You're going to want to invest in a good pair of shoes that can look professional and still be good to your feet. Those show floors are brutal. And get some of those slacks that are really yoga pants in disguise, you're going to want something comfortable."

"These are amazing tips," I said. I was still more than a bit overwhelmed with all of it.

"Oh I have all of the travel for business tips. Get one of those suitcases that rolls on four big wheels. They look goofy, but they roll the best. Always wear something on the plane you can wear to a meeting. Professional knit wear is your friend. It's comfy and no ironing. For the longer trips, pack a steamer. I'll give you the one I used to take. I can't tell you how often I ended up having to steam out one of Chandler's suits. That man does not understand packing for practicality. He packs for maximum exposure."

As she talked, she had been pulling office supplies from the lower cupboards. And to think, I had thought all of that space was used for coffee, tea, and snacks. She stood back and looked at the small work space we put together.

"That should do for now."

"What's going on here?" Kathleen McDonald's sharp precise diction cut through my good mood.

"We're setting up a temporary work space for Mila, she's been promoted to, well what did we decide your title is?"

"Travel assistant and junior executive in training," I stated.

"There is no such job. What are you really doing?" Kathleen snapped.

She really wasn't much fun.

“Mr. Owens has decided to create a position for her. We are uncertain of the exact title and the duties. He’s in a meeting so we can’t get clarity. All we are working with at the moment is that Mila will be his travel assistant. I am retiring from business travel. I’m more valuable on the ground here. There will be some level of executive mentoring involved, but mostly she will be his admin on hand for meetings and trade shows.”

Heather was good. Her explanation to Kathleen was improvised, but it sounded rehearsed and repeated often.

Kathleen huffed. “Well, Mila, I hope you appreciate the opportunity that has fallen in your lap.”

I nodded.

She continued before I had a chance to say anything. “You need to take these trips seriously. Just because you’ll be staying in hotels and not working in the office, you will be expected to behave just as, if not more so professionally.”

I continued to nod in understanding.

“Don’t think these quick trips are for messing around. If Mr. Owens finds out you’re taking advantage of the trip to ‘get with’— she did finger air quotes around get with—“a client or even someone you meet in the hotel bar or at a conference. That would reflect poorly on us, and I dare say Mr. Owens would rethink your position.”

I stopped nodding at some point. How dumb did she think I was? She clearly thought I was indiscriminate with my affections. As if I would be going on business trips to ‘get with’ anyone but Chandler. But then she didn’t know about us. No one did. And we were going to keep it that way.

“Of course I wouldn’t abuse his trust that way. I’m very aware of how privileged I am to have been able to go on the trip last week.”

“You’ve already started traveling with Mr. Owens?”

I opened my mouth to say something and I had to stop before I said something laden with sarcasm. Kathleen McDonald did not like sarcasm.

“He had a last minute trip at the end of the week. I couldn’t do it. I’ve been ill, and I suggested Mila. She’s done such a wonderful job as everyone’s back up admin.” Heather saved me. “This all came about rather suddenly after a conversation we had this morning. I think Mila will be perfect for the job. Don’t you?”

Kathleen left with a huff.

“I don’t think she likes me,” I whispered to Heather.

“I don’t think she likes anyone,” Heather replied.

CHANDLER

“This is the best you can do for an office?” I said as I found the corner they were now hiding Mila in.

She shrugged. “It’s better than the break room.”

“You need an office,” I pointed out. “And a second chair. Grab your laptop and come with me.”

Dutifully she grabbed her laptop, and was on my heels. She slid her things onto the low coffee table in my office.

“You could have just called me to come into your office.”

“You don’t have a phone extension,” I pointed out.

With a sigh she started to laugh. “I don’t do I? Well, I guess that’s what happens when you make up a new job.”

“I’ll get Heather to light a fire under the facility’s ass. There has to be a vacant office.”

“There are several. But said you didn’t want to walk that far, and that I had to be able to make it to your office within five minutes if you called me. That narrows the field considerably.”

She was being logical. Beautiful and smart, damn she was amazing. I glanced at the door I left open, and then back at her mouth. I wanted to take that mouth and bend it to my will. As I stepped in closer I caught Heather at her desk out of the corner of my eye.

I stopped. The door was open for a very real reason. It was imperative that I keep my libido in check while at the office. I crossed my arms and changed my expression. Mila had to

have read the lust on my face, but I needed to focus on work and not my desires. I sat in the nearest chair, allowing gravity to pull me down with little fight. I was losing control, and that wasn't good.

“Where are we on the preparations for the Pinnacle Expo?”

“Yeah, about that. I can't seem to get the dates I'm finding on the expo to line up with the dates you gave me. You have us scheduled to be there four full extra days, we'll be gone a full week.” She bit her lip and looked concerned.

This thing between us had basically become limited to times away. There were no dinner dates, and if I didn't have an out of town meeting during the week, I wasn't above faking one just to get her alone in a hotel room. However, that meant we didn't have much time to discuss plans.

We didn't need to for the most part. Plans insinuated there was something more than a bit of fun going on. Nevertheless, I hadn't had a chance to tell her what I had in mind. And I wasn't going to discuss it where I couldn't be sure people weren't spying. Kathleen had me paranoid, not for corporate sabotage, but I swear that woman was out to hit me with a harassment case.

“No, the week is correct. There are meetings all week after the expo. Make sure to pack for some down time. Our hotel has shark tanks in the swimming pool. That's not something you're going to want to miss.”

Mila raised her brows and cocked her head. “You've got something up your sleeve,” she whispered.

I only nodded in response.

We spent the next work day making sure all the presentations that I told her I would need were ready.

It wasn't until she pulled out her laptop on the airplane that I confessed the truth of our trip. Mila set up her tray table as soon as the seat belt light pinged off, and opened her computer.

I reached over and gently closed the laptop. “You don't need that,” I said.

“You sprung five additional meetings on me at the last minute. I have work to do. You have seven presentations in five days. Why aren’t you concerned I’m not prepared?”

“What would you say if I told you that four of those meetings will be cancelled by the time this plane arrives in Vegas?”

She stared at me open mouthed. “How do you know that?”

“Because I never scheduled them. And you were right, the expo is only one day.” I let myself be distracted by her soft expression. I licked my lip and let my gaze linger on her lips.

I could not wait to get her back to the hotel. There were after hours presentations, and a kick-off keynote speaker we needed to attend tonight. But if everything stayed on schedule...

Our flight did not arrive on time, and the car that was arranged for us got stuck in traffic. My plans for an afternoon quickie before expo events were foiled by the logistics of travel.

“I’m going to freshen up before the keynote. That was a long flight,” Mila said as we walked to our rooms. “This is me. Knock on my door in fifteen?”

I nodded and headed to my room. Once I stepped in, I was pleased that the hotel had been able to give us attached rooms. I dropped my carry-on bag on the bed and knocked on the dividing door.

Mila opened it with a grin on her face. She was in my arms, and I finally claimed her mouth after hours of longing.

There was a sharp rap on my room door.

“Damn it,” I spit out. “That’s probably our bags. I’ll be right back.”

The bellboy delivered my suitcase. I tipped him for my bag and for Mila’s. I stood half in the hall and watched as he delivered her bag. After he left, I crossed into her room.

“When did you set all of this up?” She asked as I pulled her back into my arms.

“During the long lonely hours without you.” I kissed her again. “You know we could skip out on the meetings tonight

and order room service.”

“Or we could go, and still order room service afterward. We should probably keep up the pretense of caring anything about work. This is a business trip.”

“There you go thinking logically again.”

Mila’s sense of propriety and making sure we were seen at the expo blended with after hours in our rooms. Work hours were long and dull. And until Mila, I had found my work challenging. Now, it was simply in the way.

“Are you ready for one more presentation?” she asked as she tucked away her laptop.

I stayed in the conference room chair I had been parked in for the last hour and a half. “I’m ready for this to be over so I can get on with the entire reason we are really here,” I grumbled.

“Mr. Owens, are you propositioning me?” she teased.

“I’m too tired to play games, Mila.” It had been a challenge to let her out of bed that morning. All I could think of was how much longer before I could get her back in it.

“One more meeting and then we can be alone.” She held her hand out to me.

I pulled her down until she fell into my lap.

“Chandler, no. We can’t be seen.” But she did give me a rejuvenating quick kiss before she jumped off my legs.

It was another long two hours and a rather unsuccessful meeting before we headed back to our rooms.

“I’ll call room service and have an early dinner sent up. Do you want to rest before going out?”

I grunted in affirmation. I let Mila walk into her room before taking the last few steps to my door. Once it clicked shut behind me I felt like I could relax.

The weight of having a public persona who had no desires beyond presentations and networking was exhausting. I was tired of that guy. I opened the door that divided our rooms without knocking.

Mila was on the phone. She turned and smiled at me.

I wrapped myself around her curves and buried my face in the back of her neck. “Get some wine,” I muttered into her hair.

“I don’t want to drink before we go out,” she said.

“We’re not going out.” I took the phone from her. “Bring up whatever she’s ordered, add an eight ounce sirloin medium rare, baked potato, a couple of bottles of red wine, and dessert for two. Something chocolate with strawberries. Got it?”

I placed the phone on the receiver and spun her in my arms. With her crushed to my chest I felt whole again.

“I thought we—”

I placed a finger over her lips to stop her from talking. “Tonight we stay in. I’ll take you out on the town tomorrow. We can play the slots, see a show, see more than one show. We can do whatever you want, but tonight you’re going to be naked and in my bed. And when we wake up, we’ll order more room service, and have more naked play time.”

“Oh, naked play time sounds fun,” she cooed as she started playing with my tie. She loosened it, and pulled until it slithered to the floor.

I reclaimed her lips. Pressing to her, urging her to open for my tongue. Mila dug her fingers into my hair, holding my head close. Tightening my grip, I wanted her, needed her tight against me. We consumed each other, sharing breath, twisting tongues.

She made soft mewling sounds as I pressed the kiss more intently, deepening and redoubling my efforts. I poured all of the bent up frustration and longing into that kiss. My hands caressed and roamed and grabbed at her as I tried to find a way of holding her more tightly.

We fell against the freshly made bed. I barely adjusted my hold of her, I didn’t want to, and I didn’t think I could stop kissing her at that moment. We rolled until she was perched on top. She peppered my face with more kisses as I focused on trying to regain her mouth.

Placing both hands on either side of her face, I held her still. Her eyes were a dark blue and I felt like I would drown in their depths. I don't know how long we simply stared into each other's eyes before our lips pressed back together, trying to merge us into one.

MILA

Waking up in Chandler's arms was the best thing about these business trips. Even if we did have to be professional during business hours. Waking up today was different, no trade show, no meetings, just me, Chandler, and Las Vegas.

I stretched and reached out for him.

"Good morning. Sleep well?" he asked right before he kissed me.

"Slept amazing, woke up even better." I jumped out of bed and grabbed the thick terry cloth robe the hotel provided. "What do you want to do today?"

With a groan, Chandler sat up. He swung his legs to the side. I thought he was going to stand, but he moved enough to reach out and grab the belt on my robe and drag me to him.

"I was doing it. Why are you out of bed?" he complained.

"Because you promised me shows and gambling. There's a lot to see, and we only have a few days," I continued to babble on about what we could do. "We stayed in last night."

"And wasn't last night worth it?" He lowered his lids and focused his gaze on my mouth. He smoldered. He was so hot it should have burned my skin to touch him.

"Well, yeah, of course." I couldn't help but blush a little. Last night had been outstanding. Sex with Chandler was always amazing.

“Can I entice you to stay in bed a little longer? We can order breakfast in bed. I’ll feed you champagne and strawberries. Vegas isn’t much fun until the sun goes down.” As he spoke, he opened the robe I had barely just finished wrapping around me and began stroking my skin.

A shudder danced up and down my spine. I leaned in close, placing one knee on the bed. “Okay, maybe.”

He sucked a nipple into his mouth and began pulling on me before I finished agreeing. I was powerless. He knew me, knew my body. It didn’t take much before he turned me into a mindless collection of nerves.

I clung to him, and held him close as he kneaded my hip and feasted on my breast. I was both worshiped and at his mercy. He gave more than he took, and he took everything from me.

“Okay, I guess we can stay in,” I managed to say. It was hard to speak, he stole my breath, and my ability to think. I was trying to be funny, but I had no choice as I succumbed to his masterful will.

When Chandler wanted me, I would be a fool to say no.

And the fact that he did want me, he wanted my skin under his lips, my pussy wrapped around his cock, was the most incredible feeling ever. Knowing how he felt about me made me feel like I could fly.

As he grabbed me and put my back against the mattress, spreading my thighs wide, I soared. When his tongue hit my clit, and he sucked and licked at my folds, I was a rocket in flight, headed out of the atmosphere. He took me to the highest of heights, and he held me there.

His fingers stroked into me. My hips bucked in response. I was no longer in control of my body, my reactions, it was all his doing. He played me like an instrument, knowing exactly what finger positions would make me twist, and thrust, or cry out and hit a high note.

My fingers laced through his hair as his tongue and fingers made me lose focus. I rocked against his face and he lapped me up. I felt my inner walls begin to throb and pulse with the

rhythm he set for us. Each rock, each thrust sent me a little higher. The higher the better, because when Chandler sent me over the edge, he made sure that I had a wild ride on the way down.

His fingers slid from me first. A denial that he confirmed a second later when he said, “Not so fast Mila. There is much to be done this morning.”

I whimpered. “No, don’t stop.”

“Not stopping, but not letting you come either.”

I smacked my hand against the mattress a few times. “That’s not fair,” I complained.

“No? But it will be so much fun.” He grinned up at me, and that smile of his was wicked and happy, and set the butterflies that were already rioting along my nervous system into an even greater frenzy.

He climbed from the bed. And then there was a zipping sound with an odd sensation as he pulled the tie from the robe out from under me.

“Chandler, what are you doing?” I asked as he walked around the bed winding the long tie up between his two fists.

“Having a little fun.”

I flopped onto my stomach to watch as he looped the tie around the head board and then extended the tie toward me. “Give me your wrists.”

My jaw dropped. “You’re going to tie me up?”

“Only a little.”

“But I don’t think I—” I didn’t know how I felt about the whole BDSM play stuff. I didn’t consider myself overtly kinky.

“No pain, just fun, trust me.”

I nodded, and then let him tie my wrists to the head board. I was on display for him, no more than I had been moments before, but this time I felt more exposed. And then I forgot

everything when he returned to me and began making my body hum.

He kissed my mouth, and it couldn't hold on to him. I wanted to hold him and crush against him. Instead he trailed the softest tickling touches all over me. I wiggled and squirmed. I wanted more, so much more. He took his time tasting and touching.

I reached out with my mouth and my tongue, trying to kiss and suck on whatever body part of his came close, an elbow, a shoulder. The restraint rendered me completely helpless. I gave up with a sigh of frustration.

Chandler chuckled. He was having fun. I was too, I just wanted to be able to touch him in return. He turned me.

“Get on your knees.”

With my hands bound, it was awkward. I giggled but managed to get on my knees with my hands braced against the spot where I was tied. The robe I still had on, draped around me.

He lifted the back, exposing my backside. Teeth scraped over my ass, and then he smacked me.

The spanking was swift and stung.

“Hey,” I complained. “Oh, oh.” My complaint was cut off as he then proceeded to kiss where he had smacked me.

He continued to touch and tickle my skin, reaching around from behind to tease my nipples, and finger my clit. I wasn't exactly sure what he was doing when he lay face up between my knees. Until his hands grabbed my hips and pulled me down onto his face.

Oh damn. That was amazing. His fingers bit into my hips as he raised and lowered me. I rocked my hips, barely able to stay in the position he put me. I was both terrified I would suffocate him, and overcome with the pleasure he gave me. Fortunately, I was easily manipulated to where he needed and wanted me.

His tongue ran rings around my entrance and then he would suck hard on my clit. It was magical, and I was back to soaring with the stars.

“If your intent is to deny me an orgasm,” I gasped between breaths. “Then this isn’t the way to do that.”

He shoved my hips up. “You don’t come until my cock is inside you,” he growled.

“You might want to fix that,” I gasped. He had me so tightly wound, I might shatter if he brushed a nipple just wrong. I didn’t know how much more of the hard sucking my clit could take before everything exploded.

He manhandled me to roll over. I let go of the robe tie, that had stopped functioning as a binding at some point during the fun, and reached out for him. He slid into me with a hard commanding thrust.

My inner walls stretched and quivered. I was so close.

He withdrew slowly, stroking his cock against me. I shuddered as nerves danced up and down my spine and gathered in my pussy. I was more than primed, I was ready, I just needed that extra push. His thrusts were forceful slams of his hips against mine.

One, two, three strokes and I shattered. The orgasm he gave me took over everything. I was floating in bright white light surrounded by a sound like a stadium full of roaring screaming fans. Every muscle in my body clenched before releasing, and releasing over and over again in an uncontrollable spasm.

I clamored for a hand hold on his arms, I grabbed at his shoulders. I needed to hold on or I would lose myself to the ether. I had already lost myself to him.

“Chandler!” I cried out his name.

As the waves of emotion and orgasm rolled and slowly ebbed, his efforts increased. He pounded into me, bouncing me back up into the heavens prolonging the spasms. I don’t know how long everything lasted, it felt like an eternity. But I know when it ended, it hadn’t lasted nearly long enough.

“Oh fuck!” he cried out, and then I was filled with the heat of his spilled orgasm.

The slickness and sliding of our bodies together, triggered my spasms all over again, and I rode out another crashing wave after crashing wave of orgasm. We tumbled and rolled, and crashed over and over again before collapsing against each other.

He clung to me and I held on to him for support, lest we both be lost in the tumult of ecstasy that Chandler had brought our bodies to.

I was filled with overwhelming emotion for him. I clutched at him, and he held me so tenderly. I swear I could feel emotions rolling from his body. This must be what it felt like to be in love.

“Was that worth your morning?” Chandler’s voice was a low rumble.

I tried to swallow, I was thirsty and wiped out. “That was worth everything. You know I think you’re right, this bedroom is the most interesting thing we could see in Las Vegas.”

CHANDLER

For the first time in a long time, I looked forward to traveling for meetings. I went out of my way to set up meetings that could have been handled via video conferencing. I pushed for the personal touch. And the business was benefitting. In person presentations were resulting in more partnering opportunities.

People responded to the personal touch. No one needed to know that the touch I was referring to was Mila's soft hands on my body. I got the job done, her presence was a bonus for me and for the business. And we both benefited from it. Mila was gaining actual leverage-able job skills. She was no longer some friend's kid without experience who needed a job. She knew how to create professional presentations, and I dare say she knew my banter well enough by now, that in a pinch she could give the pitch.

Our cover suited me just fine. And her professional growth provided the necessary veritas so that we could keep going with this little arrangement for as long as we were both enjoying ourselves.

When the email from Nathan in Dallas presented another prime opportunity for me to have time with Mila, I immediately suggested I fly in.

As soon as his email confirmed that an in person meeting would be best, I pressed the intercom for Heather.

“Yes?”

“The Dallas branch wants an in-person as soon as I’m available. Make it happen. Set it up for Monday. I’ll fly out early, take the weekend.”

“And if they can’t do Monday?” she asked.

“I have to be here Friday for some mid-year progress audit, so Wednesday or Thursday. And I’ll catch a flight back in the afternoon.”

“On it.”

The great thing about having Heather on it, meant she would also arrange a ticket and room for Mila without being told.

I buzzed Mila’s office. They finally gave her a private space that wasn’t a folding table behind a wall of cardboard boxes.

“I need to see you in my office,” I said.

“Do you really? I don’t think you do.” She sounded groggy.

“Rough night?”

“Yeah, but not why you think. What am I coming up to your office for?”

“Have you ever been to Dallas?” I asked.

“No, why?”

“Because you’re in for a treat,” I crooned.

“Oh like the treat Vegas was? We spent more time” —she paused for a long moment, she might have sniffled— “not seeing the sights,” she said.

“Are you complaining?”

“Hardly.” She coughed and then groaned. “When?”

“Right now,” I pointed out, she was complaining currently. At least she sounded like it

“No, I meant Dallas.”

“Heather is setting it right now. We either leave tomorrow for an overnight, or Friday and take the weekend before a Monday meeting.”

She groaned again. “I think that all the travel has caught up to me. I feel like I have a cold or the flu. And I don’t want to get on a plane. The change in pressure would force all of this into my sinuses. Will you be professionally irked if I bow out?” she asked.

“Professionally?”

“Yeah, like will it get me in trouble with my job? Personal opinions aside, I think I shouldn’t go. I don’t want to get sicker, or get you sick.”

“Ah,” I understood what she wasn’t saying. We didn’t discuss our extra curricular relationship at the office. We didn’t even use code words. We avoided any acknowledgement of it at all. “I personally think you’ll be missing out on a great opportunity. But no, your job isn’t in jeopardy for having to miss a meeting due to your health. I understand. I’ll make sure Heather knows there will be a change in plans.”

“Thank you,” her voice sounded small. She really must not have felt well.

“I will still need you to prep the materials.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll get the details from Heather.”

I placed the handset down slowly. Mila hadn’t sounded good. I couldn’t exactly send her flowers with a get better card. I didn’t send flowers to Heather. The self-imposed rule I had for Mila was if I didn’t do it for Heather, I wouldn’t do it for Mila. At least at the office.

I buzzed Heather’s desk. “Travel plans for one. And have the cafeteria deliver a hot pot of tea to Mila’s office.”

“Does she have a cold? I’m on it”

And she was. Heather was a top notch assistant, and why I wasn’t willing to give her up simply because she no longer wanted to travel. By lunch time, I had a first class ticket to Dallas for the next afternoon.

Traveling alone had gotten to be so old hat, I didn’t think of it as exciting or boring, it just was. Mila had breathed new life into the process for me. She had found the entire process an

adventure. She never got annoyed having to take her shoes off for the security check in, or waiting in lines. It was all part of the thrill.

That thrill was missing without her. I was now subject to having to hear bits and pieces of random conversations as people around me talked. I grabbed a book at one of the shops, thinking maybe it would distract me. It didn't. I had read it before. I should have paid better attention and read the back cover before paying for it.

Things didn't begin looking up for this trip until I arrived. Instead of sending a car for me, I saw Nathan White, the head of the local office holding up a sign with my name on it.

"Nathan, good to see you man, but you should have sent a car," I said as I approached him.

"That's not how we do things in Dallas. You came all this way to see us, the least I could do was pick you up before heading out to dinner. Good to see you Chandler. Tell me you didn't eat an abysmal meal on the plane because we are headed out to the best steak experience in the state." He reached out and took the bag I had slung over my shoulder.

"The whole state? That's a pretty big claim."

"Texas is a big state, we don't do things by halves around here, unless it's half a steer. You have your appetite, or are you going to embarrass me?"

"I could eat," I admitted with a chuckle.

Hours later I sat back with a groan. I thought I could eat. I rubbed my distended belly. Nathan and the executive team from the Dallas office were still going at it. I took a long draw of my beer.

"Are you tapping out? City living has made you soft," Nathan laughed.

"You live in a city. Where are you putting all that food? Did you not eat lunch, or do you have a hollow leg?" Nathan wasn't the only one doing some serious damage to his steak. We had even had a couple of rounds of appetizers.

By the time they were done with their meals, we were all moaning with full bellies. I felt like I could have rolled back to my hotel room. When I got there, I flopped on the bed like a beached whale. I was full and I was tired. When I woke up in the morning, I had at least kicked my shoes off at some point. But I had slept in my clothes. Good thing the hotel room was already equipped with an iron and ironing board.

Still full from the evening before, I decided that I'd only have coffee for breakfast. The food had been great, but there had been so much of it. By the time I arrived at the offices for our meeting, I was wide awake, and no one could tell I had slept in my clothes.

I looked over the group in the conference room. The same men sat around the conference table as who had been at the restaurant the night before. Half of what I was there to discuss had already been decided on the night before over steaks and beer.

"I think we're done here," Nathan announced early.

We were done before the meeting even started.

"Fantastic. That gives us plenty of time. The game starts in just over an hour," Chris, Nathan's CFO said.

"Game? I have a flight."

Nathan started to laugh. "Yeah, ya do. I had your assistant schedule your flight for after the game. You're not missing this."

"You've gotten very bossy since you took over the Dallas office," I commented.

"I've always been bossy, you're just better at it than me," he chuckled. "Chris is part owner of the Hawgs, minor league ball team. Talk about a good time. Baseball from a private open air box. You still like ball games, right?"

"Oh, I love a good ball game, but..." I glanced down at my clothes. I was in a suit and tie, not exactly game day attire.

"We'll get you set up with a jersey. Anyone who notices doesn't matter."

The stadium was a lot smaller than what I was used to. Our box back home felt miles up from the field, but the view from this one felt like I was right on the field. Happiness was a hotdog in one hand, a beer in the other and the action right where I could see it. The only way this could have been better was in Mila was by my side looking beautiful.

This was an experience worth repeating. I was going to have to look into the minor league at home.

“So tell me, how did you manage to buy into a baseball team?” I asked Chris between innings.

“My wife was watching some TV show. An actor bought shares in a soccer team, it got me thinking. I mean I didn’t grow up to be a professional ball player, but what was stopping me from buying shares in a team? I started poking around, and found out there was an opportunity right here in town. Best investment, I swear.”

“You’re making a good return?”

“Screw that, look around man. This is the return.” He opened his arms wide and shook them.

I got what he meant, it was the game, the fans, being able to feel like we were in the game. It was everything, that was his return. And I had thought owning a box at the stadium had been a good investment.

MILA

“Hey, Dad, I’m home,” I called out as I dropped my things on the kitchen counter. I opened the fridge and looked to see what we had to eat. I noticed that Dad hadn’t started anything for dinner, which meant it was my responsibility tonight. I still wasn’t feeling great, and really didn’t want to cook.

“How was work?” he asked as he came in from his home office.

“Work,” I answered flatly.

“You still beat?”

I nodded.

“It’s all that travel. It catches up and knocks you on your ass, and then you’re right back at it. Proud of you kiddo. What’s for dinner?”

I stared at him. I didn’t have the energy to glare. “Your choice, burritos or pizza.”

“Really? Is that what you call a healthy meal to feed your aging father? What about a vegetable?”

“We can get peppers on the pizza. They’ll put lettuce on your burrito. Doesn’t salsa count as a veggie? It’s tomato sauce,” I complained.

“I thought we had an agreement as part of you living here, you make dinner.”

“I made dinner yesterday,” I said.

“No, yesterday you brought home Chinese take out.”

Oh, he was right. I hadn't cooked for a few days. The thought of raw food made my tongue feel thick, like I was going to throw up. The feeling must have shown on my face.

“You don't look so good, maybe you shouldn't be cooking.”

That was my point, at least I thought I had said something. Maybe I only thought about saying it? But he knew I wasn't feeling great days ago, and then when I didn't go on that trip to Dallas this week because of this.

He guided me to a kitchen chair. And then brought me a cup of water. “You aren't going to be sick on me, are you Mimi?”

I took a moment to sip the water before I slowly shook my head. “I'm just really tired. I'll order dinner in a minute.”

I was too tired to sass off and remind him he was perfectly capable of cooking. After all, he managed to feed himself for the majority of the past five years while I was away at school.

“No, you rest. I'll order some burritos. Do you know what you want on yours?”

I was about to say steak, my usual, but the thought of meat right then repulsed me. “I'll have a vegetarian. Beans and rice, extra cheese. Load it up with the usual sour cream and guacamole. I think I'll pass on the salsa, but I want pico.”

“Why don't you go change out of your work clothes and curl up on the couch, watch some TV. I'll order and go pick dinner up. Would some ibuprofen help?”

I shook my head. I wasn't achy, I was queasy. And tired, really tired. I dragged myself up to my room. The clothes stayed where they fell as I pulled my outfit from the day off. Dad was right, I needed comfort. I didn't care that it was summer, and warm outside. I pulled on my favorite pair of leggings and coordinating oversize long-sleeved shirt. It was like a hug. Once I was back down stairs, I grabbed my phone, and curled up on the couch with a blanket.

“Mimi, I'm back,” Dad yelled a bit later. “You want to eat at the table, or in there?”

“Here. I don’t feel like moving.” My phone buzzed just as Dad handed me my burrito and a stack of napkins.

I looked at the caller ID. It was Chandler. I meant to drop the phone, but in my panic I dropped the burrito, and kept the phone, but didn’t answer it. Why was he calling?

“Oops, you okay there?” Dad asked.

I let out a sigh of relief. I hadn’t begun to open the burrito yet, it was still wrapped up in its foil like a little silver mummy.

“All’s good. Just a clumsy moment.”

I unwrapped my burrito and started eating. I picked up my phone and texted him back.

‘Eating dinner with Dad.’ I typed out.

‘I’m back from Dallas. Tell him you need to call me, something for work.’

‘Can I eat?’

‘Call me.’

I interpreted his demand as a call when I was finished. I made it halfway through my dinner before the anticipation of what Chandler had to say to me won.

“I’m done for now, I have to make a call.” I announced. I wrapped the rest of the burrito up in its foil and climbed off the couch, taking the food into the kitchen to put away. After I did that I went upstairs, closing my bedroom door behind me.

Chandler answered on the first ring.

“Why are you calling me?” I whispered into the phone.

“I missed you, wanted to see if you were feeling all right,” he said.

I melted at the sound of concern in his voice.

“I missed you too. Did you have a good time in Dallas without me?”

“Ate too much, slept in my clothes and went to a ball game,” he said.

“There was a business meeting there at some point, right?” I teased.

“There was, and it was productive. Look, I know we don’t really do stuff around here, but what are you doing this weekend?”

“Are you asking me on a date?” I wasn’t sure what was going on with him. The flutter in my chest told me it was love. I knew I had serious feelings for him, this was further proof that he had feelings for me too.

“Whatever you want,” he said. “But I want to see you, and not at work if you know what I mean.”

“What am I supposed to tell Dad?”

“Tell him we have to work over the weekend for something major coming up. I need your help researching something.”

“He’s going to want to know what that something is,” I said. It was too vague Dad would see right through the flimsy excuse.

“Just hit him with an NDA, you can’t talk about projects in development. Corporate secrets. It will be fine.”

It was fine. It worked beautifully. I didn’t drop the subterfuge on Dad right then. I saved it until I came home from work the next day.

“I feel like I’m being punished. I couldn’t go on the stupid trip, so now I have to work all weekend.”

“I’m sorry kiddo, welcome to corporate America.”

And that’s all it took. No questions asked when I got up and left early on Saturday morning.

I had forgotten how nice Chandler’s place was. It said ‘rich’ more than it said home.

“What do you want to do today? Go shopping, go to a museum, a round of golf?” Chandler was all smiles and weirdly attentive.

“Really, what do I want to do today? You’re hoping I say order pizza delivery and spend the afternoon in bed before I go home late tonight, aren’t you?”

He stepped in close and wrapped his arms around me and began nibbling at my ear. “I was hoping you’d say something like that.”

I snuggled into the embrace. I found a sense of belonging and comfort in his arms that I had been missing. It was as if I needed a hug from him in order to feel better. I let him hold me for several moments.

“This is nice. Can we just do this?” I was half joking, half serious.

“You want to cuddle? I am an expert at cuddling.”

From experience he was decent at cuddling, but we didn’t cuddle and snuggle together much. When we came together it was lightning and thunder crashing. We were raging storms in bed. We did not cuddle.

“I’m still not feeling very well. Sorry. I know you were expecting some bed gymnastics, but I still feel off. Would you be mad if we hung out by your pool, ordered in pizza. We could watch a movie and cuddle a little later when it gets too hot outside. I just need something simple today, if that’s okay with you?”

I was worried it wouldn’t be okay. But I shouldn’t have. He pressed his lips to mine in a warm comforting kiss.

“You don’t feel well, and I insisted that you come over. Thank you. Yes, sitting out by the pool is perfect. Did you bring a suit? Do you want to get in the water?”

“I did bring my suit. I was hoping you’d be able to rub sunscreen on my back.”

He gave me a wicked grin and chuckled.

“I can definitely do that. You can change in my room. I’ll go get the pool ready, and turn the hot tub on.”

It had been a while since I had first been in his room. As I stripped down to put my bathing suit on, I was tempted to crawl beneath the sheets. Chandler would be loving and attentive. And I would probably get sick from all the rocking

motion. I felt a wave of motion sickness simply thinking about it.

“That is a spectacular swimsuit,” Chandler said when I stepped out onto the back deck. “I can see why you hid that under a t-shirt when we went out on the boat last month.”

I loved the way he was looking at me. I felt beautiful and confident. I just wished the lurching of my insides would calm down so I could feel sexy too.

Chandler crossed the deck and held out his hand. “I believe you needed assistance with your sunscreen?”

I handed over the tube. “I remembered this, but I forgot a towel,” I said.

He pointed at a stack of folded towels. “All ready and waiting for you.”

“You took care of everything,” I said.

He nodded. “Now, let me take care of you.”

CHANDLER

“Come into my office,” I said into the speaker phone.
“Be right there,” Mila answered.

Right there meant almost ten minutes. I was still a little annoyed that her office was so far away. But at least she had one.

“Heather, can you pull up my schedule,” I said over the intercom.

“Sure thing. What are we looking at?” Heather said. “Oh, hey Mila. Go on in, we’re talking schedules.” I heard through the intercom.

I looked up to see a smiling Mila. She still looked somewhat tired. Our ‘work’ over the weekend had been very low energy, she simply hadn’t felt up to a lot of activity. Her skin glowed with the healthy tan she picked up spending two days lounging next to the pool.

I grinned and winked at her. “Pull up a chair, and bring up your schedule. I want to go over this week.”

“I don’t have any travel meetings listed, has that changed?” Mila asked as she pulled a chair in to sit opposite of me at my desk.

“No travel, but I won’t be in the office. Grimes from Switzerland is coming in, and bringing an interested party,” I began.

“Do we have any idea who this interested party is?” Heather asked. The sound of her fingers flying over her keyboard

clicked through the speaker.

“Grimes?” Mila asked.

“Marcel Grimes used to head up the office. When he took operations to Europe I stepped in.”

“So he’s very important.” Mila stated the obvious.

I nodded. “That’s why we need to clear my schedule. What’s coming up, and what do I need to shuffle off to Kathleen, or Mila.”

She pointed at herself and mouthed, ‘Me?’

“Yes, you. You’ve gone out on enough of these presentations, I think you could actually handle one. Actually, get in touch with Kyle Manning. See if he needs your assistance this week. Tell him I sent you his way.”

“Oh, I know him. His office is on the other side of the building. I had to deal with him when I was filling in for Kathleen McDonald’s assistant.”

Mila sounded a bit too enthusiastic remembering Kyle. I sucked on my back teeth and pushed down the rage that suddenly spiked through my system at the thought of her smiling at Kyle. He was younger, closer to her age.

“Well don’t run out and throw yourself at him right away. I still need you to prepare a few things for Grimes.”

Mila’s brow crinkled together, and she made a sour face at me. ‘What?’ she mouthed at me again.

I shook my head. “It’s nothing.”

“When does Mr. Grimes and his guest arrive? Do you know where he’ll be staying?”

“I assume the Four Seasons,” I said.

“I’ll check on it. Should we anticipate a walk through, but meetings elsewhere?” Heather asked.

“Yeah, and—”

“How long is he in town? Should I get you tee time at the country club?” That was exactly why Heather was so valuable.

Mila was useful during trips, but she didn't have enough history with this company to know that Grimes did business over lunch, and while out golfing. The man rarely sat in a conference room watching PowerPoint presentations. Right now she sat there looking pretty and slightly lost.

"What do you want to do about your Thursday meeting with that agency, T T T?"

"Who?"

"Triple T. The Talent Team. It's a meeting through marketing. Um, my notes say branding," Mila said, reading something from her tablet.

"Oh, right. You'll want to be there for that. Take good notes for me," I directed.

She nodded and scribbled something down.

"Where else am I scheduled? That's what we need to deal with right now."

"You have a few follow up notes in your task list, but you didn't confirm anything else."

"Push those follow up calls off until Grimes leaves. I expect he'll be in town through the weekend before he heads off to the coast."

"I'll contact his assistant in Switzerland. It's...the afternoon over there. I should be able to get her. I'll call you back when I have some information." The phone clicked as Heather disconnected.

Mila blinked up at me. "So you really don't need me for anything?"

I cleared my throat. "I wouldn't exactly say that."

She glanced over her shoulder at the door to my office. It sat wide open, anyone walking by would see us.

'I had a nice weekend,' she mouthed, barely making any noise.

I nodded. It was pleasant enough. Not what I had planned, but her company was always a pleasure. We sat there looking at each other for a long moment before she stood up.

“Well, I guess I’ll go stop by Kyle Manning’s office and offer myself up. Email me what you need me to prepare for your meetings with this guy. But from the sound of it, you won’t actually need a presentation, right?”

I shook my head. “No presentations. Notes, but I won’t know what research I’ll need until he arrives.”

She nodded, looking a little disappointed. It was business, she needed to get used to it.

“Don’t flirt with Kyle when you go down there.” I said as she left.

She turned and glared at me. “I don’t flirt at work, but thanks for the reminder.” I wouldn’t call the expression she gave me a smile, more like a grimace.

I didn’t know what she was so upset about. She was the one who turned my weekend into nothing more than a leisurely hang out with some kissing. I could have spent my time at a game. Pretty much as soon as Mila was out of my office, she was out of my mind.

I had to prepare. Marcel Grimes had been almost a mentor to me when he had run the office. I needed him to see that not only was revenue and productivity up, but that I was the driving force behind the improvements.

My phone intercom buzzed. “Tell me you have information.”

“I have lots of information. Mr. Grimes’s assistant was most helpful. I even have the names of the people he’s bringing in.” Heather began.

“People, not person?” I asked.

“Exactly. He’s meeting a couple of investors from Argentina. Think of us and the halfway point. I’ll forward the itinerary as soon as she sends it over. And good call, they have rooms and a suite booked at the Four Seasons. I’ll start working on your tee time next. You don’t want that for tomorrow do you?”

“Not if he’s coming in tonight. Tomorrow everyone will be faking they don’t have jet lag. Schedule it for after a late breakfast.”

“On it.”

Heather arranged a car to pick me up in the morning so that I didn't have to bother with valet service. With a driver on call, I could be certain to take my guests anywhere they needed. Other than out to lunch, I was fairly certain the first day would be nothing more than catching up on old times, and, if I was lucky, getting a hint of why Grimes was in town.

Once I arrived at the hotel, I went to the guest services desk and asked if they could let Grimes know that I had arrived.

“Mr. Grimes said you can go on up.” She gave me the room number, and I headed to the elevators.

The door was partially open when I arrived.

“Hello?”

“Chandler, come in, come in.” I had nearly forgotten how big and booming his voice was.

I stepped in and saw my old friend moving a vase of fruit cut to look like flowers from the low center table to a sidebar.

“Marcel, you are a sight for sore eyes. How long has it been?” I went in to shake his hand but found myself caught up in a hug. He gave me air kisses on both cheeks, European style. It caught me off guard.

“Far too long, my friend, far too long. You look healthy.”

I grinned, unable to say the same for him. He had aged drastically in the years since I had seen him. His cheeks looked sunken and while he was tan, it looked fake.

“You must thank your assistant for the edible fruit arrangement. It's a lovely and tasty gift. I know you didn't think of it,” Grimes chuckled.

He plucked a skewer with a variety of cut fruit and handed it out to me. I nodded my appreciation and took the fruit. He pulled another skewer from the arrangement and bit into it. As I was chewing, a man I didn't know stepped into the sitting area.

“Marcel, you did not mention when your associate would be arriving. Oh, hello, you are already here.”

“Chandler, you need to meet our new friends, and future associates. This gentleman is Dane Nunez, and Fernando Torres is around here somewhere.”

Fortunately when I went to shake hands with Dane, that’s all I got, a hand shake.

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about, or are you going to make me wait until we’re on the links tomorrow?” I asked.

“You already have a tee time?” Grimes asked.

“Tee time booked, caddy scheduled, and brunch reservations made. When have I ever let you down when it comes to golf?”

“Dane, you golf right?” Grimes asked.

“I excel at being bad at it. It should be interesting,” Dane admitted.

“As soon as Fernando joins us, I will jump in on the details. Because that is what we are here to work out. You’re here because as soon as Dane, Fernando, and I come to an understanding. I’ll need to convince you to come to Switzerland and head up my division there,” Grime said. He certainly did not beat around the bush and make me wait for the information.

“I don’t think you’ll need to convince me,” I admitted.

MILA

I didn't know what had gotten into Chandler. This Grimes guy shows up and suddenly my boyfriend, albeit a secret boyfriend, was suddenly a different person. After a few days of not seeing him, even for the briefest of moments I really started to miss him.

"Is Chandler in?" I asked Heather as I approached his office.

She shook her head. "He won't be back until Grimes leaves town."

I set the tablet and paper notebook I was carrying on her desk. "Who is this guy? Is he really that important?"

"Historically to the business he took this place and more than doubled profits. He's before my time, but as I understand it, he basically hand raised Chandler to be who he is today. I send him a birthday card and a fruit basket at Christmas every year on Chandler's behalf. It's a standing order."

I sighed. I didn't stand a chance against an old favorite person. I needed to stuff my feelings down and be happy that Chandler was having a good time with his friend. If I was going to be a supportive partner, that's what I needed to do. Be happy for Chandler, and give him his space. After all, he had been a supportive partner when I wasn't feeling the best, and hung out with me and kept me comfortable.

I bit my lip and smiled inwardly at that. We were supportive of each other. We were partners.

"What are you thinking?" Heather asked. She leaned in close and gave me a knowing look. "You got very happy all of a

sudden.”

Panic washed over me. “Nothing,” I said a little too loudly. Um, since the boss man’s not here I was just thinking of ducking out early.”

“You were thinking about a guy. Ducking out to see this guy?” Heather asked in a sing-song voice.

“Yeah, exactly. Don’t tell anyone. He’s a waiter at a sports bar, and I know he’s working the lunch shift today. I’m going to take a very long lunch, and then call in sick for the rest of the afternoon.” I lied about the guy, but not about leaving for the rest of the day. I wasn’t feeling the greatest, and an afternoon nap sounded like a very good idea.

“I won’t say a word to anyone. If you refill my coffee for me.” She held out an empty coffee mug.

“Sure how do you take it?”

“Black, but bring me four or five sugar packets just in case.”

I took the mug and went to the break room. Kathleen McDonald’s assistant Lisa was there talking to another one of the admins from the floor that I didn’t know. I nodded in greeting, but mostly tried to ignore them.

“I was just so tired all the time,” the admin I didn’t know said.

“Me too. Morning sickness is the worst,” Lisa responded.

“I never really had full blown morning sickness. Always just on the verge of being sick but never really. I just mostly felt like crap for the first trimester.”

I fumbled the coffee pot and poured some on the counter. She was describing my exact symptoms. I was tired all the time, and queasy but never actually threw up.

“You’re lucky. I puke at least once a day right now.”

“Are you pregnant?” I asked. I shouldn’t have butted into their conversation, but I had to know more.

“I am, but please don’t say anything. I’m waiting until I pass the first trimester before I announce anything,” Lisa answered.

“Congratulations. I won’t say anything. You’re not pregnant too are you?” I asked the other woman.

“Oh no, I just got back from maternity leave, so it’s all fresh in my mind.”

“That’s why we haven’t met, I’m Mila,” I said as I used a wad of paper towels to clean up the spill.

“Jaimie,” nice to meet you.

“Being pregnant sounds kind of miserable,” I admitted.
“Sorry.”

“I kind of am,” Lisa said. “But the misery passes and it’s supposed to get easier.” She patted her seemingly flat belly.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

I grabbed a handful of sugar packs, and carefully carried Heather’s coffee back to her.

“Thanks, have a good afternoon.” She waved as I picked up my things and walked back to my office.

I wanted to run, and drop everything. I couldn’t stop thinking about what Lisa and Jaimie had been saying. Jaimie described how I had been feeling the past couple of weeks. Tired all the time, and with that uneasy about to vomit feeling, but it never happens. Something I think if I could just throw up I’d feel better.

I had a few things I needed to take care of before lunch. As soon as I hit send on the last email, I shut down my work station, grabbed my things, and left. Twenty minutes later I sat in the parking lot of a drug store and had to talk myself into walking inside to buy a pregnancy test. People came and went, and I still sat there.

What was I going to do if I was pregnant? I’d have to tell Chandler. Would he be happy? Would he be upset with me? That was my fear talking, and I ignored that inner voice. Chandler had already proven himself to be a loving caring man. I was certain the second he found out he was going to be a father he would be a very caring partner.

I knew in my heart that we were in love. Neither of us had said the words. But actions spoke louder than words, and ever since Las Vegas Chandler's actions, and I hoped mine too, shouted joyfully of love and commitment.

His attitude this week was nothing more than nerves over an old important mentor. We were solid, and a baby would solidify us even further.

I don't know how long I was there when someone wearing the blue uniform vest of the store tapped on my window. I rolled it down just enough to hear them. "Are you okay? You've been sitting in there for a while."

"Oh, I'm fine. I was listening to an audio book, and it got really good. I didn't mean to worry anyone."

By the expression on the lady's face, she knew I was lying. I wasn't even listening to music, I was just sitting there with the engine running. I turned off the car and went inside. I grabbed the first pregnancy test I found, and offered up a silent prayer to any god that would listen about self check out. I really would have been mortified if I had to face that same concerned woman if she rang me up.

Dad wasn't home. Which was good, because I didn't feel like explaining anything to him. Yes, I was home early. Yes, I care about my job. Yes, I know I need to learn to work through discomfort to be considered a reliable employee. No, I did not care. I was tired and I wasn't feeling well.

I took the test. And then I sat there in the bathroom and stared at it the entire time it processed. The second it even looked like it was giving me a positive reading, I swept it into the trash. I washed my hands and went to bed.

I would deal with this information later. I wasn't ready for this at all.

I woke up to a pounding on my door. "Mimi, are you in there?" Dad barked.

"Yeah, what?" I was groggy as I opened up the door.

Dad stood there, his face pale. He held up the pregnancy test. "What is this?"

“What were you doing in my bathroom?” I asked.

“Taking out the garbage. Now are you going to tell me this isn’t yours or do we need to have a chat?” He talked through his teeth. He was angry and trying really hard not to yell.

I was so tired, I just wanted to sleep. “Can we talk about this after I finish my nap?” I flopped back onto my bed.

“No, we are going to talk about this now.” He stomped into my room and stood there with his arms crossed. “Does your young man know?”

I scoffed. My man wasn’t so young. But I wasn’t going to say that. “How could he? I just found out.”

“Are you planning on getting married? Do I need to talk to him? I think you both need to meet with Fr. Benjamin—”

“Dad, stop. I literally just found out. I haven’t had a chance to tell anyone. If you hadn’t been poking around in my garbage, you wouldn’t know.”

“I wasn’t poking around. It was right on top,” he stated. “You can’t tell them at work.”

“You are aware women are allowed to work while pregnant, right? I mean, I know things were different when you and my mother were younger, but... even back then pregnant women worked.”

Dad let out a heavy, long breath. “I asked my friend to give you a job, and this doesn’t look good, Mila. When he finds out you’re pregnant, single and without a plan, he’s going to focus on your irresponsibility. And everything you do wrong from here on out. You could lose your job.”

I stared at Dad. Was he serious? Would Chandler see this as just another mistake that I made, and it would tarnish everything else at work? I couldn’t believe Chandler would think that way. But clearly Dad did, and they were the same generation. There certainly were managers out there that would do that sort of thing. Dad obviously would. And a million other stories like that circulated on the internet every day, how one minor tiny mistake would be the start of an

avalanche campaign against someone either forcing them to quit, or getting them fired.

I stared at Dad and blinked a few times. I had a plan now, I didn't five minutes before, but I did now. I would tell Chandler this weekend. I was planning on it at some point anyway. But Dad did have a point, I had no idea what the maternity leave situation at work was like, and if I'd be able to continue traveling. This was going to impact my job, just how much was the question.

CHANDLER

“Good morning Chandler,” Mila’s voice called to me from my office door. She stood there looking expectant, holding her tablet and a few other things she typically brought up with her.

“I didn’t call you,” I pointed out.

“I know, I thought I would be proactive and show up for our Monday meeting, so you didn’t have to call me. How were your meetings with Marcel Grimes?”

“Everything went well. Look, Mila, I have a full schedule and have to focus right now.”

“Oh, okay,” she said. “When should I come back?”

I didn’t need her to come back, at least not until I called for her.

“I’ll let you know.”

“So, no travel meetings this week?”

“I said I’d call you when I needed you,” I barked.

Her eyes went wide, and I swear her lip quivered. I didn’t have time to coddle her hurt feelings.

“I’ll call you,” I said in a calmer voice.

I waited until she nodded and left the office. I had too much to do and not enough time to get it done. Grimes wanted me in Switzerland at the beginning of the month. When he first proposed this idea of having me step into his spot I thought he might have meant eventually, at least not until the start of the

new quarter. I knew it was all contingent on the Argentine deal.

I walked into his plans not being aware they were almost at a done deal. A deal they shook hands on at the tenth link while golfing.

He had six weeks to be in Buenos Aires. Grimes was ready to relocate, and I needed to fill the gap he was leaving behind. Ideally we would have some overlap. That's why I needed to get everything here sorted out. I had less than three weeks.

I needed to get everything lined up and into position, because as soon as I announced my departure the only falling I wanted to happen was a controlled fall into place. Like a row of dominoes cascading perfectly.

"I need Kyle manning and my schedule printed out for the next two weeks," I barked into the intercom. "Oh and I need ice."

"On it," Heather said.

Within ten minutes Heather followed Kyle into my office with a print out of my schedule, and carried the ice bucket from my mini bar.

"Close the door on the way out," I said.

Kyle and I both watched and waited until Heather closed the door.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"Have a seat," I directed, indicating the low conversation cluster. "Drink?"

"It's not even ten. Is this one of those meetings? Will I need a drink?" he chuckled.

I crossed to the mini bar and dropped two ice cubes into a glass. I opened the bottle of whiskey. "It's that kind of meeting. I know I need a drink."

"Sure, I'll take the same."

I fixed his drink, and carried the glasses over. I handed him his drink and tipped mine in salut before taking a sip. "I'm

relocating to Switzerland. And I want you to take over here.”

He took a sip of his drink before saying anything. “You’re right I was going to need this. When? Is that why you dumped your travel secretary on me?”

I didn’t remember dumping Mila on him. I told her to see if he needed her assistance while I didn’t.

“No,” I chuckled. “That was supposed to be temporary. But she’s a good worker, you should consider keeping her in that position. The meetings this summer have had a higher response rate than previous ones. I’m not going to need her anymore. I hadn’t put any thought into that, but... I’ll want someone familiar with the European client base.”

“Have you announced this to the board? Am I the first one to know or the last one?”

He understood how this company ran. He knew the board’s tendency to keep secrets and leave everyone scrambling.

“You’re the first. Right now the only people who know are you, me, Marcel Grimes, and a couple of men from a start-up in Argentina. And for now it needs to stay that way.”

“Thank you for trusting me with this news, and the division office.”

“Look, I have some personnel requests,” I started.

“Shoot.”

“Keep Heather on. She is an asset to this company. Make her a VP of logistics or something if you don’t keep her as your admin.”

“Is she really that good?” he asked.

“She is. You might consider keeping her as your admin, and move your current admin to your travel secretary. I really underestimated that position when I created it. I really did, she’s been a lifesaver on more than a few presentations. You don’t have to keep Mila if you don’t want her. I promised her old man I’d give her a job. Send her back to HR as a floating admin if you must. At least wait six weeks before laying her off.”

Kyle chuckled. “You really feel responsible for her?”

“I’ve known her since she was a kid. I share a box at the stadium with her dad. She does good work, but if you decide she’s not working out, I want to be well out of the way.”

Kyle nodded. “I understand. I’ll give her a fighting chance before I make any decisions. I assume you’ll start passing those meetings on to me?”

“Yep, I have two this week. Mila should already have the details, but your admin will have to book travel. I need Heather to help me get things sorted around here.”

“Have you told her yet? Admins can get weepy when their bosses move on and don’t take them in the transfer.”

“I’ll let her know in a day or two. She’ll have figured something is up by then,” I admitted. Heather was smart, she would notice I was packing up my files.

I would have liked to talk for an extended time, but as Kyle pointed out, he had some presentations to prepare for, and I had to get ready to move overseas.

A few hours later my phone buzzed. “Yeah?”

“Chandler, can I come up and speak with you?” Mila asked.

“Is this business related?”

“It’s always business related or I wouldn’t bother you with it during work hours.”

“Anything you have to say about work for the next two weeks is Kyle Manning’s headache. You should probably check in with him about your travel arrangements for the week.”

“That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about,” she sounded snappish.

I didn’t have time for her little attitude. I let out a deep breath

“Mila, anything regarding upcoming meetings or presentations will go through Kyle for the foreseeable future. I have to focus. I expect you to understand that and not pester me with petty work grievances. I know you to be a professional and that can handle this change in your management.”

“Of course, you’re right. Sorry to have bothered you.” She ended the call.

I didn’t hear from her for a few days. But I didn’t expect to. She had meetings and travel, and she worked for Kyle now.

I received a text message from her at the end of the week. I groaned. My weekend was already slammed.

‘Sorry to bother you, but I really need to talk to you,’ she texted.

‘Text it.’

‘Best in person. Please.’

‘Saturday after ten.’ The property manager should have come and gone by then. The packers weren’t scheduled until later. I had a brief window of time.

‘I’ll be there.’

Mila was prompt, she arrived five minutes after ten. I was still wrapping things up with the property management company.

“I think we’ll have no problems getting this place leased. We can probably rent it out as is, but I think you will want to paint everything first,” the manager was saying as I let Mila in.

“Hi Chandler,” Mila said.

I opened the door and waved her in without a word.

“You need to do what you think is best. I don’t have time to oversee any painting or modifications, or fixes that need to happen. That’s why I’m bringing you in. You need to manage the property in full.”

“Of course. I thought you might want to save the expense—”

“I leave in less than two weeks. Right now I have more money than time. You can do all the updating you think this place needs, shy of a full remodel.”

The property manager extended her hand.

I took it.

“It’s going to be a pleasure working with you Mr. Owens. And safe travels.” She nodded at Mila as she swept out of the

house.

Mila watched her with a slack jaw and wide eyes. She closed her mouth only to open it again like a goldfish. A pretty goldfish, it was a mindless gape nonetheless. “Whats—”

The doorbell interrupted her.

I held up a finger. “Hold that thought.”

A rough labor-worker looking man stood at my door. He held an aluminum clipboard that was also a thin box that could hold papers and pens.

“Mr. Chandler Owens?”

“That’s me,” I said.

“We’re here to pack you up.”

“You’re early,” I pointed out as I stepped back letting him in. “I didn’t expect you until eleven.”

“The crew comes in at eleven, I’m here to assess our supply needs. Do you have any pieces that are antiques or large mirrors that will be particularly fragile?”

“Chandler?” Mila called out my name.

“Give me a minute, Mila. I’ll be right back.” I turned my attention back to the man. “I don’t intend on taking any of the furniture. It will stay here. Follow me, I’ll show you which rooms are being packed for shipping and which one for long term storage.”

I led him to my office and indicated that the entire room was to be packed up and shipped, same with my bedroom. The rest of the house I would put into storage. I didn’t need to ship furniture overseas when it was cheaper to purchase over there. He took notes as he followed me around.

When we were done, Mila was still standing by the front door.

“Me and the boys will be back in an hour.”

I closed the door and turned to Mila. “You could have sat down. What did you need to see me about?”

“You’re moving?” She asked, her expression was completely blank.

I nodded. “I’m taking over the Swiss branch.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

I shrugged. “Probably when I made the announcement official. Look, you already started working for Kyle, so your job will stay the same. He’s going to step into my role here, locally.

He’ll make a good mentor, but maybe don’t sleep with him, he’s married,” I teased.

MILA

I didn't know what to say. "You're moving?"

"It's not like I can commute. Of course I'm moving. I have to be there before the first. It's not the most ideal time line. But sometimes, Mila you'll learn this, especially in business, you have to jump at the opportunities."

I stared at him. He was leaving, and all he could talk about was business opportunities. What about us?

Was there an us?

"So, so I work for Kyle now?"

"Yeah. I cleared it with him. You did great this week by the way. He said you were a real asset to the presentations I dumped on him. I would appreciate it if you didn't mention this at the office yet. I haven't made the announcement. I'll do that this week."

I swallowed down bile. For the first time in a few weeks I was pretty sure I was feeling sick because of morning sickness.

"Um, can I tell my dad? I would think he and your group would be interested, you know?"

He stopped and looked at me. I was like I could actually see the lightbulb appear over his head as the thought occurred to him.

"Yeah, I need to tell them. We've got a game next week, I'll see them there. But sure, you can tell Dan."

He really hadn't thought about the people in his life, at all. He only realized he should tell his friends because I said something. If he didn't value the personal relationships he had over business, he would never value me or the baby.

How could I have been so wrong? He didn't see me as a partner at all. Hell, he barely acknowledged my existence. I was nothing more than a business decision.

"What was it you wanted to talk to me about?" he asked. I was surprised he even remembered why I was there.

"I couldn't get in to see you at the office. I was unclear about the situation with Kyle Manning. I'm sorry to have bothered you on the weekend, but it was bothering me. Heather didn't have any information for me either." It wasn't a lie.

Heather had said Chandler had come into the office on Monday morning in a manic mood. He spent the entire week in a frenzy, not taking any meetings unless he demanded them immediately. Well, this sudden relocation explained pretty much everything.

"Sorry about that. I've had a lot going on."

I doubted he was actually apologetic. He didn't know the real meaning of the word. How could he? He only ever focused on himself. I was so dumb. I had thought there was something seriously growing between us. Yeah, my stupidity and blind trust.

I needed to get out of there.

"If I don't see you, I guess this is goodbye," I said. I started to lift my arms for an embrace. I figured he would at least give me that. He kept turning his attention back to his phone. He was busy. He was distracted.

"Yeah, I'll see you around."

I started to walk out.

"Mila, it was good working with you. You're a lot of fun." He winked.

I grimaced. Maybe he thought it was a smile. Fun. That's all it had been to him. Sneaking around fucking his friend's foolish

daughter.

I sat in the car for a long while before starting it up. I cranked the radio until the bass line of the music made my windows vibrate. I drove too fast, and as soon as I got on the nearest freeway I drove as fast as I could and screamed.

I screamed and kept screaming until my throat hurt. And after that I didn't sing, I yelled along with the radio. After a while I went back to the screaming and driving too fast until something inside of me broke. I smacked the dials for the radio and turned it off. I couldn't stand the noise anymore.

It was like a damn collapsing. All of my anger washed away and I was left empty and terrified. I was alone in the silence. That's when I started crying. And I couldn't stop. Tears blurred my vision and I couldn't see clearly.

I pulled off on the side of the road and sobbed. I alternated between being so profoundly sad and empty I didn't know how I would go on, and so angry that I pounded on the steering wheel to the point I was afraid I would break it.

I collapsed over the wheel and continued to cry until I got the hiccups and was certain I couldn't cry any more. At some point my tear ducts had to dry up, didn't they? My eyes felt swollen and beat up from all the crying. I never knew I could be so angry and hurt all at once. Chandler never cared, and I had made him out to be some kind of perfect Prince Charming in my imagination.

Just because it's what I wanted didn't make it true. Lesson learned. Now I had to face my dad, tell him that his friend was leaving, and pretend to be sad about that. I couldn't let him see how devastated I was over this news. I could never tell him Chandler was the father.

I sat with my thoughts a while longer. The car rocked as a semi sped past. It probably wasn't the safest or smartest for me to be sitting on the side of the road having an existential crisis. I waited until it was clear and pulled the car back out onto the road.

I had driven for quite a while. I pulled over at the first exit and stopped at a gas station. I needed the restroom. I bought too many snacks, and a large drink before returning to the car and filling it up with gas.

On the drive home I listened to music, but played at a reasonable volume. I mostly stopped crying, the candy bars seemed to have helped my mood. I realized I hadn't eaten. When I got off the freeway, I stopped at a fast food place and picked up something more substantial for lunch.

I ate as I drove home. All I wanted to do was curl up on the couch and watch movies for the rest of the weekend.

"Mimi, are you okay? You've been gone for a while. Have you been crying?" Dad stopped in his tracks and looked at me as I walked in.

I nodded.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

I curled my fingers so that my nails bit into my palms and blinked up at the ceiling. I wanted to be done with crying.

"Everything. I had to check on some work stuff with Chandler and found out he's leaving the country. He said I could tell you. He'll tell everyone at next week's game. I guess you're all gonna be at some baseball game. So now I'm worried about my job." That was all completely true.

"I'll still be able to live here right? Even if I'm not making enough to afford to move out?"

"I thought you were going to be speaking with your young man about that. He needs to step up and take care of you."

Stupid tears filled my eyes and cascaded down my cheeks.

"Mimi?"

I flapped my hand in a circle trying to self regulate my emotions. It wasn't working very well. I blew out a long breath.

"After I checked in with Chandler, I went over to his house, the baby's father. He broke up with me."

“What? Was this before or after you told him you were having his child?”

“I went over to tell him, but I never got a chance.” That was the only thing that was fully true in what I told Dad. I had to fabricate one hell of a story. “He said I was being clingy and pushing him into something he never agreed on. He also said that if I turned around and told him I was pregnant just to keep him around he’d never speak to me again because he wasn’t going to fall for that. He told me to get out and forget where he lives.” I sniffed and clenched my face trying to stop the crying. I wanted to be done crying over that man. He wasn’t worth it.

“I didn’t get a chance to say much of anything, let alone tell him. You aren’t going to kick me out too are you?” My voice broke as I kept crying.

Dad put his arms around me and held me tight. He didn’t say anything for the longest time. I panicked and started crying harder, convinced he wasn’t talking because he was going to kick me out.

“Your mom and I had you when we were much younger than you are now. Her parents didn’t give her much of a choice. I already knew I was going to marry her. I just thought we were going to be older.” He stroked my hair as my crying subsided.

“I promised myself that I was never going to kick a child of mine out for making a mistake and living her life. We were kids and we had to grow up pretty fast. I’m not going anywhere, Mimi.”

After a long silence he asked, “Would it help if I talked to this guy? Man to man?”

“You mean Dad to jerk face? No, you’ll end up threatening him and get arrested. I think I’d rather forget about him. He was a mistake.”

“But you’re not going to be able to forget about him in a few months. You’re pregnant, that’s going to change your life.”

“I know, but for now I don’t want to think about him. I have my job to worry about. I’m going to need to start saving for a

new car, and a crib. I don't have time to dwell on someone who doesn't care about me."

"That's my girl."

I could tell Dad wanted to say something more. He didn't deal with my emotions very well, this had to have been a lot for him. I always thought adults were more mature. Today proved that wasn't the case, they were selfish. At least the men I knew were.

CHANDLER

I stood on the balcony of my new apartment and watched the late sunset. Zurich sat slightly north of the forty-fifth parallel meridian. Being that far north really changed the amount of daylight there was in the summer. I could really get used to the longer daylight hours. I knew it meant longer darker nights come winter, but for now, this was amazing.

At home I had always lived far enough south that the long summer hours were nowhere near as long as they were here. Even at the height of summer, it would not have been light out this late into the night. I should take a trip up to Sweden, see the whole midnight sun phenomenon. Well, maybe next year. It was late enough in the summer that I would miss out on the full effect of no sunset for days. Still, it was nice to get a chance to see the sun, even as it was setting.

Ever since my arrival, I spent entire days in meetings with Grimes at the office. We were close to the hand off, that meant from the time I walked in the door, until we were too tired to focus, we spent analyzing and assessing where and what my strategies would be as soon as he fully handed over control. Had we been in the States, it would have been dark by the time I left the office.

We were very much back in our mentor relationship. I had missed those days. Marcel Grimes was a fount of knowledge, and I was fortunate that he was willing to share with me. But he sometimes forgot I had been running things on my own for many years. Everything would be fine.

I guess he just needed to know that the second he stepped on the plane for South America this place was in good hands. My hands, the best hands for the job.

I took a sip from my drink and admired the scenery. The view from my new apartment was very different from both my home in the States and my expectations. In the States my house had been in an affluent neighborhood with curving streets, quiet neighbors and few streetlights, completely surrounded by trees. The view from my back deck had been the pool, the large trees in my yard, and the fence separating the yard from the neighbor. Here, the trees were smaller and my apartment was just above the treetops. My balcony looked out over the neighborhood across the street, and out to the city, and beyond that Lake Zurich.

I thought I would be getting a more metropolitan high rise apartment, but I guess I really didn't know what to expect from Zurich. When I had pictured moving to Europe, the images I held were left over from various vacations in Paris and Rome, or the ski trips I took to the Bavarian Alps. Zurich held old European charm but it was a very modern place. There was a familiarity to the outlying neighborhoods, they could have been back home.

I trusted Marcel's assistant with locating a furnished apartment for me with a year's lease. I should have taken care of finding a place myself. The arrangements weren't horrible, just not what I would have made for myself. After years living in the suburbs, this would have been a great opportunity to live in the heart of the city. But I doubt I would have ended up with an apartment as large as this place. At least I was told it was a large apartment, I considered it small.

And this evening it felt even smaller. All of my boxes arrived earlier in the day. I had been stuck for the morning while movers carried box after box. It was a good thing I hadn't packed any furniture. My living room sectional would not have fit, and there was no room for the billiards table. As much I luxuriated in a king sized bed, the bedrooms here wouldn't have accommodated the mattress and dressers.

I directed the movers to stack everything against the living room wall. The boxes took up far too much space. The apartment had already felt small before the wall of boxes closed in the space even further.

When I returned after a day of meetings, it felt as if everything had somehow become even more compact.

Escaping to the balcony, I knew I was avoiding the dreaded task of unpacking. I returned inside and set the drink down on the low coffee table. I stood in front of the boxes and scanned the labels. As I found boxes with their labels turned so they couldn't be read, I unstacked the boxes on top, turned everything so the label faced out, and re-stacked everything.

I wasn't about to unpack all of this myself, but I was tired of essentially living out of a suitcase. I wanted fresh clothes, and my toiletries. Once I located the appropriate boxes, I took down the boxes from the top of the stack, and pulled the boxes I wanted from the wall like removing specific bricks.

Lugging the boxes one at a time, I distributed them to the bedroom and the ensuite bathroom. Opening them and unboxing my belongings was an interesting experience. There were far too many items. I had no idea why I had them packed. Why had I packed a glass bottle of aftershave? It wasn't my regular brand. I could have easily replaced it with something here. I unscrewed the top and sniffed.

Memories of Mila dancing around in the hotel room in Las Vegas came back to me. I had been in bed, refusing to get out of it for days. I had her where and how I wanted, why should I leave?

She held out the small sample vial she found in the bathroom. "Here you need to put this on."

I reached out and took her hand, stopping her from dousing me in the scent she found.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. It smells good. Expensive. You'd be irresistible if you smelled like that."

I sniffed the sample, it wasn't bad. I put a few drops on my hands and clapped the aftershave to my neck. It certainly wasn't offensive.

She rolled against me and put her nose against my neck and made a big production of sniffing me. She cooed and made appreciative noises, and then she made appreciative advances. I knew there was a reason I was still in that bed.

Whether it had been the after shave, or simply her mood, she certainly proved I was irresistible. Her naked curves under me were definitely hard to resist. And at that moment, I didn't even try.

As soon as she managed to drag me out of bed and forced clothes onto me, I made sure to stop at the concierge shop and purchase a bottle of that aftershave.

I only wore it on our trips together after that. And she proved time and time again to be receptive to my advances when I wore the scent. This was my Mila aftershave. I wasn't going to need it here.

A small ball of tension formed in my chest. I hadn't left her under the best of circumstances. I hadn't left her in the lurch, but I probably should have been more circumspect with my goodbye. I made sure she still had a job. She knew what we had together was for fun while it lasted. Transferring to Zurich was the smartest choice I ever made regarding my career. She'd understand that. She had to. If she didn't, she wasn't as bright as I had thought.

It was morning back home. I could email her and check in. But what good would that do? I didn't want to confuse her by reaching out when there was nothing really between us. I was here. It's not as if I'd ask her to fly over here for a fun filled week in bed. I could just as easily find someone here to have a good time with. I expected Mila already had someone lined up.

Ow. I looked down, at some point I crushed the plastic packaging on my preferred brand of antacid. I looked at it and shook my head. Another item I really hadn't needed to pack

and pay to have shipped. There were drug stores here, I'd be able to find something similar if needed.

I may not have liked the idea of Mila sharing her delights with another man, I wasn't exactly in a position to tell her not to. If she was still single when I returned to the states I didn't see why we couldn't start right back up where we left off.

If I wanted to check in, I could drop a note to Kyle, and see how everything was going? Give him a call. That wouldn't be unusual, or out of the ordinary. I expected Grimes to call me a couple of times before he got so caught up in his new role in Argentina and forgot.

I checked my watch, it was late local time. Too late to give the states a call. I'd remember to call before I left the office tomorrow. That should line up with morning in the states. Returning to the living room, I grabbed my tablet. I added a note to call Kyle in the morning and check in on Heather and Mila. I added a second note for Grimes's admin to hire someone to come in and unpack my stuff.

We still hadn't worked out the exact custody of his administrative assistant. She was good, but I didn't know if she expected to continue with me, or if she would take the opportunity to seek different employment. I assumed those were her choices. Grimes hadn't mentioned if she would be relocating with him. And there hadn't been any effort in bringing in someone new for me. I added find out about the admin to my tasks for the morning. Tomorrow was already looking busy.

MILA

Three Years Later...

I sat on the living room floor. Luke kept handing me the small figures that came with his play set. I wish he would be as enthusiastic about picking everything up when it was time to clean. But for now, it was time to play.

“Thank you,” I repeated as he handed me another plastic animal.

“Mommy take.” His words might not have been as clear as his intention was.

“Mommy take,” I repeated. “Thank you. Can you bring me the tiger?”

We were working on naming the animals. He loved his animals. My lap was full of plastic figurines. And even more were scattered all over the living room. Our bedroom upstairs was a virtual zoo full of a stuffed animal menagerie.

“Tiger!” he proclaimed proudly as he half threw half gave me that animal.

“Can you find the elephant?”

He toddled around the room until he found the right animal and threw it at me.

“If this is your idea of cleaning, it’s going to take forever,” Dad commented as he walked into the room. There was no humor in his voice.

“Pawpaw!” Luke yelled and ran until he slammed into Dad’s legs.

“Hey there buddy,” he picked Luke up. “How’s my best guy?”

“Pawpaw, animals.” Luke pointed at our messy activity.

“You’re going to have this all cleaned up by tonight right?” Dad asked.

“I do every night, don’t I?” I countered.

Dad adored Luke, or at least he faked it pretty well. Only he didn’t like having a toddler in the house. Toddlers made messes. My toddler, my mess. That meant I was constantly cleaning up after anything we did, and that every night after I put Luke to bed, I had to make the house look as if he didn’t live there. It was exhausting.

I was already stretched thin with my crappy job. Luke was all energy all the time. And then Dad put this pressure on me. I knew he didn’t want me and Luke living here, but I simply didn’t make enough to live on my own.

“Are you planning on taking Luke to the z-o-o tomorrow?”

“I hadn’t been planning on it, why?”

“There’s a game on. The guys are coming over to watch.”

“Don’t you have a box at the stadium for that?” Another day I needed to get out of the house and disappear. I really needed to get chores done, and was counting on having all day Sunday to do that.

“That’s for home games.”

“And this isn’t a home game. Gotcha. It’s supposed to rain all day tomorrow, I’m not taking Luke.”

Dad tickled Luke, and the interaction the two of them were having was in complete opposition to the one I was having with him. It was obvious how much the two of them adored each other. But the words coming out of Dad’s mouth made me think he didn’t want his friends to know that either of us existed.

“Can you take him to the mall or something?”

I stared at him. I wanted him to just admit he wanted us out of the way. “We can go for a while, but I need to do laundry. Your game is going to be on for four hours or more. I know how much you love to yell at the commentators after the game.”

“Do your laundry tonight after Luke goes to bed.”

I closed my eyes. This wasn't an argument I was going to win. “Okay, we'll go for the morning. But I'm going to need to bring him home at nap time. I'll come straight in and take him to our room. As long as you and your friends are in the den, you won't see me come in. And we'll stay in our room and read books when he wakes up.”

I won't act like I live in my own home. I will be as out of the way as I can.

“That should be fine. I expect you to be cordial if you do run into anyone, but try not to have a conversation. When they ask how you're doing, they aren't really interested.”

I nodded. He meant whatever I do, don't mention how tired I am chasing after a toddler and trying to work full time. The stupid thing was, his friends already knew. They had even seen Luke when he was an infant.

I don't think Dad really got over his embarrassment from one time when McLain was being a jerk. I honestly didn't think the man knew how to speak to women without flirting. And in a teasing voice he asked me if I knew who the father was yet.

At the time I was so tired, I just burst into tears. I took the baby and hid in my room. After that, Dad kept trying to keep us hidden. I still don't know if he was more embarrassed about my reaction or the fact that I refused to tell him who the father is.

“Try not to smile at McLain,” he said.

All I could do was nod. There was no telling Dad to tell McLain to stop inappropriately flirting with me. The man was on his third or fourth wife. He had no reason to speak to me with the thinly veiled innuendos he did. I never did anything to encourage him. I certainly didn't smile at him.

“I never smile at McLain, Dad. I don’t even talk to him first, you know that,” I said. I climbed to my feet and began gathering up all of the animals scattered around. Maybe if I started cleaning early, he wouldn’t be so cranky with me. It was wishful thinking, but that’s all I seemed to have anymore.

“Well that’s why I think it would be best if you could find a way to be out of the house.”

Dad had promised me he wouldn’t kick me out. When he and Mom got pregnant with me, they didn’t have a choice. My grandfather on her side, a man I have no memory of, was going to kick her out and disown her if they didn’t get married. So being the good Catholic boy he was, Dad married her. He said he lost God when he lost Mom. But he never lost the attitude he was raised with.

He raised me on his own, a single parent. I had a child, and wasn’t married. But because he was a widower and I just refused to tell anyone who Luke’s father was, I was a constant source of shame. He wouldn’t admit it, but I certainly felt it. It was in every look, and in his words.

As I continued to toss Luke’s toys into the toy bucket, Dad tickled and played with my son. It should have been wonderful. It should have made my heart happy.

I found a way to live with the rejection from Chandler Owens, Luke’s biological father. I would find a way to survive Dad’s disappointment. In my heart I held hope that Luke would never be aware of the judgement we had to endure.

It would have helped if I had a better job. But that wasn’t my luck. I hadn’t had much luck at all lately.

“Do you think you can keep him occupied while I make dinner?” I asked.

“You don’t have to ask me to spend time with Luke,” Dad told me. “Come on, let’s go find sticks outside.”

“Put a jacket on him please.”

I was so numb to the split personality Dad displayed when it came to Luke. Maybe I was the real problem? Luke was fine, he was a totally innocent little boy while I was the problem

child. I embarrassed my parent. I got knocked up. I couldn't keep a decent job. I drove a crappy car because I couldn't afford anything better. After years of trying to buy everything for me, and not understanding why I wanted to try to stand on my own, when I actually needed the help, Dad decided it would be better my way. I could do it myself.

He bought himself a new car with a high safety rating. The only time he put a car seat in it and took Luke anywhere was right after he was born, and I wasn't supposed to drive for a few days.

After that, Luke never rode in Dad's car.

I watched as he helped Luke on with a jacket. He looked back at me, the smile he had for Luke was gone from his face when our eyes met. I turned away.

It hurt to know that I had broken whatever there had been between us. For a moment in time, I thought he was going to be the most supportive father that ever existed. And while I was pregnant, he did pretty well. I didn't notice the off handed remarks right away. It wasn't until I brought Luke home, and Dad's friends commented that his attitude toward me noticeably changed.

I lugged the bucket of toys up to our room. On the way I picked up anything else that Luke left laying around. Once upstairs, I grabbed any sippy cups and took them down to the kitchen. I tossed them in the sink. I would have to wash them by hand and then tuck them into a cupboard Dad didn't use. I tried really hard to not let Luke's needs and belongings over run the house.

As I entered the kitchen I noticed the garbage needed taking out. I put down the dishes and pulled a new bag out from under the sink. As I changed the bag I saw two sippy cups in the garbage.

Tears stung my eyes. This was a virtual slap across my face, and it hurt as if it had been real. The best I could figure was that Dad found the cups I must have missed the last time I picked up. Instead of putting them in the sink for me to wash,

he threw them away. They were just plastic cups, but the lack of compassion and respect was so blatant.

He may have said he wouldn't kick us out, but this felt like I was being pushed away. Little by little Dad was pressuring me to leave. He would be innocent of kicking me out if I left on my own. But he certainly made it clear we weren't wanted there.

CHANDLER

When I pulled up to Daniel's house, everything was strangely the same as the last time I had been there. And it had been years. Doug still drove a red BMW convertible, and I recognized Doug's vintage Mustang. I assumed the bright yellow Corvette belonged to McLain.

Of everyone in the group, he was the one to most likely suffer the typical mid-life crisis. I found out he was already in the middle of another divorce after not quite two years of marriage. The sports car was to be expected.

I didn't see Mila's old beat up sedan. I don't know why I was bothering to look for it. She was on the cusp of a brilliant career when I left. She must have moved out by now and upgraded her car. Hell, she might not even be in the same city anymore.

It would be good to see her, but I wasn't holding my breath.

I knocked and then let myself in, as I used to.

"Chandler, you came dressed for the occasion," Doug said, commenting on my pristine team jersey. "Good to see you didn't forget how to watch a football game."

"Hey man, how have you been?" I clapped him on the shoulder.

"Not complaining, not complaining."

Daniel came into the den carrying a tray of wings. McLain was hot on his heels with a giant bowl of chips in one hand and salsa in the other.

“Make yourself useful and grab the beers,” Daniel directed. “You remember beer right? They have that in Europe don’t they.”

“The beer in Europe could take itself to the table. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to stomach this thin American stuff.”

“Don’t be a beer snob,” McLain said.

“Is that your new ride?” I asked.

“Yeah, I traded in the last wife for it. I think I’ve finally made the right decision. This beauty doesn’t bitch, and sits around looking pretty.”

“This one spends all your money just like your last two wives,” Doug joked.

“Yeah, well when I’m tired of this one, I can sell her ass for an upgrade and she won’t try to sue me for all I’m worth,” McLain said. “I’m done with women.”

“Don’t believe him,” Daniel said as he walked between us. “He’s never going to give up on women, and he’s never going to learn his lesson.”

Daniel clicked on the TV, and we settled in around on the couch. It was good to be home. The game started and it was like old times, yelling at the coaches on TV, and cheering on when we made an excellent play. It didn’t seem to matter how well our guys played, they could not make that first goal. We kept losing ground. At the end of the first quarter we still hadn’t made a touchdown.

When our guys finally scored I jumped up and pumped my fist into the air. Unfortunately, in the process I knocked over the chips and salsa, spilling some on my clothes.

“Ah, crap.” The salsa was going to stain my jersey. It was new, and I really didn’t want a large red stain front and center

McLain handed me a stack of napkins.

“I need to rinse this.”

“You sound like an old woman,” McLain commented.

“I sound like a man who knows how to do his own laundry,” I snapped back as I made my way into the kitchen. I ignored the guys when they oohed and aahed at my quip.

I pulled my shirt off as I walked into the kitchen. I stopped. Mila was there. She stood at the counter pouring milk into a kid’s sippy cup.

“Mila?”

She jumped as I startled her. The milk spilled. She stared at me before cursing under her breath. I reached out for the paper towels and handed them to her.

“Chandler, what are you doing here?”

“Football,” I indicated the game on in the other room. I held out my shirt as if to show her the stain. “I’ve got to rinse my shirt. I got salsa on it.”

“I meant, you’re back from Europe.” She screwed the lip on the cup and put the milk in the refrigerator.

I stuck my jersey under the faucet and turned the water on.

“Make sure to use cold water on that,” she said as she left.

I managed to turn the faucet to cold. I wanted to say something else, but she was gone. I didn’t even know she was here.

“What took you so long? You’re missing the game,” Doug said.

“I’ll catch up on the replay. Daniel, I just ran into Mila. Is she babysitting or something? She had one of those little kids cups.”

“Mila’s home? I thought she planned on being out most of the day,” Daniel said. He didn’t sound pleased, and he didn’t answer my question.

“Didn’t Daniel tell you? He’s officially old.”

“We’re all old McLain,” Doug said.

“I know. I’m having my first midlife crisis, but Daniel here is a grandfather. Now that’s old.”

It took a minute for the information to filter in. If Daniel was a grandfather, Mila was a mother. No wonder she didn't want to talk to me. I was the old flame, and she clearly had a new family situation going on.

"Congratulations man. When did Mila get married?"

Doug started shaking his head vigorously and dragging his fingers back and forth across his throat. I had stepped into the wrong proverbial shit. Maybe had my friends filled me in, I wouldn't have fucked up.

"Sorry man. I didn't know." I dropped the subject.

"You didn't know. She's doing the single working mother thing right now," Daniel said.

I knew Daniel's history, married young because he knocked up his girlfriend. Clearly there not being a husband around was a sore point.

The game started back up, and I only gave it half of my attention. I kept my ears open for when Mila might show back up in the kitchen. I thought I heard her, and ducked out.

"Mila," I said. "How have you been?"

She had an arm full of dishes she put in the sink. "I've been, just been. Not good, not bad. Go back to your game Chandler."

"I heard you had a kid. So, the father is a deadbeat?"

"Why do you assume that?" she asked.

"Because your dad admitted you're single."

She let out a long sigh. "Not deadbeat. That makes it sound like he knows about his son. He has no idea, and wants nothing to do with me. So that's all there is to it."

She looked good. I forgot how sensuous her curves were.

"You look good. You should go out with me. Let me take you to dinner."

"You come back after how many years, and think I'll just go out to dinner with you? My father is in the other room. If he heard you he'd bust a blood vessel, and then hit you or

something. You're as clueless as McLain. I never realized how dumb grown men can be."

"Oh come on, Mila. We can go somewhere nice, just the two of us. It could be like old times if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, and I'm not going out with you," she practically hissed under her breath.

"Why not? You're single, I'm single. We used to have a lot of fun together," I reminded her.

"That should be reason enough." She clenched her jaw and opened her eyes wide at me. I noticed they were her natural golden brown color today.

I chuckled. I pointed at my eyes and then her eyes. "You still do that colored contact thing? I remembered how you used to coordinate your contacts with your outfits."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I don't have time to coordinate anything these days."

"What are the two of you chatting about in here?" Daniel walked in and gave Mila a very pointed look before he smiled in my direction. What was that about?

He had always been keen on making sure Mila made something of herself. I wasn't below using that to my advantage.

"Mila and I were just catching up. Now that I'm back in town, I'm going to need a qualified admin. I was hoping to lure Mila to come and work for me again. We made a great team before I left."

"Really?" Daniel asked. "She could use a decent job."

"Dad!" Mila complained.

"It's true, and you know it. You're always complaining about your job," he said to her. He turned his attention to me. "What are you thinking? Travel is out, I'm telling you that right now."

I started to chuckle. Daniel played right into my hands. "I think I need to spend an evening discussing the possibilities

with Mila.”

She pursed her lips and her nostrils flared. I grinned. I was going to win this round.

“Why not lunch?” Daniel asked.

“Mila has a job, we can’t expect her to come work for me without knowing what the expectations would be.”

“She can quit, and start working for you next week.”

I patted Daniel on the shoulder. “I appreciate your enthusiasm, but this is an opportunity Mila needs to decide for herself.”

“Fine, when do you want us?”

He wasn’t letting this one go. “Tell you what. Let Mila and I see if we can work something out, and then you and I can have a lunch meeting.”

“I appreciate the offer, Chandler. I really do. But I can’t meet you. I don’t have a babysitter I can call, so as you can see dinner wouldn’t work.”

“Babysitter?” I shook my head and hooked my thumb to point at Daniel. “What’s he for? Daniel, you watch your grandson, don’t you?”

“Uh,” Daniel stammered.

“You’ve raised one kid, you know how to watch another. Why don’t you babysit so I can take Mila out and try to convince her she needs to work for me again.”

Daniel shrugged. “Yeah, I can do that.”

“I’m not—” Mila started before she stopped herself and just shook her head. “This is entrapment. Fine, dinner. When?”

MILA

“I was beginning to think you were going to leave me sitting out here,” Chandler said out of his window as I approached the car. “Thought you might have changed your mind.” He smiled his dazzling smile at me and my insides melted.

I had changed my mind several times. I was going to have dinner with him and tell him off. I would cancel. I would show up and throw myself into his arms. I would pretend to be sick and send Dad in my place.

My insides had been a twisted mess from the very second I first saw him. When he spoke to me about going out to dinner and hooking up I thought I would throw up from the nervous anxiety. But at some point in the middle of the night while I wasn't sleeping because my mind would not settle down because Chandler was back, it clicked that he still wanted me. I went giddy with joy. Which sent a surge of adrenaline through my system. Forget sleeping.

After too little sleep, when I woke up in the morning I thought about not telling Dad, but cancelling on Chandler and just finding a nice quiet parking lot, and sleeping for a few hours in my car. While a tempting thought, I knew I couldn't get away with doing that. They were friends they would talk.

In the end, I didn't have much of a choice. He showed up at the house to pick me up. By then I realized I should go, maybe I could get some closure, maybe I would tell him about Luke. I was still all mixed up inside.

I opened the passenger door to his SUV and climbed in.

“Dad took his time this evening. He had to print out a list of questions that I needed to be sure to ask.” I pulled the folded up sheet of paper from my purse and handed it across to Chandler.

He scanned over it and started laughing. “Wow, Daniel is really eager to get you a new job.”

“It’s been a rough couple of years on the job front. He’s taking it personally, even though they’re my jobs.”

Chandler handed the paper back. “tell him this isn’t an application, and this was simply a conversation.”

He started the car and pulled it out of the drive.

“Where are we going?” I asked. I sat back and enjoyed riding in a luxury car for a moment.

“I thought I’d see what you were in the mood for.”

“Ni chicken nuggets, no applesauce, no meals that come with toys. And can I have an adult beverage, in a glass, not a plastic cup?”

As he drove, the silence between us felt weighted. There was something to be said. The nerves in my stomach did their thing again and I started to tap my fingers against the arm rest. Would this be the time to tell him about Luke?

“So, you have a kid now?”

I thought I was going to jump out of my skin. “Yeah, I do.”

“How did that happen?”

I started laughing. “Chandler, you’re an adult man, if you don’t know about the birds and the bees by now, I don’t know what to say.”

Should I tell him now?

“You’re funny. That’s not what I meant. I gather your dad doesn’t talk about it much. I kind of stepped in it yesterday when I found out,” he said.

I turned to watch him as he focused on the traffic. “Dad is trying to be supportive, but the circumstances aren’t ideal. Me blatantly having a kid out of wedlock flies in the face of his personal beliefs. He adores my son, but I don’t think he likes me very much.”

We stopped at a red light. Chandler reached out and stroked his knuckle down the side of my face. It was the first act of compassion from anyone I had since Like was born. I leaned against his touch.

“I still like you. I missed you.”

He leaned in, catching the back of my neck and pulling me to him. His lips slid over mine. I was lost. I leaned against him, urging him to kiss me deeper and harder. A blast of honking from behind had Chandler jumping back and driving again.

This time the silence between us was super charged. He rested his hand on my thigh, stroking up and down my leg with his thumb. Each sweep sent a building surge of electricity through my body. I wasn’t able to focus on where he was taking us. All I was aware of was caress after caress and how my body responded. Stroke, and my nipples peaked, wanting attention. Stroke, and I felt a tightening in my core. Stroke.

I picked up his hand and started kissing his fingers. Sucking them into my mouth, exploring them with my tongue. There was only so much of him I could touch while buckled in. The center console on his stupid car was too big and in the way for me to be able to reach for his cock.

We were in a dark secluded area. Lots of trees and little light when he pulled the car over and put it into park.

He was out of the car and yanking my door open in seconds. I unbuckled and he was over me. He lowered my seat back until we were practically horizontal. It took some shifting, but I was able to hook my leg over his hip as he pressed against my core.

His lips were demanding and taking my breath. His tongue ravished mine. His hands touched and groped and claimed my body as he pressed his hip to mine. The hard ridge of his

erection behind his zipper spoke volumes to how much he wanted me.

Could he feel how hot I was for him? His hands squeezed my breasts, and I rocked my hips against him. He lowered his hand down my body. Moving handfuls of fabric out of the way, he lifted the hem of the dress I wore until he found the waistband of the leggings I had underneath.

I helped as he pulled both my leggings and panties down my hips, exposing my pussy to his touch.

He cupped my heat. I cried into his mouth and bucked against his hand.

He shifted and began biting my breasts through the fabric of my dress. I wanted him to touch me, to take me. His fingers slid between my folds. I was slick with want and need. When he dragged his fingers over my clit I saw stars.

I hadn't had a man's touch since he left me. I craved more. I rocked my hips, demanding more. Pulling on the neckline of my dress, I managed to unfasten the top few buttons, exposing my breast.

He pulled the bra down exposing me further. We were cramped, my clothes pulled on me in awkward uncomfortable ways. I didn't care.

Heat infused me as he sucked my nipple into his mouth. He stroked and sucked. It was almost a relief to feel this way again. His fingers slid deeper and dipped into me. I moaned. He felt so good. As he thrust his fingers into me I felt everything tighten, everything tensed up, ready to crash.

And then something changed. Not in how he touched me, but in how I felt about all of this. My body no longer tensed for an orgasm. I felt twinges as if I were experiencing aftershocks, but the big explosion never happened.

What were we doing humping like teenagers in a car in a dark park? This wasn't supposed to be happening. We were adults but barely acting like it. Chandler was back, and we were back together. It was as if nothing had changed. We made each other crazy with lust. But that's all it really was, lust.

This wasn't love. This wasn't going to get me anywhere. Chandler left and I had barely managed to keep that job for another six weeks before I was let go, my position unnecessary and redundant. I had a child but not a family.

Chandler's lust felt like it would solve all of my problems, but it didn't. It caused them. I wasn't anything more than someone he could have a fun time with. I only mattered because of the sex.

I shoved against his shoulders. "No, I can't. We need to stop."

Chandler's fingers stopped moving but he left them where they were against my skin. He stopped sucking on my nipple and looked up at me. I pushed again. When his fingers slid away I questioned my sanity and reasons for not doing this.

In the small space of the car he sat back. I scrambled away from him, ending up sitting in the back seat. I panted, unsure of what he would do. We both panted and stared hard at each other.

"Why? What's wrong?"

I tucked my boob away and pulled my clothes back into place. Everything was wrong. We were wrong.

"We can't do this. It's not a good idea," I said.

"It seems like a very good idea. Is it the car? We can go back to my place. I still have that nice king size bed."

I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see him. It was too hard. I wanted his touch, but I wanted so much more. He wasn't ever going to give me what I needed. I needed a man who would put his family before his own wants. And Chandler was a man who put his own wants and needs before anything else.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I started repeating. "I can't do this. We can't go back to our previous arrangement. I've got a kid, I can't be your personal assistant available to have sex with whenever you want."

"Do you really think that a job offer is still on the table after this?" He started arranging his clothes and then opened the car door.

Of course I didn't. I wasn't as stupid as I had been only a few minutes ago. I climbed across the seat and pushed the auto adjustment to an upright position before closing the door and putting my seatbelt on.

This time the silence as he drove me home was empty. There was no tension, no longing, no animosity. It was a void growing between us.

CHANDLER

The weather wasn't the best for a day on the lake, but as Daniel would say, the fish don't care if it's raining or not. He had a point. We were headed out for a serious fishing trip. Which meant sitting in the cold rain and trying to catch a bigger fish than the other guy.

It was all about bragging rights, and at the end of the day, heading back to Daniel's place, grilling some fresh caught fish, and drinking beers with the guys. It also meant I would be able to spend some time with Mila. Daniel had mentioned that she and her kid might be there. If nothing else she'd be around at dinner time.

I still wasn't exactly certain what had happened between us. One minute we combusted like a wildfire, and the next, Mila was putting the breaks on everything hard and fast. For some reason, my reaction to her kept replaying in my head. I shouldn't have been bothered, but I was. Not by her actions, but my own.

I wanted an opportunity to smooth things over with her. I parked and pulled my gear out of the back and headed toward the doc. I didn't see Daniel or Mila, but the boat was already tied up and waiting for us. I had to wait about fifteen minutes before the rest of the guys arrived.

"You remember how to do this?" McLain, always the jester, asked.

"They have lakes in Switzerland," I responded.

“European lakes are for lounging on and looking rich,” Greg said as he walked past me, his arms full of fishing rods.

Daniel followed up behind the guys carrying a large cooler. I was disappointed that I didn’t see Mila behind him.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said, distracted. I had really been looking forward to seeing her again. “I never went out on the water while I was there.”

“What? No yachts with nubile young models serving you drinks?”

“You’re confusing a mountain lake with the Mediterranean. No.” I pointed out.

“How about sky bunnies and hot toddies by the sky lodge fire?” McLain kept pushing.

“Now you’re talking.” I pointed at him as if he had finally figured out what I had been spending the last three years of my life doing.

“I knew it, you old dog.” He smacked me on the back. “I should have followed your lead, and never gotten married.”

The cooler lid opened with a creak as McLain got out a beer. The can made a pop-hiss as he opened it and started drinking.

“Ah,” he said, clearly refreshed by the drink. “You can’t get divorced if you don’t get married.”

Greg clapped him on the back before jumping off the boat. He untied the rope from the dock anchors and jumped back on board. “And you don’t start day drinking if you don’t get divorced.”

McLain held up the can. “I earned this. Her lawyers have been all over the prenup like ants at a picnic. They aren’t finding anything. I sealed up that deal tight before we tied the knot.”

I went to the helm where Daniel was captaining the boat while McLain bitched about his most recent ex.

“Need me to take over?” I asked.

“I’m good. How was dinner the other night?” Daniel asked. “Mila didn’t say much when she got home. I thought you’d be

out hashing out the details of her new job.”

So she hadn't told him anything.

“I don't think it's going to work out. We started a good conversation, but there were some considerations that were not to her liking.”

“She turned you down?” Daniel cut straight to the point.

Of course he didn't realize she shut me down physically and that we never made it to any kind of job negotiation. There was no job to offer, I was going to have to make that up once she agreed. But, no agreement, no job, and no Mila.

“You wouldn't be willing to talk to her again? As a favor?”

“I did that once before,” I reminded him.

“And that worked out well. She excelled.”

“She did. Why didn't she stay on? I would have thought she would have been a manager by now,” I said.

“Yeah, well, unfortunately the new guy decided her job wasn't necessary. She got laid off about two months after you left.”

“No, I told them to keep her on even if they decided to eliminate the job. That's a shame. She had potential, I mean she still does, right?”

Daniel was quiet for a while. I watched the trees around the edge of the lake. A light drizzle started. It wasn't exactly raining. It wasn't enough precipitation to keep us off the lake and drive us away from our mission.

He throttled the engine down, and the boat slowed as we entered the cove where we would sit, and wonder why we sucked so much at fishing.

“Are you two going to sit up here all day and gossip like some old ladies?” McLain joined us at the helm.

“We're talking business, like grown ups do,” I said.

McLain smacked my arm. “I missed you, man. It's good to have you back. But seriously, stop talking shop. We are out

here to relax, catch some fish. Be true to our inner masculine need to hunt. Be one with nature.”

I wasn't so sure that McLain hadn't already drunk his limit for the day. I didn't have an inner need to hunt, it was something to do. A way to burn off steam and have fun. Sex served the same purpose, and I'd much rather spend the day in bed with a beautiful woman.

But I understood what he was saying. Today was a day to spend with friends and let go of the stress of the world.

“What are you talking about anyway?” he asked.

“Mila turned down a job offer,” I answered.

“She's not in a position to be picky about work. She's had a hard time keeping a decent job the past few years. Look, when we're back at the house, give her another chance.”

“Of course. But I don't think she'll talk to me. She seems very determined to do this on her own.”

“Yeah, I know how you feel. She won't even talk to me any more,” McLain complained.

I looked at him. “Do you still make all those sexist jokes at her expense?”

“I do not.”

“When was the last time you didn't ask her to be your next ex? You can't talk to women like that McLain. Someone like Mila deserves to be treated better than that.”

McLain tipped his head and raised his brows. He heard me. He was a total sexist, and until that moment I had let him get away with that shit. I thought it was funny. But it hurt Mila, and that was not cool. If I couldn't call a friend on his bullshit, was he really a friend?

The rest of the morning passed in relative calm and fishing success. By the time Daniel guided his boat alongside the dock, I was more than ready to get out of the constant drizzle. A chill set in. I wanted warm clothes, a warming drink, and maybe a good hot meal.

“I’ll see you back at my place.” Daniel took the cooler, now empty of drinks but full of fresh fish hanging out in some lake water. “Last one there cleans the fish.”

McLain was the first one there, his bright yellow Corvette waited in the driveway when I pulled in.

He stood at the front door speaking with Mila. He looked calm and concerned.

My hackles went up, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on edge. If he was insulting her again, then next time I wouldn’t have words for him. I felt an urge to hurt him in her defense. I left my engine running. I felt as if I spied on them. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. McLain rubbed her upper arm. She smiled and nodded before stepping back and letting him inside.

Had he just apologized? That would show real growth. Something I was sure McLain hadn’t experienced since he was in middle school.

Greg pulled in next, followed by Daniel.

“Looks like you’re stuck gutting the fish,” I said as Daniel opened the tailgate on his SUV.

Daniel reached in and pulled out the cooler. He turned and shoved it into my arms.

“Not me. I have to fire up the grill. Looks like you got lucky today Chandler.”

I hardly called gutting fish lucky. I knew the drill. I carried the cooler through to the back deck, and continued down onto the lawn. By the time I made it back into the house, A stack of newspapers, some plastic bags, and a knife were waiting for me. Gutting fish was a thankless job, but the end results would be worth it.

After I delivered the fish cleaned and ready for the grill, I headed back outside and grabbed a duffel bag from my car. I was ready for a hot shower and a change of clothes. Fortunately, Daniel was the kind of host who understood this.

Everyone else had already cycled through. They were gathered in the den. I was the last one in. Greg handed me a drink. The scotch burned going down. Exactly what I needed, warmth from the inside out.

I grabbed my things and headed upstairs to the shower.

Mila stood in the hallway, a small child in her arms.

We stared at each other for a long moment. I hefted my bag. "My turn in the shower." I said.

She nodded, still not talking. She stepped to the side and I walked past.

"Chandler, did you say something to McLain?" she asked after I was well past her.

I turned and looked back at her. "Why?"

"He apologized to me earlier, about being a jerk. I thought maybe you said something. I know my dad certainly didn't. If it was you. Thank you."

MILA

My insides melted and twisted when I saw Chandler. It felt like a betrayal. I didn't want to like him any more.

And I definitely did not want to be helplessly attracted to him the way I was. It was somehow easier when he was away. I hurt, it sucked. I missed him so badly even while I convinced myself that he meant nothing to me. But I'd rather never see him again than to have to endure this torture.

Now that he was back, seeing him made the pain of being left feel fresh. Seeing him and knowing that I had been nothing more than a sexual distraction when I thought there had been so much more between us twisted like a burning knife in my gut. I had been nothing but a distraction for him while he had been the first love of my life.

Seeing him act like nothing had changed reminded me of my foolishness, and I hated being reminded of that. Hated knowing that I had been so gullible, such an idiot.

It felt like Dad suddenly seemed to have his friends over here all the time. Why couldn't they go to someone else's home to hang out and grill their catch, and to watch football. Was it because everyone else was married and their wives didn't want to deal with them? McLain was single again, why didn't they go over to his place?

They came here and I had to go into hiding in case my presence and Luke's existence reminded everyone that I had embarrassed my Dad. I know he would rather I take Luke out for the day. In warmer weather that was an option. But until the weather changed, where was I supposed to go?

I couldn't get away. I couldn't take Luke out in the rainy weather, and I couldn't hang out at the mall. I wasn't a teenager anymore when I could spend hours at the mall. I had thought shopping was fun. I didn't find shopping fun when it was my own money, and I was keenly aware that I didn't have a discretionary income. Every penny I made was spoken for. Most of it went toward Luke's daycare, the rest went toward diapers and clothes.

It was a good thing McLain bought his new sports car. The roar of the engine let me know when everyone had returned from their fishing trip. As soon as Dad's friends started showing up, I bundled Luke up and we went to hangout in our room. I was being a dutiful daughter and whisking away the evidence of my shame.

I certainly never intended Chandler to meet Luke. It was remarkably easy to not say anything as we stood there in the hall face to face. If Chandler hadn't figured out the little boy I held was my son, well that was his problem not mine.

My problem was that no matter how much I did not want to talk to Chandler, I couldn't stop myself. Especially after McLain admitted he had been an asshole to me. That was a shocker. But it was nice to have that recognition, that he understood I didn't find his sense of humor funny. Knowing my Dad's friend to the extent that I did, I could only assume someone called him on his bullshit. Dad always stood by and lightly chuckled every time McLain made a joke at my expense, so I seriously doubted he had said anything. It had to have been Chandler.

I shouldn't have spoken. I should have let Chandler walk past me without saying anything.

I carried Luke into our room and pulled out the basket of plastic animals. We sorted and arranged them for what felt like hours. Luke was delighted to have my undivided attention. Even while I resented being sent to my room, part of me this time with Luke was precious. I told myself to shut up and enjoy the time with my son.

Eventually Luke fell asleep. My stomach rumbled as the smell of grilled fish and vegetables reached my room. Making sure Luke was safely tucked into his crib, I ventured out. I was hungry, and Luke would be when he woke up.

Dad and the guys were all out on the back deck. That meant the fish would be done soon, but not yet. I took advantage of having access to the kitchen. I found the chips and salsa. I ate as I pulled out a box of noodles and cheese. I had a limited amount of time before the guys headed back inside and Dad would expect me to pretend I didn't exist.

With a big bowl of macaroni and cheese to share for dinner, I returned to my room and watched Luke sleep. He was my heart outside my body. Watching him sleep, and seeing Chandler again squeezed deep inside my chest. Luke looked so much like his father.

It was probably a good thing we were exiled. My dad's friends were smart men, one of them would eventually make the connection. I was amazed no one had figured it out before now. Dad accepted my story, I was ditched by some waiter from a sports bar. Why not? He certainly wouldn't believe that I had an affair with one of his friends. Or maybe it was the other way around, his friend had an affair with me. After all he certainly was capable of ending it without a thought.

Luke woke up. His dark hair was a mess, and his head was a little sweaty.

"Waked up," he said in his little voice.

"You did."

"Animals," he said. We started playing with the plastic figures as if he hadn't fallen asleep in the middle of whatever this game was.

"Are you ready for dinner?" I sat with the bowl in my lap and Luke waddled around in circles between bites. I ate most of it.

There were times I worried if he ate enough, but he was growing like a weed. Every day he felt heavier to pick up, and his little legs seemed longer. My little boy was amazing, and I was going to do what I needed to protect him. I needed to be

strong for him. The best way I could do that was to avoid Chandler as much as possible.

I let Luke distract me until he fell asleep for the night. I waited until I heard the roar of McLain's Corvette pull out of the drive before I headed back downstairs with our dirty dishes.

Dad carried in a tray full of dishes and things.

I didn't say anything to him, and he didn't say anything to me. I put my dishes away and put together a fresh cup of water for Luke.

"Mila." Dad stopped me as I was headed back to my room.

I looked at him expectantly.

"Come on, help me out here." He pointed at the dishes he dropped off.

I blinked back tears. I wasn't welcome in my own home, and yet I was expected to cook and clean and do all the chores as long as no one knew that neither Luke nor I existed.

"You turned down Chandler's offer. Mila, you need a decent job, and the last time you worked for him you were making good money. You had a career path."

The last time I worked for Chandler I was his personal travel fuck buddy, and I got pregnant. I didn't have a career trajectory. If there had been any validity to my job at that point I wouldn't have been fired after a few weeks.

I had been stupid. But I felt like I finally understood all the mistakes I had made. I wasn't going to put myself into a position to be taken advantage of like that again.

"It wasn't going to work, Dad. I don't want to do that kind of work."

"And you want to be doing what you're doing now?"

I was doing my best to survive. I no longer knew why I had bothered to go to college. I should have been working for a museum, or a library. But I had somehow gotten derailed into real estate development because my dad knew a guy.

“I don’t know what I want to do anymore, Dad. It’s not this.” I gestured around at the kitchen and his dishes

“Mila.”

I knew that tone, I was in trouble. I talked back. When I was younger that tone was reserved for blasphemy and cursing. Now it was any and every time I disagreed with him. I stopped. I didn’t huff or roll my eyes. And I came up with the fastest lie I could think of.

“I didn’t take the job offer because it was going to involve travel, when I had been very clear that wasn’t anything I was going to be able to manage at this point in time,” I spoke slowly and clearly. “It was a good offer. But I couldn’t accept it. Can you understand that?”

“If this is about Luke,” he started.

It was always about Luke. I couldn’t leave my baby. I didn’t have anyone I could rely on to be my backup.

“No, Dad, whatever you’re about to say, no.”

“Mila, it’s a good offer.”

“You assume it’s a good offer because you trust your friend. But look, it is a good offer but not for me, and not right now. I’ll stick it out with my crappy job and I’ll keep looking for something that fits better with my current situation. Okay? Can that be okay?”

He let out a long breath and dropped his head. “Yes, that’s okay. I just want to see you...”

He shook his head, he didn’t finish his thought. He didn’t need to. I think I knew what he wanted. He wanted me settled, married, cared for. Not living as a burden under his roof.

“I’ll take care of the dishes. That wasn’t fair of me,” he said.

I gave him a nod. I wouldn’t have called this conversation a breakthrough, but at least Dad no longer expected me to clean up after his stinky grilled fish.

CHANDLER

“Are you seriously babysitting again?” I joked as Daniel opened his door to let me in.

“That’s what I said when I told you I wasn’t coming to the game.”

I followed him into the den where Mila’s kid sat on the floor surrounded by plastic toys.

“You picked this over hanging out with us at the stadium?”

“I noticed you’re here and not at the stadium,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, well.” I shrugged. “I thought I’d come hang with you, we can catch another game on TV.”

“I’ve got Luke here to keep me company.”

Luke had one of the plastic toys in his mouth. “I’m sure he’s a riveting conversationalist.”

“He’s learning, but glad to have the company. You want a drink?”

“Sure.” I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

I was clicking through the channels looking for the game when Daniel returned from the kitchen. He handed me a beer, but I noticed he had a sports drink.

“Not drinking?”

He tipped his drink toward the kid on the floor.

I got up and crossed into the kitchen. I put the beer back and grabbed myself a sports drink from the pantry. “If you aren’t

drinking because of the kid, then I shouldn't drink either. Babysitting?" I shook my head, when had we become reduced to this.

"I blame you," Daniel said.

"What do I have to do with any of this?" I sat back and twisted the top off my drink.

"You took Mila out to dinner, and convinced me to watch Luke."

The kid on the floor looked up when he heard his name. "Pawpaw?" He spoke clearly, even if the words he used were more gibberish than words. His meaning was clear enough. Daniel was his grandfather.

"You're okay there buddy," Daniel said, reassuring the kid. "So now Mila thinks she can ask me to watch Luke so she can go out."

"She's out?" What was Mila doing going out and leaving her kid at home?

Daniel lifted a brow and made a noncommittal half shrug motion. "She says one thing, but honestly I don't exactly know if I believe her."

I knew Mila kept secrets from Daniel. Hell, we had kept a pretty big secret from him. So it didn't surprise me she might be hiding something from him. But I knew her. She had been unfailingly honest with me. My curiosity was piqued. What was she up to that had her father convinced she was up to something sneaky?

"She finally got a new job, or at least that's what she claims. She goes to work at odd hours, like today. I know plenty of office jobs require over time, but something about this seems off. Usually she's open about the company she works for. It seems shady."

"Maybe she's not working in an office. You know retail work, they have unpredictable schedules."

"Yeah, but I don't think it's retail. Honestly I'm not even certain if it's a job. She seems to already work a regular week,

and then she'll have these extra hours. I almost suspect her of seeing someone."

"Almost suspect? Way to commit about your doubts," I laughed. My gut clenched at the thought of Mila seeing someone. "Why would she have to sneak around if she was seeing someone?"

"She knows I would be upset. I didn't know she was seeing anyone until I found out she was pregnant. She didn't want to tell the father, and when I forced the matter, she learned the hard way that not all men are honorable."

Anger stirred and rose in my throat. How dare some man reject her when she told him she was pregnant with his child. "Bastard." I spit out.

"Don't call my grandchild that."

"I was referring to his father," I said. "Did she at least sue the guy for child support?"

Daniel shook his head. "As far as I know, she never got a chance to tell him, he broke up with her. And she refuses to speak about it. I refuse to speak about it. It's been a point of contention between us for years. I love my daughter, Chandler. If I ever find out who this guy is, I'll be hard pressed not to give him a pounding."

"Well, if you need backup, I'm your man."

"I may take you up on that if I find out who she's seeing now. And if I find out this current guy isn't treating her with respect."

"You really think she's seeing someone and it's not a job?"

He shrugged.

The game was on, but my attention was elsewhere. What was going on with Mila? If she was seeing someone that might explain why she shut me down. She could have told me she wasn't interested because she was involved with someone. But why keep a new guy a secret? Unless he wasn't new. Maybe she had gotten back together with the boy's father?

He seemed like an easy kid. He let Daniel and I watch the game, and occasionally toddled over to hand me a plastic animal. He'd tell me the name in his baby babble, I'd correct him and then he'd take the animal back.

"I'm home. Thanks Dad," Mila said as she walked into the den. She looked at me, and then went straight to where Luke was entertaining himself and picked him up.

She made cooing baby sounds, asking him if he had a good day with his Pawpaw, and if he was playing with his toys. Luke held up the plastic tiger he held and made babbling conversation with her.

She kissed his head.

"Sorry I was late. The project went over. Did he have a nap?" she asked.

"No, he didn't want to when I asked him."

"You can't ask him if he wants a nap, Dad. His favorite word is no. You have to put him in his crib and get him to settle down in a dark room."

"I thought he might just, you know, fall asleep on the floor or something."

She let out a sigh and shook her head. "You raised me, I thought you'd know this stuff."

"Your mother was still around when you were taking naps."

"I should go put him down or he'll get cranky. I'm surprised he hasn't had a melt down yet."

"He was fine," Daniel said. His phone rang, and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Luke is fine, If he doesn't want to nap I don't see why I should make him. I have to get this, excuse me." He began talking into his phone as he stepped out of the room.

"Hello, Mila," I said.

She looked at me. I expected her to say something but she didn't. And then it was as if she didn't see me. She turned and walked away.

I watched her leave before getting up and following after her.

“Where have you been?” I asked in a hushed voice.

“That’s none of your business,” she said.

Her kid snuggled in against her shoulder and looked up at me with the same big brown eyes as his mother had. He curled his fist against his chin and began sucking on his thumb. He suddenly looked tired.

“You left your son with your father all day and you can’t be bothered to tell him where you’ve been?”

“What are you talking about? I told him I was at work.” she chuckled “If Dad is so bothered that I was gone and he doesn’t believe I was at my job, then he needs to say something. Also, to be clear, when I mentioned that I needed to be out for the day and the daycare charges extra for Saturdays, Dad volunteered.”

I narrowed my gaze at her. Her outfit looked too, I don’t know how to describe it, she looked dressed for a date not for work at some retail place or even a restaurant. Now all of Daniel’s words were getting mixed up in my head. What kind of job would she have on a Saturday? Had she been out with her boyfriend? Had she and the kid’s father really broken up?

“How did you meet him?” I asked. I wanted to see what she would say. Would she slip up and tell me who the kid’s father really was if I caught her off guard with my question?

“Meet who?” she asked.

“The kid’s father. When did you have time for a boyfriend I didn’t know about?”

She tilted her head to the side and looked at me like she didn’t understand.

“You didn’t think I’d figure it out? I know how calendars work, Mila. I figured out that you had to be seeing this other guy when you were with me. When did you have time?”

She blinked at me and her jaw dropped open. I caught her. Now to get her to give up the information.

“When I worked for you, you’ll remember that we only saw each other while out of town. There was a lot of time in between those trips. I had plenty of time to do other things, Chandler. You didn’t seem terribly bothered about it back then, so why worry about it now?”

“Why aren’t you answering my questions?”

“Why are you interrogating me? My life is none of your concern. You’ve made that clear. I’m tired, my son is tired. And I don’t exactly understand the point of your questions, or how any of it is your business. Excuse me.”

She turned and walked away from me.

I headed back to the den to finish watching the game and stew in my own suspicions.

“How’s the game going? Nothing happened, did it?” Daniel asked as he came back into the room.

He hadn’t noticed I had followed after Mila. “No changes. Are you hungry? I feel like ordering a pizza.”

I needed to figure out what to do about Mila. I agreed with Daniel, she was hiding something. I just couldn’t put my finger on it.

MILA

“Dad, will you be able to watch Luke tonight?” I asked as I set his morning coffee on the table. “I’ll pick him up from day care but I need to go back to work tonight for a few hours.”

“They are working you strange hours,” he commented.

“No stranger than any place else with mandatory overtime.” I didn’t want to ask him, but I hadn’t had time yet to find a daycare with more hours and flexibility. I couldn’t be the only parent who didn’t only work standard business hours during a standard working week.

I sat down and started feeding Luke. I spooned oatmeal into his mouth. I didn’t have time for him to struggle and feed himself, or for the clean up in the aftermath of letting him do so. I barely had time for breakfast.

“Mandatory over time? Is that what’s been going on?” He didn’t trust me.

I didn’t blame him. But it was exhausting. I couldn’t tell him what was really going on. If I did he would be on my case and force me to work for Chandler again. I wasn’t going to do that, wasn’t going to put myself in a compromising position that way ever again.

“Yes, that’s what’s been going on. Can you watch him, or do I miss out on the work?” I needed the hours. I needed the job.

“Sure, I’ll watch him. But you have to get him from the daycare. If you have to put in extra hours, why are they letting you pick up Luke and bring him home?”

“They are letting me because I need to. I get a break you know. I’ll just be spending mine in traffic and picking Luke up.”

“How much longer is this going to be going on? When are you planning on filling me in with what’s really going on in your life?”

I put the spoon down and stared at him. What did he really want to know? He knew enough.

“I have a crappy job, Dad, that’s all that’s going on. I haven’t had time to find a new day care that suits my weird hours, and frankly I don’t know if I’ll be at this place long enough for that to make a difference.”

“Why don’t you think you’ll be there very long? You need to start committing, Mila. Employers want employees they can count on. You keep changing jobs the way you have and no one is going to want to hire you.”

“No one wants to hire me now. I’m a single mother. The system is stacked against me.”

Dad shook his head. I resumed feeding Luke. He said he would watch Luke, and that was all that mattered. It would have been helpful if he would pick Luke up, but I wasn’t going to push my good luck. The fact that he was willing to babysit was a miracle as far as I was concerned.

I finished feeding Luke, cleaned off his messy face, and changed him before I bundled him and his things off for the day.

“I’ll see you later,” I said as we left.

I would have loved a job like Dad had. He got to work from home whenever he wanted, and his hours were his to determine. I had to be in place by eight thirty or I’d have a point on my record. The micromanagement of my job at the call center was the worst. No, the worst was when they cut my hours back to four days a week.

The drive to the daycare didn’t take very long. It was the primary reason I had picked that place. It was close to home.

But I really needed to find another place. I liked the teachers, and Luke seemed to enjoy his days.

“Bye my sweet boy,” I said as I kissed Luke on the head.

“Mila, can I see you before you go?” Emma, the site manager asked as I was about to leave. She had to have been waiting for me. My gut clenched as I followed her back to the office.

“As you know, we close at six. The children have to be picked up so our teachers can finish cleaning up and go home.”

“I know. I’m sorry, the call center won’t let me leave my desk until five thirty exactly,” I said. I wasn’t even allowed to start packing up so that as soon as five thirty came around I could be on my feet and headed out the door. “They’ve gotten a lot stricter with clocking out on time.”

“You know we have to charge you for any time we stay past six.” She handed a printout to me.

“Yeah.” I knew what that paper was. I didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to deal with it, and certainly didn’t know where I’d get the money to cover the additional fees.

“Your most recent auto-payment didn’t cover your overages. I’m going to need a check or credit card payment before you leave,” she said.

“I don’t actually have checks, my bank does that.” I started to fish my phone out of my bag. “I can set up a payment, but it takes a couple of days before they send out the check. Would that work?”

“I’m afraid not. I need the payment today or you’ll have to take Luke home. I’m sorry, but I do have to enforce the policy.”

I stared at her. I didn’t have the money in my account until I got paid in a few days. I was really hoping I could have the check scheduled to go out at that point. I looked over my shoulder as if I could see Luke playing happily with his other little friends. I couldn’t go in there and pick him up. I couldn’t take him home, Dad had to work. And if I called in sick, I would lose the day’s pay at best, I’d most likely get another

warning, and I might lose my job. I couldn't remember how many warnings I had hanging over my head.

"You said you could take a credit card? Can it be called in, or do you need the actual card?"

"We can take payments over the phone. But I need the payment right now."

I nodded. "I understand. I need to call my Dad, give me a second."

I hit the speed dial for Dad. He answered on the first ring. "Daniel Jones," he said. He was already in work mode.

"Hey, it's me. I've run into a little situation with the daycare. I can pay you back. I get paid on Friday. If I don't make this payment right now, they'll make me bring Luke home."

I turned my back on Emma, as if my back provided a barrier against her listening in on my conversation.

I heard Dad grumble. I started talking fast.

"I'm out of PT. I don't know if they'll let me take the day off without pay. Can you please give her your credit card information."

"Don't you have a credit card for this type of thing?" Disappointment laced through his words.

"I do, and it's maxed because of this type of thing. Please, Dad. I can pay you back on Friday."

"Hand her the phone," he said with a heavy sigh.

I handed Emma the phone, and she took down Dad's information. She thanked him and then handed my phone back.

"I'm sorry. It's policy, Mila."

I nodded. She was just doing her job. I couldn't fault her for it. But it didn't make me happy. It made me quite the opposite of happy, and I had no control as I started crying as I left her office.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I worked two jobs, I should have had more than enough to cover the cost of Luke's daycare.

I definitely did not have enough to pay rent, fortunately Dad saved me that expense. Even so, I wasn't going to have anything left after this paycheck to cover anything more than the few bills I did have to pay. I was responsible for my car insurance, and my phone bill. Plus any food that was specifically for Luke, meaning anything I fed him. The next few weeks we would be eating a lot of macaroni and cheese, and oatmeal.

I sniffled and cried the entire commute to work. I hated my job and dreaded the reprimand. I knew my manager would bark at me as soon as I got to my station late.

I needed a new job but I wasn't able to find anything to replace the full time hours. No one was hiring, or they were hiring for inconsistent hours and random schedules. Instead of replacing my call center position with something more lucrative I had to get a second job.

I worked in the office of a small imports company. The owner was happy enough to have me come in on flexible hours, and the occasional Saturday. He only needed me about fifteen hours a week. If I could get Luke into a different daycare, I could work a more consistent schedule. It was bad enough that I had to work a second job. I couldn't tell Dad about it because I was fairly certain the whole operation was illegal, or borderline illegal. And Dad would force me to quit. I could barely afford to pay for daycare with the two jobs I had. I wouldn't make it without the second job.

I never knew exactly what the company imported. I made arrangements for deliveries and shipments coming in on container ships. And then sent the boxes to wherever they needed to be. Fortunately a lot of that communication could be done by email. It would have been great if I could have done that part of the job from home, but the new boss insisted that everything happen on site, no remote work. He paid in cash, so I hid the job from Dad, and spent any free time left continuing the search for something better.

CHANDLER

Mila's car wasn't in the driveway when I arrived. Hopefully I arrived before she did. That was the plan.

If I missed her, then I'd have to wait a few more days before trying again, or it would seem odd that I was at their house so much.

Daniel opened the door shortly after I rang the bell. "Chandler, what brings you here?"

I followed him inside.

"My house is too big and the neighborhood too quiet. I'm having to adjust to living back in the States. I knew you'd be home. Hope you don't mind that I stopped by?"

"Not at all, can I get you a drink?"

"Yeah, that would be great."

He handed me a sports drink. I looked down at the bottle and up at him. "Luke?" I asked.

The last time Daniel handed me something other than a beer it was because of his grandson.

"I'm watching him later. Mila is bringing him home before going back to work for some mandatory overtime."

"Is that what she's calling it now?" I joked.

Daniel scoffed and shook his head. "I hear you. I'm not sure what that girl is up to these days. She's working all the time but never seems to have any money. I can't help but be suspicious. She's so secretive."

I shrugged. "I'm willing to offer her another chance."

"Dad, I'm home. Whose car is out front?" Mila called from the front. A moment later she walked into the kitchen with Luke on her hip.

She set him down and he ran and hugged Daniel's legs babbling his little kid's words. The only word I recognized was Pawpaw.

"Oh, you." She glared in my direction, but didn't really look at me.

"Good evening, Mila. How was work today?" I asked.

Her eyes narrowed and she glared even harder. "Work was work. And I'm not done yet."

She turned her attention to her father.

"Luke had a long nap apparently, so if he doesn't want to go to bed before I get home, that's fine. He'll probably eat a lot at dinner."

"Aren't you feeding him?" Daniel asked.

Mila rolled her eyes and dropped her posture. "Dad, I need to get back to work. You said you would watch him."

"I did. You didn't say anything about feeding him. What does he eat?"

"He will eat what you feed him. Just don't give him spicy food, and cut everything up. He still only gets a spoon. I don't want him to hurt himself," she said.

"Have you considered hiring a nanny?" I suggested.

"You're so out of touch with my situation right now Chandler, your suggestions aren't even helpful."

"Why do you say that? A nanny would know how to make sure Luke was watched after and properly fed."

"A nanny costs money. Dad has raised a kid before, this isn't something unfamiliar to him. So unless you're volunteering to be the nanny, or pay for one, how is that helpful? I have to go."

She waved her hand, dismissing me. She bent over and kissed the boy before leaving.

I followed her into the entry, catching her before she left. “Mila, if you worked for me you could afford a nanny.”

She stepped in close and whispered between her teeth. “I have more self respect than I did when I worked for you before. Maybe if you come up with a legitimate job offer I might consider it.”

She stepped away, pressing down the front of her blouse and adjusting her jacket. “I may have a shitty job, but I have to live with my choices, at least now I can live with myself.”

She closed the door behind her. I returned to the kitchen.

“What did she say? You offered her a job again, right?” Daniel asked. He was more desperate for her to have a better job than she was.

I shook my head. “Rejected before I could even tell her what the job would be.”

As far as I could tell there was no real valid reason Mila could give me for either not seeing me or for working for me. I didn’t understand the self loathing that came with having worked for me.. She made the choices she made back then. I didn’t know what that self respect comment had been about.

Fine, she was angry with me. I could deal with that. The sooner she got over herself, the sooner we could get back together. She couldn’t deny we were great together. We made a good team.

Daniel certainly didn’t know what was going on with her.

I knew that her life was none of my concern. I needed to let her and her poor life choices go. But every time I saw her again I just wanted her. It was as simple as that. I felt this unquenchable need to have her in my life. It would be easier if her choices aligned with my desires.

She wasn’t desperate, she was determined and angry. And I needed to know why.

“Do you think the kid would like Chinese? I’ll order, my treat for entertaining me this evening,” I suggested.

The next morning I did something that maybe I shouldn’t have. I wasn’t the kind of controlling man who needed to know everything my woman was doing. Mila wasn’t my woman. Even though seeing her certainly raised my caveman desires to toss her over my shoulder and drag her off.

I kept telling myself as I drove into her neighborhood early in the morning, that I was doing this as much for Daniel’s information as for my own. I sat about half a block away, half hidden behind some bushes growing too close to the road.

When she drove past in her old sedan, I followed. I wanted to know what she was really up to.

After she dropped Luke off at a daycare facility, I followed her into the lot of an office park. I watched as she and others walked into one of the buildings.

According to my internet search, the company sold medical supplies, and had a large call center at that address. I knew where she worked during the day. It only took a bit of internet research and a few emails or two to establish their call center hours.

When I inquired about a job in the call center, they were very pleased to let me know they operated during the standard business week, and did not require any overtime or weekend hours. The woman on the phone directed me to exactly where on their website I could apply.

To me it sounded like they had a high turnover rate since they started a new training class every other week.

Mila had to have hated working for a place like that. No creativity, no thinking, just follow a script, and limit the call to a certain amount of time. It wasn’t this job that was requiring overtime.

More than ever, I was convinced she had a boyfriend. And it made me angry that she was keeping him a secret. What other secrets was she keeping?

I left work early to sit in the parking lot at the call center. Where did she go after work?

It took four days of me following her to the daycare and then to her house before I considered giving up. She went home, she stayed home. No mandatory overtime for the rest of the week.

I wasn't going to give up, but I couldn't spend all of my time following her around town.

"What do you know about these AirTag things?" I asked the guys the next time we were watching a game.

Daniel wasn't around, so I figured it meant Mila had pulled her last minute working overtime bullshit on him. I was still curious what she was up to. The more I poked around on the internet for a way to follow her without actually sitting in my car and following her, the more I kept running into information about AirTags.

"Aren't those things so you can track people, dogs? Right?" Doug asked.

"I had a private investigator tap into one of my ex's phones. He was able to locate her that way. Busted her with her boyfriend," McLain said.

"That only works if you have access to the person's phone. Those AirTag things don't need a phone to send out a signal. I've heard of people putting them in their kid's jackets. I've really only heard about anyone using them when it's been a concern, you know stalkers, shit like that." Greg said. "But they aren't like a GPS device. I think they can only tell you if something is nearby, not an exact location."

I nodded and realized that maybe I was going to need something else if I wanted to know where Mila was going. I needed something I could attach to her car.

I wasn't stalking her. I was making sure that whatever she was doing, she was safe. And that's what I told myself when I ordered the GPS device. And that's what I told myself when I drove to her work and popped open the hood of her car and stuck in behind the engine where it wouldn't easily be seen.

I couldn't be there to make sure she was safe and at home or at work twenty-four-seven, but I could now confirm her location. She had gone home and stayed there the day I put the tracker on her car.

The next night, I checked to see if she was home and her car was in motion. It was like watching a movie as the little dot that represented her car trailed over the map. When the car stopped, and stayed stopped, I went after her.

I was prepared to find her at an apartment or a restaurant, someplace where she would meet a date. Instead, she was parked in front of an office built onto the front of a warehouse in an industrial park. This wasn't the same job.

I picked up my phone and called the number on the sign mounted to the wall next to the door.

"Eagle Imports." I heard her voice say before I ended the call.

She had a second job, what was so secretive about that?

MILA

“Mila, can I see you in my office?”

Angela started to walk away from me, confident that I would be right behind her. And I was.

“Close the door, have a seat,” she said.

I closed the door but I did not sit down. I needed to run, not stand there and get reprimanded. If she wanted to tell me about everything I was doing wrong, why couldn't she have done this twenty minutes earlier?

“Sit.”

“I'd rather not. I need to leave or I'll be late picking up my son. They bill me when I'm late.”

“Suit yourself. I'll cut to the chase. Your call numbers are down.”

I shook my head. “So?”

“You need to make more calls.”

“I'm on the phone all the time. I'm working with our clients,” I explained. “How am I supposed to make more calls?”

“Get on the phone, make the sale, get off the phone. Cut the chit chat out of the middle. No one needs you to ask how the weather is where they are.”

“I'm trying to make a connection. Be friendly so they're more apt to buy their supplies.”

Angela sighed. “We don’t pay you to make a connection. You’re paid to move units of diabetes supplies. And that’s something that can be done in two thirds of the time you’re currently taking.”

I nodded. It wasn’t enough to have to call strangers and get them to talk about their health, I had to upsell them on the supplies they needed, and now I needed to do it even faster.

“Okay, I’ll work on that.”

“This is an official notice. You have to show improvement in your timing by the end of the quarter,” she said.

Great, I only had a few weeks to change my entire approach. “Fine. Are you done?”

“Your lack of enthusiasm for the job is being noted. Yeah, we’re done. I expect to see a noticeable improvement when you’re back in the office next week.”

I turned to leave, but then stopped. I really wanted to tell her I had no enthusiasm when management didn’t respect my time. I would be over ten minutes late leaving by the time I got in my car. If I drove fast enough, I might only be five minutes late getting to the daycare.

Traffic had other plans for me, and I was almost twenty minutes late. Fortunately the teacher stuck waiting for me had Luke in his jacket and ready to leave. She didn’t want to be there any longer. I knew I would hear about it in the morning when I dropped Luke off.

I really needed some extra time. Time to find a new job, time to find a better daycare.

Luke was cranky. I was already late for my next job. I spent what little extra cash I had on drive thru. When we got home, I sat in the car and ate chicken nuggets and french fries with Luke. I didn’t want to have another argument with Dad about feeding Luke.

The hand off went fairly smoothly. At least Chandler wasn’t lurking around to question me on every choice I was making. I kissed Luke and ran out the door.

I texted my boss after I jumped in the car, before I started driving.

“Sorry I’m late,” I said as I rushed into the offices at the import company.

“It happens. You’ll be able to stay and make up the difference right?”

I nodded as I hurried into my office. This evening I would send out a bunch of emails and get documents and orders organized for tomorrow, my one day a week that I came into the office.

“Do you think you could stay late tomorrow evening? Put in some overtime? I know it’s Friday night, but I could really use the help.”

“I’ll have to see if I can get my Dad to watch my son. I’ll have to pick him up from daycare. I can do that on a dinner break, if Dad says that’s okay.”

“That would be great. I’d also like to increase your hours, if that works with you?” Ward said.

I dropped my bags off at my desk.

“Extra hours?” I could really use more hours. “I need to find a different daycare for Luke. How soon? I really get the feeling my dad is going to stop being willing to watch my son.”

“Get your mom to do it,” Ward said offhandedly.

He didn’t say it out of malice, he just didn’t know.

“I don’t have a mom. It’s just me and Dad. Can I have a couple of weeks to work out childcare?”

“Yeah, sure. Business is really picking up, and I could use your help even more.”

I wanted more hours, I wanted better pay. But the childcare situation was a real impediment to my success.

“You know if you would let me take work home, I could do a lot of this stuff working remotely,” I suggested. “I’d be able to put in the hours after my son goes to bed, especially since most of the emails I’m sending out aren’t getting read until the

next day. And spreadsheets can be done at night. It's a reasonable plan. And I have a laptop I could use, so you wouldn't need to pay for any equipment. I could bring it in to work and you could get it set up with all the programs and passwords." I spoke fast and probably looked too eager.

If I could just get a second job that would let me work from home, the child care issue would be taken care of. There was no reason why I couldn't do data entry and send out emails while making sure Luke ate his dinner.

"I appreciate you putting thought into this job, but I really need you on-site—"

There was a loud crash followed by barks that sounded like, "FBI freeze." A swarm of men in dark blue baseball caps and bomber jackets with FBI across everything in big yellow letters.

I couldn't have moved if I wanted to. I literally shook in my shoes. As men surrounded Ward.

"Fuck, I'm not saying anything without a lawyer." Ward yelled.

"We'll see about that," one FBI agent said as he took Ward's hands and pulled them behind his back. I heard the click click of handcuffs.

"You're next."

Rough hands grabbed my arms and twisted them behind my back.

"What's going on?" I asked in a panic.

"Shut up!" Ward snarled.

The FBI pulled me down until my butt crashed into a chair. "Stay put."

I nodded. I wasn't going to go anywhere.

They began by yanking the computer plug out of the wall and disconnecting all the wires and cables from the back. Men carried the computers out of the office. Then they scraped everything on my desk into those little filing boxes.

“Hey, that’s my bag!” I cried out as my purse and tote bag were put into another box.

“It’s evidence now.”

“Evidence? Ward, what’s going on?”

“From the looks of it, they are seizing everything.”

“But why?” Nothing made any sense.

“Don’t ask stupid questions. And don’t tell them anything,” Ward said.

I couldn’t tell who was who. All the FBI agents looked alike in their aviator glasses and baseball caps. The one who handcuffed me wore his ID badge around his neck on a lanyard. I didn’t see what his name was. He and another man came back into the office and led Ward and I outside. I was put into a black SUV, a different one from Ward.

The entire time I shook like a leaf, and asked what was happening. No one would answer me. That gut feeling I had that Ward wasn’t exactly on the up and up had come true in a very scary reality.

The SUV started up. I was tethered somehow to the seat. I leaned as far forward as I could. “Hey, I just work for that guy part time. I don’t know what’s going on here. Am I under arrest?”

“That depends on you and your cooperation,” the agent in the passenger seat said.

“I’ll tell you what I know. I guarantee it’s not much.”

By the time we arrived at their offices, they must have run a background check on me. The information they got had to have told them I had no idea what was going on. I was placed in a generic looking office, nothing like the holding cells they always have in TV.

An older man came into the office and unfastened my cuff. I rubbed my wrists as he sat down. He dropped my bags on the desk in front of me.

“We’re keeping your phone for the time being, Miss Jones.”

“Am I under arrest?” I asked again.

“For now, no. But you need to stick around, no sudden tropical vacations, okay?”

I nodded.

“You were working for a bad man, were you aware of that?”

“I needed the job,” I confessed. “Is this all about tax evasion? He paid me under the table. I thought maybe he’s importing something he shouldn’t be.”

“Funny enough, the imports were probably the only legit thing Ward Smith has ever done. We are going to want to question you and get a full statement, but it looks like you were in the wrong place at the wrong time this evening.”

Another agent came in and told me to follow him. I was taken to a front reception area. He pulled out a business card and handed it to me.

“You’re free to go. If you think of anything, call that number.”

I glanced at the card and nodded. Nodding was easier than words.

“We’ll be in touch.”

“How? You have my phone.”

“We’ll be able to contact you. Do you need to call for a ride?” He indicated that I should talk to the receptionist if I needed to make a phone call.

I watched him walk away. That was it? Scare the crap out of me, and send me on my way?

“I need to make a call, can I use your phone?”

With a nod the receptionist handed me the receiver. I gave her the one number I had memorized.

CHANDLER

My phone buzzed. Caller ID unknown. I let it go to voicemail. It rang again, and again I let it go, but every time I sent it to voicemail they would just call again. Whoever it was wanted my attention.

“Chandler Olsen,” I grumbled as I connected the call.

“Chandler, I’m in trouble, can you come get me?” Mila’s voice was quiet and full of panic.

My entire body was suddenly on alert. The hairs on the back of my neck pricked.

“Where are you, are you okay? Are you at work?”

The last time I checked the GPS I tucked into her car, she was at the import job. If something happened to her at work... I didn’t want to think about it. I was on my feet and headed to the car.

“No, I’m not at work. I’m out on National, by the cemetery.”

There wasn’t anything out but auto mechanics, and the big police station, the one where they kept all the trucks and the impound lot.

I got the car started and headed out. “Have you been arrested? What’s going on?”

Silence from her. I heard as she took in a halting shaky breath. “I wasn’t arrested, but I’m in trouble. I’m at the FBI office.”

FBI? What the fuck? “Talk to me, Mila.”

“Just come, I’ll tell you when you get here.” She gave me the address and ended the call.

I floored the gas. I didn’t care, I was headed straight into a hive of police and FBI officers at top speed. I needed to get to Mila. The local FBI offices were tucked into an unassuming brick structure built sometime in the last century. It didn’t have enough style to be considered mid-century architecture. It was perfectly forgettable, and about a block away from the Police Department. The collection of large black SUVs parked in front was the only give away that something more than met the eye was going on inside.

I pushed into the lobby and before I could demand to see Mila, she tackled me and was in my arms.

I enveloped her in my embrace. She was back. I could protect her now.

She shook with sobs, and I let her cry. There was no one else in the small lobby area, not even a receptionist. I gathered Mila to me and held her until her breathing settled. Only then did I shift her so I could see her. She wiped at her tears. In quick succession, I pulled a few tissues out of the box on the receptionist desk and handed them to her, I grabbed her bags from where she abandoned them, and I guided her out the door.

She continued to sniffle and cry as I guided her into the passenger seat. I tossed her bags into the back and climbed in. I looked at her, waiting for her to say something. She simply stared straight ahead.

I started the car and pulled out of the lot, and drove. I didn’t have a destination, I didn’t think Mila wanted to go anywhere other than away from where she had been. It took her almost twenty minutes of sitting in silence before she started talking.

“Thank you. I didn’t know who else to call.”

“Why didn’t you call your dad?” I asked.

“I couldn’t. I don’t think he has Luke’s car seat installed in his SUV. So he couldn’t have come to get me.”

“Okay. Where’s your car?”

“At work.”

Without thinking I started to head toward the office park.

“You can’t tell Dad. Promise me you won’t tell him.” Her voice was full of panic.

“I don’t even know what I’m not telling him, Mila. What happened?”

She was quiet for a long while before she pointed into the parking lot of a strip mall. “Pull over. I want to get out. I need out.”

She jumped from the car before I even turned the engine off. I followed, prepared to run after her, but she paced back and forth like a caged cat. I leaned against the side of the car and waited.

She walked back and forth shaking her hands and muttering to herself. Every now and again she would shake her entire body and roll her shoulders.

“I work for, no worked for an Imports company. I didn’t tell Dad because he thinks I should be able to make a living with one job. But I can’t. No one has full time jobs any more, so I have two office jobs. I just tell Dad it’s one place so he doesn’t argue with me about it. I can’t do anything right anymore. He’s going to be so mad at me.”

“Daniel isn’t going to be mad you had to take on a second job.”

“He is. He already is annoyed that I ask him to babysit Luke now. If he finds out what’s happened he’s going to kick me out. Chandler I can barely afford to pay the daycare.”

“What happened back there Mila? Why were you at the FBI?”

“They took me in, Chandler. They put handcuffs on me and put me in the back of one of those big SUVs. They have my phone!”

I was on my feet in the middle of her pacing path. I grabbed her shoulders to hold her still. “What? Tell me exactly everything that happened.”

She started gasping for air in big gulps.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. I’ve got you. Big breath, hold it, let it out.” I breathed with her, coaching her through before she started hyperventilating.

After a few more minutes of steady breathing she began talking again.

“I thought my boss was shady, but only doing tax evasion stuff. He paid me under the table.”

“You knew you were working for a shady operation and you stayed?”

“He paid me really well, and only needed me for about twelve hours a week. It was one of those too good to turn down deals.”

I grumbled. She turned down working for me so that she could do what? “I would have paid you more than really well, and you wouldn’t have put yourself in danger.”

She shook her head. “You don’t get it Chandler, do you? You are dangerous for me. I couldn’t risk being near you. I have to be able to do this life thing on my own.”

How was I dangerous for her? That made no sense. She was barely making sense.

“The FBI raided the office while I was there. I told them everything I know. Everything. I told them what I thought my boss was doing. I’m not allowed to leave the state until they say so, but I’m not actually under arrest. I don’t really understand what’s going on.”

“But they kept your phone. Why?”

She shrugged. “Evidence I guess. What am I supposed to do now, Chandler? I’m scared. I haven’t done anything. I don’t want to get arrested.”

She started shaking and tears streamed down her cheeks. I pulled her against me again. I didn’t know what to do either, but I had access to lawyers who would. Mila was innocent, I’d make sure she was kept safe. I held her there in that parking lot for who knows how long.

“Come on, let’s go get something to eat, we can talk this over while you get some warm food in you, and maybe a drink.”

She shook her head. “I should get my car.”

“We can get your car later.” I said. If the FBI had been at the office where she worked, I needed to get to her car and pull out the tracking device, just in case. That would look very suspicious, and she already had the wrong eyes looking at her.

I pulled into a chain restaurant. We were seated immediately despite it almost being the weekend and the restaurant being attached to a bar. I ordered a sampler appetizer for us to share, and made sure Mila got a glass of wine.

She didn’t say anything other than mutter a few ‘thank yous,’ and, ‘I don’t know what to dos.’

When the waitress placed the food between us, Mila’s eyes lit up like she hadn’t seen food in ages. She grabbed a stuffed potato skin.

“Hot, hot, hot,” she said as she dropped it on her mini plate. She proceeded to spoon a dollop of ranch dressing in it, and then shoved the whole thing into her mouth. I couldn’t help but chuckle. She ate like she was desperate.

She took a big gulp of a swallow, and then reached across the table and took a chasing gulp of my beer.

“Hey,” I complained.

“Too hot, can’t wash a potato skin down with wine,” she explained.

I got the waitress’ attention and ordered Mila water, and myself another beer. I waited until Mila had more warm food inside of her before bringing up her little situation again.

“You need to tell your father.”

She started to whine. “I can’t.”

“Mila, you’re headed into what could potentially be a very messy legal situation. Criminal even, especially since you don’t know what exactly happened. You’re going to need a

lawyer, lawyers. You said it yourself, you can barely afford daycare.”

“They’ll give me a public defendant won’t they?”

“It’s the FBI, I don’t know. You weren’t arrested this evening, and that’s probably a very good sign. Daniel has access to lawyers through his firm. You have to let him help you.”

“He’s so disappointed in my Chandler. I’m nothing but a fuck up in his eyes. This is only going to enforce that opinion. What am I supposed to do when he kicks me out?”

“You have to give him a chance, Mila. Daniel is not going to kick you out. If you think it would help, I’ll be there for you when you tell him. I’ll take you home after this and I’ll stick around.”

She nodded. “Okay, but you’ll be there?”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

MILA

Chandler followed me into the house.

“Dad?” I called out quietly. I didn’t want to disturb Luke if he was settling down for the night.

I walked into the den.

Dad looked up. He saw me and then Chandler, his brow furrowed. He lifted a finger to his lips before indicating Luke asleep on the couch. He stood and waved his fingers, moving us back into the kitchen.

“Shouldn’t you be working?” he asked me before turning his attention to Chandler “What are you doing here?”

I swallowed. I didn’t know what to say. I cast my gaze to Chandler in a panic. How did I tell Dad, well, everything?

“There’s been a situation,” Chandler said. “Mila has something she needs to discuss with you.”

Dad glared at Chandler and then at me. I almost wanted to laugh, would have if I also wasn’t so nauseated that I was afraid I’d throw up from anxiety. I was pretty sure Dad thought we were going to tell him we were dating or something. That boat sailed long ago. This was worse, so much worse.

Chandler put his hand on Dad’s shoulder. “It’s not what you’re thinking it is, relax.”

“I’ll relax when you tell me.” He held up his hand, fingers spread.

“It’s not that easy,” I said.

He let out a sigh. “Fine, Luke is almost asleep.”

I started to step out into the den when Dad caught my arm. “If he sees you, he’ll get all excited and worked up. Let me finish getting him to bed, and then we can all sit down and you can fill me in on what’s going on here.”

We waited in the kitchen until Dad carried Luke upstairs. I was too nervous to sit after we moved into the other room.

“Sit down, Mila,” Chandler said.

“Yes, Mila, sit,” Dad said from behind me.

I spun to look at him. My heart filled my throat. This was worse than having to tell him I was pregnant, then again he had confronted me about that. So this was ever worse than that, because this time I had to say something.

“Let me start with the fact that I wasn’t formally arrested.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Dad’s voice dropped. He was angry, and probably already on edge from earlier.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I was working two jobs. I didn’t tell you because you’d get mad at me. I’m tired of doing everything wrong, tired of your constant judgment. So I hid it from you.”

Dad nodded. He was clenching and unclenching his hands as he waited for me to finish.

“I’ve been working nights and Fridays for an import company. I get paid under the table. So, yes, I thought there was something not quite up and up about the business, but I honestly didn’t think it was much more than tax evasion. That is until the FBI raided the place tonight. I don’t even think I had been in the office for all of five minutes when they burst in and started shouting.”

Tears burned my eyes again and I recalled the events as they unfolded. I was so scared and confused.

“They kept me in a room, handcuffed to a chair for the longest time before they came in and started asking me questions. But

I don't know anything. And I told them everything I do know."

"What exactly did you do for this import company?" Dad asked.

"I processed shipping manifests. I matched invoices to packing slips, and I made sure shipping containers were picked up and delivered to the right places. That's all I did, I swear. I don't even know what else was being shipped. If it wasn't on a manifest, I had no way of knowing. And I didn't pay much attention to the product descriptions, I just made sure product numbers matched."

"What were they importing?"

It was like the interrogation at the FBI all over again.

"Mostly toys and cheap office supplies. After a while, when I was sitting there all by myself, I thought maybe there had been some designer knockoffs. So the next time someone came back I told them. I have nothing to hide."

"What about the payments, how did he pay you?" Dad asked all the same questions.

"I got paid in cash. I turned in a paper timesheet. They will be in the files the FBI seized. And yes, I offered to make sure I record that income when I do taxes."

Dad looked thoughtful. He brought his clenched hands up to his chin and was quiet for a long moment.

"They let me go. Said they would get in touch with me. They have my phone," I finally said.

"Why didn't you call me?" Dad finally asked.

"Because..." you don't have car seats in your SUV for Luke, ... I didn't want you to yell at me for being so dumb, ... I panicked. "I thought Luke might be asleep and I didn't want you to have to wake him up to come and get me. Chandler's was the only other number I could remember. I didn't know who else to call."

"Why were you working for this import company?" Dad asked.

“They cut my hours at the call center. I needed a second job to cover all of my expenses. This was the first place that fit into my schedule, and the pay was really good.”

“And you didn’t think that getting paid in cash was a problem?”

“Of course, I knew it was a problem, but I needed something while I kept looking. It was the best decision I could make at the time,” I was practically crying again at this point. Didn’t Dad see that I was the victim here?

“You’ve made some bad employment decisions, Mila. What happened? You used to be so fearless.”

I spun on Chandler.

“That was before the world reminded me that I was worthless. I was allowed to have my fun, but then I was stuck with the consequences of other people’s actions. I’m hanging on by a thread here.”

“What’s all that supposed to mean, worthless, consequences?”

Something inside of me collapsed. I was broken. I opened my mouth and my pain rushed out.

“What do I mean? You abandoned me, you just walked away. You took that job in Europe and never told me, never asked for my opinion.”

“He was your boss, Mila. He didn’t need to ask your opinion.”

“It was a business decision, you understood.”

“How do you know I understood it was just business? You never asked me Chandler, never gave me a second thought. You had an opportunity to be great and that’s all that mattered.” I turned my attention to Dad. “No, Dad, my opinion should have mattered. I was in love with him. He left and I never got the chance to even tell him about Luke.”

Both of them went pale before their faces flooded with red hot rage. It would have been funny if I wasn’t in the middle of their attention, and focused anger.

“What do you mean Luke is mine?” Chandler stayed in his chair. He held onto the hand rests for support.

“You told me the father was some waiter at a sports bar.” Dad surged to his feet.

“Everything I’ve done, bad choices or not, has been to take care of Luke. I just want to take care of my baby. And now...” No one was listening to me.

Dad clenched and unclenched his fists. “You touched my daughter. You touched my daughter!”

I had to jump out of the way as he lunged for Chandler. Dad grabbed Chandler’s shirt, he pulled Chandler up to his feet, and then decked him. The sound was a horrible thud as Dad’s fist smashed into Chandler’s jaw. Chandler staggered back.

“Dad! Stop it. Stop it!”

Chandler recovered and suddenly had Dad’s shirt twisted around both fists they were face to face.

“Yeah, maybe I deserved that. But you will never hit me again.” He tossed Dad as if he were nothing more than a rag doll. Dad fell back into the recliner with so much force the big chair tipped back and sent Dad sprawling.

“Chandler! This is why I never wanted you to know. Why he was never supposed to know!”

I ran to Dad. He brushed off my attempt at help.

“Get the fuck out of my house. Stay away from my daughter.”

Dad climbed to his feet and barreled down on Chandler, they snarled and bumped chests.

“Get out!” He roared in Chandler’s face.

Chandler snarled. I thought they were going to start physically fighting again. Chandler shoved Dad and turned. The door slammed behind him.

Dad stood there panting heavily. He took one look at me and thrust his finger out, pointing upstairs. “You’re grounded, go to your room!”

“You can’t ground me, I’m twenty five.”

“You’re behaving like you’re thirteen. No, you made better choices when you were thirteen. Chandler Owens? How could you, Mimi, how could you?”

“How could I?”

“You went behind my back to date a man like him,” Dad snarled.

“A man like him? He’s your friend. What kind of friends do you have if you wouldn’t trust one of them with me? It’s not like I was with McLain!”

He flinched. Good, I wanted him to feel my pain.

“Did he take advantage of you? Use your job as leverage against you?”

I bit out a sharp laugh. “No Dad, it was nothing like that. Nothing at all. I made the choice, and I choose him. He was just the first in a long line of bad decisions I’ve made.”

“You were dating Chandler and you didn’t trust me enough to tell me?” Anger radiated off of him.

“You’ve never trusted me enough for me to feel safe telling you anything.” I cried. There was no more dam to hold my thoughts back, and more spilled out. “I couldn’t even tell you I had to take a second job. You literally hold the roof over my head as a constant threat to behave, be quiet, stay out of sight. What was I supposed to think?”

CHANDLER

I was a father. That little boy was mine.

I wasn't exactly sure how I got home after leaving Daniel's place. I rubbed my jaw. Damn he could throw a punch. Fuck, and I fully deserved it.

I was a father.

It kept repeating on a loop in my brain. I would think of one thing completely unrelated, and the next thought was me being a dad. Did the boy look like me? Did he look like Mila? I really hadn't paid much attention to him. He was her kid and none of my business.

Only, he was my business.

Why hadn't she ever said anything? She could have come after me for child support. She still could. I would need to contact my lawyer in the morning. There was something else I was supposed to talk to him about, but that thought was gone.

I ran my hand through my hair and made my way upstairs in my dark house. There was no ambient light coming in from outside, no soft glow of city lights below. As strange as it had been to move from this to living in Zurich, I was still not acclimatized to being back here. All of the little differences between the States and Europe like restaurants, and having someone come in and do the shopping, those were nothing compared to the large loneliness and emptiness of the house.

I turned on the tap for the shower and waited for the water to get hot. I really needed to install one of those tankless heaters

in the bathroom. Having hot water immediately was one of those details that I didn't know I would miss.

I was a father.

Fuck.

I pulled my shirt back on and turned off the shower. I had to get that GPS tracker out of Mila's car before the FBI decided they needed to go through her stuff.

The lot was dark and abandoned with only a few cars parked. Removing the GPS took no time. I was struck with how easy it would have been to take her car. It was old and beat up. She had one of those flower shaped air fresheners hanging from the rearview mirror. Luke's car seat was secured in the back seat. A stuffed animal waited there for the next time he would play with it.

My son rode around in a car like this. His mother was proud, and her father was an asshole. Why the hell had Daniel let Mila keep this pile of shit? He could have easily given her a better car. I could easily give her a better car. I would have, but no one told me I had a son.

Should I buy her a car? Would she accept it? Would a sudden expensive gift put her under deeper scrutiny from the FBI investigation?

"Damn it, Mila!" I shouted and pounded my steering wheel. I could have been there for her.

I went through my nightly routine, showering, laying out clothes and sundries for the following morning. I went through the actions, and never once really paid any attention to any of it.

All night long, I wasn't aware of getting any sleep. I tossed and turned. I should have known, I should have been told. I should have taken one look at that kid and somehow known he was mine.

As I drove to work, I was on autopilot. I pulled into the drive at Daniel's house. What I was thinking? Why was I there?

I rang the doorbell.

“What are you doing here?” Mila asked as she opened the door. “If my father sees you...”

“Is the kid really mine?”

She stepped outside, wrapping her sweater around her and closing the door behind her. She looked so young. What the fuck had I been thinking? I shouldn't have been messing around with a younger woman. My friend's kid.

“Did you get pregnant on purpose?” I demanded.

“What the fuck, Chandler? Are you trying to be funny? On purpose? To purposefully put myself in a constant state of near poverty and struggling with money? To purposely go against my father's very obvious family oriented values?”

“No, to entrap me.” It sounded wrong as soon as I said it.

“Entrap!” She glanced over her shoulder before continuing more quietly. “If I had wanted to tie you to me through a child, don't you think I would have told you? Sued you for child support? Oh, I don't know, done anything other than what I've been doing?”

“I want a paternity test,” I demanded.

“Why? What does it matter?”

“He's my son, Mila,” I growled. “It matters.”

“Fine, but you have to set it up. I'm not doing the work for you. I know who the father is. It's not like there was anyone else it could have been.”

“No waiter, then?” I couldn't help myself but to jab that lie back at her.

She chuckled. “There never was one.” She took a step forward and pushed on my chest. “You need to go. Dad is still pissed, and he's going to come looking for me in a minute.”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“About what? That you're here? No. I'll tell him it was a Jehovah's Witness and I couldn't get a word in edgewise to say no thank you.”

“So, you’re going to lie to him? Do you lie to everyone like you lied to me?”

“Yep, I go around and tell everyone I know that they’re the father of my child while I make sure to tell you he’s not yours,” her tone was sharp and bitter. “You couldn’t be bothered to tell me for a week that you were leaving the country, and leaving me behind. So sorry I couldn’t be bothered to tell you you’re a father. Goodbye, Chandler.”

She turned and went inside, closing the door behind me. I stood there and stared after her, willing her to come back through the door. Willing her to come back and tell me different words.

I made it into the office.

I didn’t do anything when I got there, I wasn’t exactly sure why I was even there to begin with. Kyle Manning had the US office pretty much under control, I wasn’t much more than a glorified figure head.

“Call my lawyer, Heather,” I said into the phone intercom.

“Yes Mr. Owens, and I’m Sarah, remember?”

“That’s right, Sarah.” I was so distracted I forgot my admin’s name.

Heather had left the company at some point during my time abroad. I should track her down and lure her back to being my personal admin.

I was too distracted to sit on my ass and read through emails. I needed to do something, go somewhere. I had energy burning along my neck and shoulders that needed to be let out. I grabbed my stuff and walked out of the office.

“I’m leaving,” I announced as I strode past Sarah’s desk. “Call the Lawyer’s office back and tell them they can reach me on my cell.”

I didn’t stick around to hear if she acknowledged me or not.

I punched in McLain’s number.

“Chandler!” The man was still in his frat-boy summer of life. He had never quite grown up. I needed that energy now.

“How do you feel about ax throwing?” I asked.

“I suck at it, why?”

“Want to go toss some hatchets at a sheet of plywood and start day drinking?”

“I’m in.”

His bright yellow Corvette was sitting in the parking lot of the Hatchet Job, the ax throwing place he suggested.

“What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into?” he asked as a greeting. He pointed to his chin as a mirror to the bruise I had on my face.

“I’ll tell you inside.” I wanted to get in and start moving my arms. I wanted my shoulders to burn with exhaustion. It was the only way I could think of to get rid of this sensation of unease.

We checked in and McLain took care of lining our drinks up

“The bartender is sending over some microwave burritos as soon as they’re done,” he said as he put two beers on the small table at the head of our throwing lane.

“Why the fuck for?”

“Because you are pissed off, and we are drinking before lunch. You need food in your system for both activities.”

“You day drink without food,” I complained.

“Au contraire mon frere,” McLain answered. “I day drink with snacks, and without sharp objects. You want to tell me what’s going on?”

I picked up the first ax and hurled it toward the target. It embedded into the wood with a hard thwack. I could tell him, or he could find out from Daniel, if Daniel bothered to say anything.

“So tell me if I’ve got this straight. When Daniel’s daughter got pregnant, how did he handle it? I’m under the impression

that he basically ignored it, and then once she had the kid, he never talked about it?”

I hurled another ax. It clattered against the target and fell to the floor.

“That’s about right.” McLain threw an ax. It stuck. “He was very avoidant about any discussion. It’s her business, if she was too embarrassed or whatever...” He shrugged. “We didn’t push it.”

“No one talked to him about getting her a new car, or—”

“No, why would we? She’s his kid, they have a weird father daughter dynamic. That’s on them. Why are you so bothered by this all of a sudden?”

I took a long drink of my beer as the bartender called out that our burritos were ready. McLain picked them up and brought them back to the table. I grabbed one and took a bite. It tasted like beans and the tortilla stuck to my teeth.

“Look, Daniel is probably going to either sell back his share in the box at the stadium, or demand that I do. Let the guys know I’ll sell mine back. I don’t know if I’m going to stick around town or not.”

I picked up another ax and threw it.

“Why would Daniel do that? Chandler, what aren’t you telling me?”

I tossed another ax. When I turned back around, McLain’s expression told me he figured it out.

MILA

A paternity test? I was so mad I couldn't see straight. How dare he? I stewed in my anger all morning.

Dad kept glancing over at me as he drove to the industrial park where my car was still parked.

"What are your plans for the day?" he asked as he pulled alongside my car.

I shrugged. I glanced over my shoulder at the office. "Not going to work. I guess it's time to go back home and start looking for a new job."

"What are you going to do about the investigation?"

"There's nothing I can do. I guess I should go get a temporary phone while they have mine."

I looked over at him. He held his face tight, lips pursed together, eyes in a squint. He was still angry. I didn't have the money for a new phone, even a cheap one, especially now that I didn't have a second job.

"Could you loan me the money for a phone?" My stomach fell the second the words were out of my mouth.

"You managed to get yourself into this situation, you can find your way out."

I got the answer I expected. I climbed out of the car, and wrestled Luke out the car seat in the back.

With my boy on my hip I turned back to Dad.

"Thanks for the ride. Are you coming home?" I asked.

He hated me so much, I expected him to either take off for a few days or kick me out.

“If I’m not home you’ll have your answer,” was all he said.

He drove off, not even waiting to see if my car would start.

“I guess it’s just you and me,” I said to Luke.

I got him situated into his seat and slid in behind the steering wheel. I watched him in the rearview mirror for a few minutes. He occupied himself with his stuffed animal. He looked up and our eyes met. The smile my boy gave me warmed my heart. How was I supposed to support him? I didn’t want to go home either. I needed to think, I couldn’t think at home.

I grabbed my purse and scrambled to see how much change I had floating around in the bottom of my bag. I still had a good portion of my last payment from Ward. I stared at the money for a long moment. I should set that money aside. I should.

I glanced back at Luke in the mirror. I needed a clear head, and a place to think. I had a few snacks in my purse, and a sippy cup. We had what we needed for a day out. I would be a splurge. Dad would call me irresponsible. It probably was the wrong thing to do, but I excelled at doing the wrong thing.

I didn’t tell Luke, and drove toward the zoo.

I drove through a part of town I was only ever in when going to the zoo. I never got out of my car. At a red light, I noticed the ads plastered in the window of the shops in the strip mall I was about to drive past. When the light turned, instead of going straight, I turned right, and turned into the parking lot.

I stopped and looked at the garish orange and pink posters for budget phone plans.

Why had I never really paid attention to my options before? I grabbed Luke and we went inside. I felt stupid being nervous. No, this wasn’t an affluent area, it didn’t mean the people here were going to hurt me, or any of the other stupid ideas that had been drilled into my head as a kid.

Bells rang as I walked into the shop.

“Be there in a second!” Someone for the back of the store called out. It wasn’t set up like any phone store I had been in before with a sales person waiting for me at the door, and all the latest models out on display. There was a glass counter almost as soon as I stepped in, and the side walls had racks of gift cards that wouldn’t be any good to anyone until they were activated.

A skinny older man came out from behind racks of shelves on the other side of the counter. “You need something?”

“Um, yeah. How much for a phone?” I hesitated and stammered.

The man looked at me and looked at Luke. With a nod of understanding— I’m not sure what he thought our situation was, but I got the impression he saw single mothers in need of a new phone a lot— he pulled out a box with a phone and an orange and pink pamphlet. The phone didn’t look any different from my more expensive one. But the information showed me what it could and couldn’t do, and gave me plan options.

Thirty minutes later I had a new phone. I didn’t need a contract, and it wasn’t going to cost me very much. I even had access to the internet, so I could apply for jobs. The man made sure to show me that feature. Clearly, I had a specific needy look about me.

Why hadn’t I looked at my options before, I mean really looked? My other phone, the one the FBI had, was on the cheapest plan at one of the bigger carriers, because that’s where Dad had set my phone up when I was younger. When he made me start paying for it, I didn’t even think about seeing what else was out there.

I had been acting as if someone would come and rescue me at some point for years. It was clear that I was going to have to rescue myself. Only I didn’t know how to do it.

I sat in the car and counted how much money I had left. There was still enough for the zoo. The relief I felt was magical. I could still do something for my baby. My life was a complete mess, but I could still take Luke to see his animals, and give

myself some space to think. I wiped my tears, not wanting Luke to see me cry.

Whatever it was that had made me want to come here today and been some kind of guiding light. As we waited in line to pay our entrance, the woman in front of me turned with a big smile on her face.

“We ended up having an extra ticket, do you want it?” She held out an adult zoo pass.

I was stunned. “Yes, please. Wow, thank you.”

She told me to enjoy it, and I thanked her again.

“That was very sweet of her,” the young woman at the ticket booth said as I handed her the ticket.

“I’m in shock. I kind of needed this,” I confessed.

She worked and tapped something into her computer before handing out the passes that showed I had a paid entry, and that Luke was still a free kid.

“I love it when people do that. It just makes everyone’s day a little brighter. Have fun.”

She was right. My mood was already so much better than when Dad left us in that parking lot.

Luke was easy at the zoo. I pushed his stroller, he played with his plastic toys, and when we reached the first enclosure, he watched, memorized.

As the monkeys played and Luke giggled, I pulled out my new phone.

I sent Dad a text message. ‘It’s Mila, this is my new phone number.’

I didn’t expect him to text me back or even call.

I pulled out the business card Agent Klein had given me the night before. I called the number. It went to voicemail.

“Hi, this is Mila Jones. You kept my phone. I thought you should have my new phone number.” I left my number.

I could only think of one other person who should have my number, Chandler. I stared at the phone for what felt like an eternity. I slid it back into my bag without adding Chandler's number.

I had done without him in my life for three years, I could continue without him.

I was feeling better. Still scared and sad. Dad hated me, and had even more reason to be angry with me. I needed to find a way to move out. He wouldn't go back on his word. He wouldn't kick me out. But I didn't put it past him to make wanting to stay impossible.

I was scared about what Chandler was planning. He said he wanted a DNA test. Why? Would he want to take Luke from me? If he insisted on proving paternity, maybe I should insist on some form of child support? I shouldn't have said anything about Luke. But I was so angry. How dare he tell me I made bad choices, when I was doing the best I could with a situation he was responsible for?

And I was scared about my job, and the whole FBI thing. The only wrong thing I had done was agree to work for that man.

Luke and I entered the new tiger exhibit, I saw the lady who had given me the free ticket. I smiled at her. There was a glimmer of hope. Not only was there an empty bench for me to sit on while Luke watched the tigers sleep in the sun, someone had done something nice for me for no reason. I had a new affordable phone. I had gotten myself this far, I could keep going.

"Thank you again for the ticket," I said as she came up and sat next to me on the bench.

"You looked like you desperately needed to be here today," she said with a chuckle.

"That obvious?" I asked.

"We've all been there, in one way or another," she admitted.

CHANDLER

Reality came crashing into me. I rolled over with a groan. I could still feel the ass kicking I took the day before. I drank too much, and pushed my body too hard. As much as I threw myself into distractions, and tried to wear my body out, the first thought I had before I even opened my eyes was: I'm a father. I have a son.

I sat on the edge of my bed, running my hands through my hair and over my jaw. I needed to shave. I needed to brush my teeth, and I stank. After shuffling into the bathroom and cranking the taps to full hot, that thought about getting a tankless water heater came back to me.

I could have one put in, or hell, I could just go back. Now that was an interesting concept. I could return to Europe. Probably not the Zurich office, my job there was done.

I focused on relocating during my shower. It was a decent distraction and kept my mind from focusing on Mila and Luke. They danced in and around my other thoughts, constantly there. I focused on other issues, determined not to give their thoughts my attention.

I got into the office before Sarah was at her desk. I had a backlog of emails to get through, tasks and conversations I had put off the day before. I wanted all of that work off my plate as soon as possible.

There was a knock on the door frame, the door was already open.

I looked up to see Sarah, still in her coat. “Good morning, I wasn’t sure if I’d see you today. I have a stack of messages for you. I’ll bring them in as soon as I get settled.”

I nodded. And went back to sorting my emails. At least half of them I could delegate and forward to Kyle, after all this was his regional office even if I was currently located here. Of what was left, a good third of those emails were crap that I could ignore or delete.

I didn’t need to prioritize what was left, I would just start at the top and work my way down.

“I have your messages, is now a good time?” Sarah asked.

I nodded and held out my hand for the little slips of paper she kept her phone notes on.

She handed them over one at a time. “Your lawyer couldn’t reach you, please give him a call back at your earliest convenience. Kyle Manning is out of town at a conference, and would like you to give him a call about doing a video conference in his stead. Kathleen McDonald needs something from accounting but they said you or Kyle need to approve it and Kyle is out of town.”

“That is?” I asked, expecting more.

“Everyone else said they would email you,” she said pointing at my computer.

That explained all the emails this morning.

“Thanks, I’ll take care of it. Do you have the current number for Marcel Grimes?” I asked.

“The name is familiar, so probably. If not I will track it down. I’ll buzz you?”

I nodded that was acceptable.

I dialed Kathleen first. “You needed my assistance?”

“Are you feeling better?” she asked.

I started to protest that I was feeling fine, and then realized it was probably what Sarah had told Kathleen when she asked where I was.

“Yeah, better. What can I do for you?”

She explained that she needed the unpublished quarterly numbers for some marketing comparisons, and she could not wait for the accounting department to confirm everything. She wasn't going to publish any firm numbers, but she really needed to see how the latest marketing projections were playing against the predictions.

“They won't release that information without you or Kyle giving them the okay. I don't want to wait another week or two for the results. I want to run my analysis now.”

“I'll get that taken care of for you,” I assured her.

I buzzed Sarah. “Sorry, I'm still looking for that number.”

“That's fine. Get me accounting,” I said.

After I took care of Kathleen's needs, I moved on to following up with Kyle. It occurred to me as he handed over a meeting to me that he didn't want to deal with, that I didn't have to work. I was in a position where I could retire from the full time grind and become a consultant.

I didn't need an office and an assistant. But I did like having an assistant. They kept me functional when I tended to focus on other things.

What would I do if I retired? And then thoughts of Mila and Luke came flooding back into my mind. I hadn't thought about either of them, or the fact that I was a father for the hours I had been busy.

I called my lawyer. I was shuffled off to one of his associates, Miles Bell.

“Mr. Owens, thank you for returning our call. You were difficult to get a hold of yesterday,” Miles said.

“Yeah, I didn't realize I was going to be out of touch.”

“How may we be of assistance to you?” He spoke in the plural. I understood it meant he was there to represent the entire law firm, and what he said was what anyone from their office would say. It was intended to put me at ease but it was off putting.

“A situation has come up and I need to readjust certain aspects of my estate, and named beneficiaries,” I told him.

“Oh, this sounds like we should set up an appointment so that we can go over all aspects this might impact,” he said.

“Yeah, also, I’m going to need your office to coordinate a paternity test.” I gave them Mila’s contact information before it occurred to me that she no longer had a phone. “You’re going to need to go through her father. She is currently without a phone.”

After I gave them all the pertinent information for Mila and Daniel, we agreed that an appointment before having the test results would be a waste of time. As long as Mila cooperated, and submitted for the test in a timely fashion, we could expect to meet as soon as the next week.

“Good, let’s do that. I’m considering leaving the country for a prolonged period, and want this all taken care of before I go.”

“Has the mother issued any demands regarding child support? Should we be prepared for anything of that nature?”

“No, she hasn’t. She’s too proud. But if paternity comes back positive, I’m going to want to have a check backdating support ready to go. I don’t want my son raised by a struggling mother.”

“And custody?”

“Custody?” I hadn’t thought about that. I didn’t know what my thoughts were exactly. All I knew was that Luke was my son, and Mila had spent the past few years struggling. “I guess I should consider that. For now let’s leave that alone. The mother has custody.”

“We’ll take care of getting that test taken care of. And we’ll reach out to legal colleagues who specialize in this area. We’ll be certain to bring in someone highly reputable.”

We ended the call with the understanding that everything moving forward was based on the paternity test results. Mila had been right, she didn’t need a test to know. Neither did I. But I had millions of dollars in the balance, and I wasn’t going

to let the decisions of my estate be based on anything less than legal proof.

I hadn't been off the phone for more than a minute when Sarah buzzed though. "I found Marcel Grimes. Do you want me to ring his office?"

"Yes, put it through when you have him."

About five minutes later my phone rang again. "Owens," I said, picking up.

"Please hold for Senior Grimes," the receptionist had a thick accent. She must not speak English very often.

"Chandler Owens, what has you calling me?" Grimes' voice rang through loud and clear, it was as if he were in the room with me.

"Marcel, how is life in the opposite hemisphere?"

We did our typical dance around the subject, catching up. I told him how I left Zurich and how his hand picked predecessor was doing now that I was no longer there to guide him. I told him what I was currently doing.

"You sound bored," he said.

"I am bored. I'm considering retiring and doing consultation work. But I have an itch to travel some more," I admitted.

"Do you want to come down here? South America is a thriving and growing market opportunity. Buenos Aires is a city beyond comparison."

"I've just spent three years in Europe, do you really think Buenos Aires—"

"I spent most of my life in Europe, Chandler, when I say this place is fantastic, I know of what I speak. You want to come here, trust me."

"Wilson Group doesn't have a presence in Argentina," I pointed out.

"Maybe it's time you flew from the Wilson Group nest. There are other companies out there that would appreciate your skill set."

“Are you offering?” I would take any offer coming from Grimes, he knew his businesses and he knew me.

He chuckled. “I don’t have anything I can offer, but I bet I could line a few opportunities up. You give me a date that you’ll be here, and I’ll have someone ready to make you an offer.”

I let out a long breath. Getting out of this place, changing companies sounded like a good idea. Getting out of town and away from my troubles, it was all very appealing.

“Maybe I’ll do that. Come down for a visit. I’ve never been there.”

“I’ll set something up. Give me a date, let’s do this,” Grimes said.

I needed to settle things with Mila before I could go anywhere permanently. But There was nothing keeping me from spending a long weekend away.

“I’ll email you the details,” I said as I ended the call.

“Sarah,” I said into the intercom. “Make arrangements for me in Buenos Aires the week after next.”

MILA

“Here, let me help you.” Dad began cleaning off the table and handing me dishes.

I had already put Luke to bed, and had returned to the kitchen to finish cleaning up. I was surprised Dad was still hanging around. Usually, after dinner he went into hiding in his office, or he'd leave and go hang out at some sports bar, at least on the nights his friends weren't over watching whatever game it was on our TV.

“Thank you,” I said. I wasn't sure what else there was to say. He hadn't spoken to me for days since I confessed I was picked up by the FBI and I blurted out that Chandler was Luke's father.

I still wasn't sure which he was more angry with me about.

“You've really been struggling, haven't you?” he asked.

I closed my eyes and nodded. My stomach clenched. What was he going to do now? Was this it? Was this the talk where he told me to get out?

“I haven't made it easy have I?”

I bit the inside of my cheek. I didn't turn to face him. I turned on the hot water and started to rinse off the dishes. How did I answer this question? If I said no, I'd be lying. If I said yes, he'd just have more fuel to be angry with.

“You don't have to answer that. I know I haven't,” he eventually said.

I felt tension release from my shoulders, but my stomach was still twisting into a knot.

“I’ve been hard on you. I thought that’s what it would take to make you push yourself.”

I still had my back to him, so he didn’t see me open my mouth to answer.

“But I realize that’s not what’s been happening. I’ve pushed you to the breaking point. You’re fighting to keep up with the demands I’ve set, and it’s too much.”

I turned to face him, my jaw open. I had nothing to say, but he finally seemed to understand that all of this was too much.

“I’m trying my best, Dad.” I said.

“I realize that now. Maybe if I had been a little more present, you could have trusted me. I could have helped, told you not to worry about taking a second job. If you had asked my advice I would have said that job sounded suspicious. And when I asked myself why didn’t you ask me, or tell me, I realized that trust is a two way street. I owe you an apology.”

I stared at him. Had my dad really just apologized?

“I don’t know what to say,” I admitted. I wasn’t going to brush it off and say not a problem, because it was a problem. A big one.

“I said I would be here for you, and I convinced myself that being in the house meant the same thing. I’ve physically been around, but not emotionally.”

“You’ve been here for Luke.”

“But not for you. When your mother got pregnant—”

“I know the story, Dad. You were going to marry my mom anyway. I know,” I had heard it all before.

“No, I don’t think you know it all,” Dad said.

“Mom’s parents were going to kick her out of the house if you didn’t marry her. She wouldn’t get any kind of support from them at all. I get it, you had to get married or Mom’s own mother would stop talking to her.”

“We had to get married or her father would have stopped her mother from talking to her. He would have cut her out of her family completely. My parents wanted us to wait. They were all for us living together and raising you, and then getting married later,” he said.

“I always thought Grandma and Grandpa also wanted you to get married,” I confessed. I was surprised to learn they hadn’t been behind the big push.

“Well, they supported whatever we decided. But they thought getting married too soon wasn’t the best idea. It turns out it probably was.”

He looked pale and was shaking. “Mila, you would have been raised by a single mother and then handed over to the state when she died if her father hadn’t forced our hands. I like to think I would have stuck around, but the reality is I wouldn’t have. I wanted out so bad about two years later. Things got tough. Finding a job was tricky, you needed constant attention. I seriously considered leaving. I would have too, if your mother hadn’t gotten sick.”

“You would have left us?” I sat down hard. Dad— who always did the right thing, pushed me when no one else cared, or when I wanted to give up— had almost abandoned me and my mother. It didn’t seem real.

“That’s not something you would have done,” I said.

“It is. I did it, but I didn’t last twenty four hours. Your mom thought I was on an overnight for an interview out of town. I hadn’t planned on going home that day, but then I realized I would never see your little face again. I realized I was just making it harder on your mother. Sure it would have been easier for me, but that wasn’t fair, was it? I went home, but I kept looking for another way out.”

I looked at him and could barely believe what I was hearing.

“I’ve been making it harder on you, too. I told you I would be here to help you, support you, and I have been absent.”

I nodded. I had been raising Luke all on my own and navigating around Dad and his moods when he remembered

how much of a disappointment I was.

“I’ve let the memory of your mother down.”

I nodded. I knew the story he told it to me when I was little, how she asked him to take care of me, never let me forget how much she loved me. I barely remembered her, but I had a scene of her in bed asking Dad to take care of me. I was asleep, curled up next to her. I heard that story so much it felt like a memory.

“Do you think you could lend me the money to pay for daycare?” I squirmed a little as I asked him. I was barely going to have enough in my next paycheck.

He gave me a sharp nod. “Daycare, that’s a good place to start. You don’t need to borrow money for that. I’ll pay for it. I can afford it. I should have offered earlier. I thought you were exaggerating when you told me how much it cost.”

“I never lied about how expensive it is. I basically work to pay them.”

“I know that now. Maybe we can sit down this week and figure out your expenses. I was thinking that it might make more sense for me to watch Luke while you get a part time job, and we take him out of daycare. As you said, you’re working to pay them. Have you considered working for them? Maybe you would get a discount?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know about working with kids. It’s not the worst idea.”

Dan nodded. “And we need to talk about your other issue.”

“Yeah, the investigation. I know. No one has called me back. I gave Agent Klein my new number. But I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how I’m going to afford a lawyer.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I have a legal team at work who is already lining someone up for you.”

“Why are you doing this? Like all of a sudden, why now?” I blinked hard, I didn’t want to cry. But I needed this help so badly, it felt strangely as if I could breathe again.

“It took some thinking and soul searching, but... Mila, you are so brave, and work so hard. You’ve tackled everything on your own. I think when I realized you’ve known who Luke’s father was all this time— not some poor waiter who wouldn’t have been in a position to help you out even if he had known about Luke, but a man who had the means available to him to make your life easier— and you took it on yourself to handle everything on your own. That you could have told Chandler, sued him for child support, but you didn’t. You faced your situation head on. That’s not a person to be ashamed of. You are not someone to be embarrassed about. I had everything backwards. I should have been embarrassed for my actions, not yours. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t say anything, I sat there for a minute. The tears that I hadn’t wanted started to fall. I threw my arms around my dad and held on. He hugged me back. This didn’t erase the past three years, but this would certainly make going forward a whole lot easier. Having Dad’s support meant everything. Having financial help changed everything.

I released him and sat back down. I was too wobbly to stand on my own feet. “Thank you.”

“Now, I have to ask, what are you planning on doing about Chandler?”

I gulped. I would have to deal with him sooner or later. “He told me he wants a DNA test done on Luke. I agreed, but he’s got to set it up. I’m not going to just do the work for him, I’m not his personal assistant. I figure he’ll have a lawyer call or something.”

“You gave him your new phone number?”

I shook my head. I didn’t see any reason to make anything easy for him.

CHANDLER

The longer I stared out the window the more I hated the view. Trees, shrubs, the neighbor's driveway full of cars. They had a three car garage, why weren't any of their cars ever in it?

The ice stopped rattling around in my glass hours earlier. It was dark out, and stayed dark out, it didn't grow darker as the city went to sleep and lights were turned off. My neighborhood in the depths of suburbia stayed the same, dark was dark. I stared out that fucking window expecting some miracle of insight.

Decision making was my strength, or had been until I was faced with this situation. Money was easy. And until I met Mila, I thought people were easy too. Now I had a son, and nothing lined up anymore. Nothing moved forward. My life had stalled out.

I couldn't force Mila to submit a DNA test for Luke unless I went through the courts. My lawyer already told me unless I was planning to sue for custody, the court would see my curiosity of the boy's paternity as a waste of time. Legally, I was curious. That was the stupidest thing I have ever heard.

Legally, I needed to know so I could make him my heir, so I could set up the appropriate Trusts, and accounts. I wasn't going to pay for someone else's condom fail to go to college. Only I couldn't force my support onto Mila if she didn't want it.

How the fuck could she not want my support? She was obviously struggling. But she never said anything, even after I came back.

I flinched awake when the glass dropped from my hand and crashed to the floor. Somehow the dark night was now the dusky light of pre-dawn. I clearly fell asleep at some point. Gathering up the broken glass, I continued to focus on the barrier to my future.

I had a son. Now what the hell was I going to do about it?

Hours later I woke up in bed. Sunlight filtered through my bedroom curtains, and my phone was ringing. The vibration reverberated through my bedside table like a loudspeaker.

“Yes, what?” I managed to bark out as I grabbed it to my ear.

“I know we are in different time zones, but you are not so far behind me as to still be in bed. I’m enjoying my lunch, you should be making plans. Why are you asleep?” Grimes asked. His tone was balanced on the fine edge between being derisive and being a reprimand.

I sat up and ran my hand over my face in an attempt to wake up faster.

“Grimes, what are you busting my balls about?”

“You’re wasting time, Chandler. Teenagers and housewives sleep in. Are you ill? Why are you in bed?”

“I mentioned that I had a little issue to clear up before I could commit and move.” I hadn’t gone into details, but I had told him I wasn’t in a position to jump and relocate like I had before. “Unfortunately, my hands are tied until the other party finishes what I need them to do.”

“Then you should be up and monitoring them until the task is complete.”

“Is that why you called? To tell me I’m not moving fast enough, or was there an actual reason?” I groaned. I wasn’t in the mood for anyone, especially Grimes to be on my case. It wasn’t like Mila would actually listen to me if I called again.

All of my previous calls were going straight to voicemail. She hadn't blocked me, so my best guess was that the FBI still had her phone. Of course, if I was serious, I could swallow down my pride, risk another fist to the face, and show up at her house.

"I called because I wanted to check your progress. My assistant has found a very suitable apartment, but you are not ready for us to proceed with leasing anything."

"No, I'm not ready to lease anything, yet. I'll see if I can light a fire under them this week. I want out of here sooner than later."

He made a few non-committal judgements regarding my fitness for upper management. I wasn't sure if he was joking or not. I had a proven track record, but that didn't matter to someone like Marcel Grimes. One mistake, one perceived mistake and his opinion could switch.

He ended the call. I stared at my phone. Maybe if I confided my situation to him, he wouldn't be so harsh. But harsh and to the point were what made Grimes a great man.

It was time to stop fucking around. Mila needed to complete and submit the test for Luke. And that meant I needed to get showered and dressed before showing up on her doorstep.

Her car wasn't around when I pulled in, but Daniel's was. Might as well get this over with. I pressed the doorbell and backed off the front stoop. No need to be in the direct line of fire when he opened the door.

"Get the hell off my property!" Daniel barked as soon as he saw me.

I raised my hands and backed away, maintaining distance between us. "Truce? Peace. Come on, man, give me a chance?"

"A chance to do what? Ruin Mila's life even more?" he crossed his arms and puffed up his chest.

Daniel wasn't a large man, but he was fit. Even if he was firmly lodged into middle-age. I doubt he could take me if it

came back to blows. But he could hit. It took days for that mark on my jaw to go away.

“I’m not here to fight you.”

He grunted in response. Good enough for me.

“Do you honestly think I would have left Mila in the lurch if I had known about the kid?”

Another grunt.

“Look, I believe her when she says he’s mine. But I need to wrap some stuff up legally and I can’t do that until she sends in the paternity test. Could you at least talk to her and get her to do that?” I asked.

“What kind of legal stuff?”

“Child support, heir to my estate. That sort of legal. If she’s afraid I’m going to sue for custody, that’s not me.”

It looked like he was chewing on the inside of his cheek, his jaw working from side to side as he stood there thinking. After a few long moments of staring each other down, he started talking.

“If you had known about Luke, how would things have been different? Would you have married Mila?”

Married Mila? I was fond of her, but I didn’t think we had that kind of relationship. We had been together for the fun of it, not the future of it.

“Truthfully, probably not. But I would have been around more. Would have come back during my vacations to see her and the kid. I can tell you, I would have made sure that she had a better car to drive around in. And if she insisted on working, child care at the best place would have been paid for. She wouldn’t have had to struggle.”

I lifted my hands in a defeated gesture, palms twisted up, fingers spread. “I wouldn’t have left her on her own if I had known. That’s not the kind of man I am.”

“Then where have you been the past week? If that’s not the kind of man you are, why haven’t you shown up with all of

these things you claim you would have given her?”

“Get her to do the DNA test, Daniel.”

“Would you have supported her without the DNA test when she was pregnant? Why demand the test now?”

It was a fair question.

“Because we were actively seeing each other at that point, it would have been the right thing to do. And I would have asked for confirmation of paternity once the kid was born. But I didn’t learn about him for almost three years, how do I know what Mila’s been up to?”

Daniel took a threatening step forward. I backed up.

“It’s only logical. Tell me you wouldn’t do the same?”

“We’re not the same. I married Mila’s mother when she found out she was pregnant,” he snarled.

“That was different. You were actually in love with her.”

“Are you telling me you weren’t in love with Mila?”

“That’s not what we had going on.”

“You weren’t in love with her, but had no problems sleeping with her and getting her pregnant.”

The sooner he came to terms with that, the sooner he might help me out. I nodded, and waited

“Come on, man. Can’t you see if you help me out with this, get Mila to send in the test, then we’ll know for certain. If the kid is mine—”

“His name is Luke.”

I nodded. “Luke. If Luke is my son, then I’ll make sure Mila has all her needs met.”

“But you won’t fix the damage done to her reputation and marry her?”

“You’re living in the ice ages, Daniel. Hell, back when Mila was born people weren’t so hung up on that, only your wife’s family. Look, things would have to be very different between me and Mila for that to happen. She’s not talking to me, and I

have no idea if that kid, if Luke is really my son. Help me out, here.”

“If I help you out, you have to agree to spend time with him. He’s a good little boy, you should get to know him,” he told me his requirements.

“That’s it? Spend time with a two year old? What are we going to talk about football?”

“Grow up, Chandler. I always thought you were a good man, prove it. Spend time with Luke, and I’ll make sure Mila sends in that test.”

KIRA

Present

The double beep beep of a car horn had me scurrying faster across the street. I twisted and waved at the driver. I hadn't seen them and I didn't recognize the car, but odds were good I knew them. Besides, it was my fault for being in the street.

Too lazy to walk to the end of the block and cross at the intersection, I took a chance and dashed across the street. I flashed a quick glance around to see if one of Millers Glen's finest police officers were around. The last thing I needed this week

MILA

We sat on the floor. Chandler looked uncomfortable and grumpy. I was enjoying his discomfort.

“What are you smirking at?” he grumbled at Dad.

Dad was sitting comfortably in his recliner.

“You’re the one who said you wanted to get to know your son,” I reminded him. He glared at me.

I suspected that might not have been exactly what had happened between Dad and Chandler. All I knew was they were now ganging up on me, and I had to play nice with Chandler. Fine. But I wasn’t about to let Chandler spend time alone with Luke.

Luke didn’t know him, and I had a feeling Chandler didn’t know how to interact with a two-year-old. Luke had some language, but not a lot, and most of what he said was close to actual words. And he wasn’t potty trained. Could Chandler actually change a diaper?

“Yes, I did.” The way he said the words, the way he glared at Dad, I suspected there was something else going on between them. Fine, they could have their secrets. I certainly had mine.

So while the adults were at various levels of discomfort, physically for Chandler, and emotionally for me— it was so hard to sit there and not rage or cry—Luke was enjoying himself. He had everyone’s attention, and new animals.

Chandler had arrived with a gift for Luke. More animal figurines. And these were the good ones, super sturdy.

“Hey, there, Luke, that’s not food.” Chandler reached out in an attempt to take the new giraffe away.

Luke dodged him with a giggle. I sighed.

“These are the good figures, we shouldn’t have to worry about pieces breaking off. He has a habit of chewing on things he really likes. It’s normal,” I told Chandler.

“Luke, sweetie, we don’t chew on our toys, remember?” I crawled across the floor to him and pried the figurine out of his hand and mouth. It was covered in slobber. I got to my feet and carried the offending creature into the kitchen for a quick rinse off.

“He just puts things in his mouth?” Chandler sounded concerned.

“He does. He’s still finding out about the world around him. He doesn’t chew on everything, just the things he seems to like the best,” I explained.

“He’s like a puppy,” Dad said. He pushed out of his recliner.

“Dad! Do not compare Luke to a puppy.”

“Human puppy,” he said again, chuckling.

I don’t know where he was going, he didn’t say anything when he left. To be honest, I didn’t realize he wasn’t around for almost an hour, my attention was on Luke, and Chandler.

Luke started to get fussy, whiney, and belligerent.

“What’s wrong with him?” Chandler asked me.

I shrugged. “Why don’t you ask him?”

Chandler looked so perplexed that he could actually talk to Luke about something other than repeating animal names.

“What’s wrong with you? Why are you cranky all of a sudden?” he barked rather harshly.

I didn’t blame Luke one bit when he burst into tears and crawled into my lap.

Chandler tossed his hands in the air. “What did I do?” He climbed to his feet. “Is your kid always so sensitive?”

I looked up at him. “He’s your child too, and yes, he is a sensitive little boy who is tired and cranky, and you just talked to him like he’s a problem. You can’t talk to little kids like that.”

“You told me to ask him what was wrong.”

“Watch, learn,” I said to Chandler. I turned my attention to Luke. “Are you hungry, would you like some cheesy noodles?”

Luke’s lower lip stuck out and he shook his head.

“Is this a chicken nuggets kind of day?”

This time Luke nodded.

I glanced up at Chandler. I hoped my expression of wide eyes and pursed lips said, ‘told you so,’ because that’s what I was thinking.

“Not fair. You knew what to ask, you prompted his response.” Chandler looked totally annoyed that this interaction with Luke wasn’t as easy as he had clearly expected. He probably thought he’d show up and say something like, ‘hey kid, I’m your dad,’ and expect Luke to fawn over him. Magical connection between father and son.

I lifted Luke off my lap.

“Here.” Chandler held out his hands and took Luke from me.

I didn’t hear what he was saying as I climbed to my feet. His head was tucked in close, and his voice was low and soft. Luke sucked in his little protruding lip and nodded. They headed into the kitchen in front of me.

Luke pointed to his highchair. Chandler stared at it, and then set Luke into it. He struggled with the tray, but managed to figure out how to slide it in. “See, I’m learning.”

And Chandler continued to learn. He paid attention to how many chicken nuggets to make, three. And how long to microwave them.

“Don’t you cook these in the oven?”

“No, he doesn’t know the difference, and the oven would take too long. I get the ones that are already fully cooked.”

The microwave binged. I pulled the plate out and tapped the tops of them to test how hot they were. The plate was always hotter than the nuggets. I explained what I was doing as I did it. I had gotten into the habit of narrating everything I did around Luke, it seemed natural to do the same with Chandler. He needed to learn what I was doing. I couldn’t think of a better way than explaining as I went.

“These are barely warm,” Chandler noticed when I had him test the nuggets.

“Too hot and Luke might get burned. They need to warm up without being frozen or too hot.”

“There’s a lot more to this than I realized.”

I laughed at his confession. He had no idea.

“Thank you,” Chandler said as he was getting ready to leave. We had fed and changed Luke, and Chandler read before I put Luke down for a nap. Chandler observed the entire time. “I have a lot more to learn about him, don’t I?”

I nodded.

“Can I come back on Saturday?”

I was surprised that he asked. Whatever deal he made with Dad, I thought this was it. Just this morning. I stared at Chandler for a long moment. I needed to think. I wanted Luke to know his father, I had always wanted that. But in my hurt of being abandoned, I kept Luke to myself.

The secret was no longer a secret. I couldn’t think of any reason to keep Chandler away from Luke, other than my own feelings. And I knew from past events, my feelings could not exactly be trusted to make the smartest decisions.

I nodded. “I think Luke might like that.”

The next time Chandler showed up, he didn’t bring a present for Luke, but one for me. He walked in through the door carrying a stack of books. Flags of sticky notes stuck out from each book. “I bought some books. I have questions.”

Together, we sat on the floor and played with Luke and his animals while Chandler flipped through book after book, stopping at a flagged item and asking me about it.

He asked me everything from Luke's medical history, had I breast fed him, how was his immune system, was he up to date on his shots, to what were his favorite foods and was I giving him enough vegetables? Where was Luke developmentally? Was he on target, ahead or behind?

Chandler had gone from barely noticing I had a child, to ignoring us once he learned Luke was his, to being fully invested in his well being. I kind of liked it. I didn't know if Dad, who was helping me to raise Luke, even knew most of this information.

Even after lunch— that included some carrot sticks on Chandler's insistence— and nap time, Chandler stayed and continued to ask me questions. What was Luke's routine like when he went to daycare? Did we do things differently on weekends?

The more Chandler visited and spent time with us, the more frequently he was on our doorstep. Every morning I didn't work at the call center, Chandler was there. More and more he stayed for a while after Luke went down for a nap to talk.

Luke hadn't hit the 'Why?' question phase yet. I expected it in the next few years. He would question and ask me to explain everything. I felt like Chandler hit that phase early on Luke's behalf. It felt good to be the expert for once. He had to come to me for the answers.

"What is he like when he wakes up?" Chandler asked.

I shrugged. "It depends. If he's not feeling well, he's fighting something off or about to get sick, he might be clingy or snuggly. A growing spurt could also make him want more cuddles. He could wake up full of spit and vinegar and want to run around and shout. If he's like that I might take him to the park to burn all of that excess energy off."

"He likes the park? Can I come?"

“Of course, you can.” I tilted my head and looked at him from a new angle. “What’s with the sudden interest in being in Luke’s life?”

Chandler leaned back in his chair and ran his hands through his hair. “Truthfully, I’m not sure. I’ve been processing this whole situation. I’m still working it all out in my head. But as I spend more and more time with you both, I realize this isn’t something I can check off an action plan.”

“There are plenty of men who do just that.” I made a check in the air. “Spent time with the kid, paid child support, done.”

“I’m not like that, Mila. You know that.”

I stared hard at him this time. Did I know that? Had I really even given him the opportunity to prove to me what he would be like as a father? I bit the inside of my lip. I had been doing a great job of playing the victim all this time, when the truth was, I hadn’t given Chandler a chance. I had thought he would have been a great father, and then I didn’t even tell him.

CHANDLER

I saw Mila with new eyes. She had always been beautiful, but now there was something more about her. She had matured, I saw the weariness about her for what it was. Not only was she struggling to maintain a level of comfort for her child, it was the love and care for Luke that I saw in her face.

She didn't have time or need of my bullshit. She no longer played those games.

No wonder she was exhausted.

And Daniel certainly hadn't been any help over the past few years. He hadn't stepped up when she needed him the most, and I was a continent away, clueless that she needed me. That wasn't going to happen this time. This time I knew about Luke, and I would make sure they were both taken care of.

I couldn't get enough time with either of them. Each day I spent was another memory I could tuck away, a point of reference I could ask about when I reached back out in the future. I made sure there was a connection between Luke and I. One that would hold through the years when I returned to visit.

And the thought that I was setting everything up to fall into place so that I could leave Mila again felt like a kick in the gut.

I stood in the doorway of the room Luke and Mila shared. The house was more than big enough for Luke to have his own room. It was probably a remnant of Daniel's mismanagement of his emotions over Mila having a child. Well, if she wanted,

I would let Mila stay at my house while I was gone. She could have full control of her situation that way.

As Luke slept, his thin baby hair sticking to his forehead, his tiny features made him look like a Renaissance painting of a cherub. Which room should I have painted and converted into a room for a growing boy? Mila would probably want to redecorate the master as well.

I should find a painter and general contractor to come in and make those changes before I left. Save her the hassle.

“What are you doing?” Mila asked me in a low voice.

She was so close. It felt right to reach out and wrap my arm over her shoulder. She leaned in close and rested her hand on my stomach.

“Watching our boy. This doesn’t ever get old, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t.” she jiggled with a quiet laugh.

Damn she felt good, she felt right.

“How do you get anything done? I mean, I know I should leave. I have work that I’ve been avoiding all morning. But I’m content watching him.”

She sucked in a breath, and let it out on a pained sigh. “It’s hard, Chandler. I’m not going to lie. When he was a baby, everyone kept telling me to sleep when he slept so I could get some rest. I couldn’t. I was terrified if I stopped watching him, something would happen, or I’d wake up and he wouldn’t even be real. That he had just been a dream.”

“A nightmare, you mean.”

She punched me. It wasn’t a hard punch, but it wasn’t a playful jab, she had meant it. “The nightmare has been everything else, not him, never him. Don’t ever say that again.”

“So you’re telling me if you had a chance to do it all over again—”

“I wouldn’t change a thing. Not true, I’d have been stronger and told you, even while you were packing up to leave me. I

would have told you, and I wouldn't have taken that office job with Ward."

If she had told me, everything would have been different. She wouldn't have needed to take that job.

"Still nothing new from your friendly FBI agent?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It's all pending." She seemed to lean in a little closer at that point.

I needed to go, but that would mean walking away from this moment of peace. I was very aware this was going to be one of those memories I held onto well into my geriatric years. Mila and I were getting along, comfortable, and touching. And Luke asleep in his perfection.

I groaned, and Mila shifted, taking her weight off me. She didn't step away, so my arm stayed draped over her shoulders.

"I guess it's time to go." I didn't want to. "Will you have dinner with me?"

"You know you can stay for dinner if you want. I mean the last time you and Dad spent the entire time bitching about your football team. But I know Luke would like to have you around."

"What about you? Would you like to have me around?"

She tipped her face up to me. I studied her face as she looked at me. She had the tiny pointy chin our son seemed to have inherited. And the way his eyes changed shape when he smiled, he got that from her.

Her lips were her own, and I was drawn down to them like an electromagnet switched on. I hadn't kissed her for months. My lips pressed against hers, and it felt like air in my lungs after holding my breath underwater.

She didn't move at first. The slightest whimper sounded in her throat, and then her arms were snaking around my neck. I held her body close to mine. It's where she fit, where she belonged. The kiss was long and slow and tender. The fire of our passion was definitely there. I felt mine roaring in the background, just as I could sense she held reign in on hers.

She let out a soft hum when the kiss ended. Her eyes were closed. She was savoring the kiss just as I was. I licked my lips, wanting to keep the taste of her right there in the front of my memory.

“I can’t stay tonight. I’m already behind on a few projects.”

“They’re keeping you busy at the office?” She teased.

“I’m keeping me busy.”

Mila didn’t know that I had already left Wilson and had taken on a few consulting projects to hold me over until I could complete the relocation to Argentina. “I’d like to take you out to dinner. We need to talk.” I turned so I could look at Luke. “You think Daniel will be willing to babysit?”

“So you mean the kind of talking that requires undivided attention?” I saw the gulp in her throat as she swallowed.

I nodded solemnly. We needed to have a serious, adult conversation about what was going on between us, between me and Luke. I had a list of provisions for them, and I needed to propose that she move into my house when I leave.

“Yes, I’m going to need your attention.” I needed to go over everything with her so that nothing was a surprise when we met with the legal team and bankers.

“I haven’t been out on a date in years. Is this a date-date? Can I expect you to try to kiss me when you drop me off?” Her tone was cheerful, but it was forced.

“If you promise you’ll kiss me like that again, I promise I will kiss you when I drop you off.” Just the thought of kissing her again tightened something in my chest. “I’ve really got to go. I’m going to be late for a meeting.”

“That’s not like you.” She pressed my shirt down across my pecs.

Her touch was making it harder to go. I grasped her fingers in my hand. I had to close my eyes against the temptation to kiss them, but danger lay in wait down that path.

“I’ll call you.” I let go of her hand and left.

I sat through the video meeting as if I were in a fog. Too much had happened between Mila and I for me to simply ignore her touch. It was familiar, it was right.

I showed up on her doorstep three long days later. Daniel held Luke when he opened the door. Luke reached out for me. I took him from his grandfather, and followed Daniel into the den. Luke's animals were scattered all over the floor.

"Mila said you have somethings to discuss," Daniel said.

"Yeah, I have some stuff I want to get into place for her and Luke's care. I want to go over everything with her so that nothing is a surprise when we go into the lawyer's office to sign papers."

"Don't you think I should be included in this discussion?"

I shook my head. "This isn't a negotiation. If you have concerns and want to come with us to the lawyer's office you can. But this is between Mila and myself."

"If it involves Luke, I should be part of the decision making process."

I kept shaking my head and held up my hands with my palms out. "No offense, but no."

"Are you ready?" Mila asked as she swept into the room. Her hair was down and swaying, and her eyes bright. She looked well rested and sparkled. "Be good for Pawpaw." She kissed Luke and wiggled her eyebrows at me as she left the room.

I took the hint, said good night to both Daniel, and my son, and followed her out.

She had the front door open and was waiting for me on the other side. She wore form fitting jeans that accentuated her curves in a way that my body responded to. I couldn't stop myself from touching her, even just a little. I slid my arm around the small of her back as I stepped out next to her.

"You look beautiful," I said against her hair.

"I'm wearing jeans and a t-shirt. You didn't tell me how fancy we were being," she complained as she tugged on the front of my suit jacket. It was designer, all of my suits were.

“I came from a meeting.” I lied, I wanted to look good.
“You’re perfect. I wasn’t planning on anything fancy. I want us to be able to sit and talk as long as we need.”

MILA

The giggles were back. At some point in time, I stopped feeling giddy around Chandler. I stopped laughing and smiling. But those feelings were back.

He looked dashing in his suit. I knew he looked good no matter what he wore, but there was something about him in a fine suit that made me go weak in the knees. Maybe that's why I fell for him three years earlier.

He wasn't joking when he said 'nothing fancy,' was planned. He pulled into the lot of a burger joint. I hadn't been to this place, it looked like a combination of dive bar and diner. The booths were extra large, and the onion rings were some of the best I ever tasted.

And he talked. He said he needed to talk, and that's what he did. He might not have intended on seducing me, but his words were outstanding, and filled me with warmth.

"I wasn't here when you needed me. I want to make sure that no matter what happens next, you are cared for. That Luke is cared for," he said.

It was probably the nicest thing I had heard in a long time. I don't know what about my luck had changed but it seemed as if suddenly everything was going my way. Dad was willing to pay for daycare, and now Chandler was offering me child support.

"You know I... this is wonderful, but..." I was having a hard time getting the words to come out of my mouth properly. I slid out of my side of the booth and slid in next to Chandler.

I rested my head on his shoulder and picked up his hand in mine. I wanted a connection between us, but I couldn't face him for some reason.

“Even after the paternity test, I wasn't going to ask you for support. Dad told me I should, especially since you were after me about the DNA thing. Thank you. I always knew you would be a good father. You're a good man.”

He lifted my face, with a finger under his chin. I saw the depths of his eyes only briefly before his lips brushed against mine. I lifted so that I could press against his mouth, lick his lips. His tongue found mine, and for a moment I was engulfed in flames. But then the kiss ended.

Being around Chandler was a roller coaster the past few weeks.

I felt as if we were growing close again. And then he kissed me, and now I wanted him. I wanted him completely, with my body and my mind.

“Let's get out of here,” his voice was low and gravely.

I didn't need to be told twice. I slid out of the booth and grabbed my jacket. He tossed a twenty on the table for a generous tip, and grabbed the check to pay on the way out.

In the parking lot, he grabbed me, pressing his body to mine. “I'm going to take you home and make love to you,” he said with such authority I could barely answer.

I nodded. I wanted to say yes, please but the words came out as a squeak.

He drove way too fast, and it still wasn't fast enough. I chewed on my lip the entire time. Chandler's expression was determined focus as he kept his eyes on the traffic. We didn't talk.

His house was dark. We didn't pause once inside, no lights switched on, no offer of a drink or mild chit chat. Chandler took my hand and pulled me along to his bedroom.

“You've been missing from this bed for far too long.” His lips claimed mine, and I was lost to him.

We were fire together, all hot passion. There was no slow tender seduction, this was an urgency to get inside each other's pants. I loved that about him, he wanted to touch and taste my body as much as I wanted him.

I purred when he pulled his shirt off and I could drag my short nails down the front of his pecs. The crisp hairs on his chest tickled my finger tips. I loved the feel of him.

He palmed one of my breasts, and I resigned myself to running my fingers through the hair on his head, no longer able to reach around his strong arms to touch him. Chandler always rendered me useless when he touched me like this. I could hardly think, could barely remember my own name. It was heaven.

He guided our bodies against the smooth sheets of his bed. He was right, it had been far too long since I had been there. Comfort, luxury, Chandler. It was like a forgotten dream that I could finally remember, and it was better than what I had been missing. This was a taste on my tongue that had been amazing, but now I could taste it again, it was better, so much better.

Chandler's strong hands guided me, maneuvered me to where he wanted me. He claimed a nipple in his mouth while he kneaded and massaged my hips, and spread my legs.

His fingers glided over my seam back and forth with soft teasing strokes.

I felt his cock, heavy and hot against my leg. I tried to stroke him. I wanted to touch him and make him feel as amazing as he was making me feel.

I cried out a moan when he slid that teasing finger between my folds. His touch teased and played with me before he pressed his thumb against my clit. I bucked my hips against his hand. He found the spot that would give me the most pleasure, and he remembered exactly how I liked it toyed with.

He pressed a rhythm against my clit. I doubt it was anything more than the rhythm in his head, but it felt like morse code straight to my core. It was as if his thumb was telling me he

was going to thrust his cock into me until I screamed, and screamed again.

His hips joined the rhythm as he rubbed his cock against my skin. He had been the last man to touch me like this. I didn't want to imagine that anyone could match his expertise at moving my body. Chandler hadn't forgotten what to do, on the other hand, I couldn't think, couldn't remember if he liked nails on his back, or teeth scraping against the soft skin of his earlobe.

I tried it all when I could, the rest of the time, I let him guide me, use me, drive me insane.

Pressure built in my core. I thought I would explode.

"I need you," I whimpered.

He pushed up so that he hovered above me. "I'm right here, Mila. I'm right here."

"But I need you inside me," I managed to say.

He left my body for only a moment, but it was long enough to miss his touch. I reached between my legs and tried to find my clit. My fingers were clumsy, and before I succeeded, Chandler was back and moving my hands out of the way. "None of that while I'm here."

He shifted until he was between my thighs. His thick cock replaced his fingers as he returned to toying with me. His thumb returned to pressing out its message against my clit.

I wanted to shout with joy when he pressed his tip against my opening and thrust home. Home, he was where he belonged. We belonged intertwined this way, hip to hip, heart to heart.

Everything in my body tightened up. I felt the waves begin with each stroke, each thrust. He rocked me into the bed.

Wrapping my legs around him, I clung to him. I wanted to bring all of him against me at once. I wanted to consume him. As I clutched at his arms and shoulders, he maintained a steady pounding, a constant crashing of hips.

My inner walls sucked and pulled on his cock, and then everything was light and fireworks. I could barely breathe as

my body was wrapped in a seizure so exquisite. This was bliss on the highest of highs. I didn't think Chandler had even made me cum so hard before.

He grunted and increased his speed. I wanted to demand more, harder, faster, faster, but I was already traveling at light speed. He needed to catch up.

The orgasm took its toll and when the last wave rolled over my body, all I could do was pant.

Chandler, covered in sweat, looked down at me, smiling.

I stared deep into his eyes. I never wanted to lose this, lose him. "I love you," I confessed.

He cupped the side of my cheek and kissed me. He wasn't ready for the words yet, but he felt them. Didn't he? How could he have just done that to my body and not love me too?

"I've been thinking," he said as he rolled to his feet. "I want you and Luke to stay here."

He crossed his room to the bathroom and closed the door.

I stared after him, shocked by his words, and fascinated with his strong glutes. He had a fabulous ass.

"What do you mean stay here?" I asked as soon as the bathroom door opened again. "You mean live with you? Move in and be a family?" My heart wanted to explode with happiness. "Yes, yes, that would be amazing."

He shook his head, and picked his shorts up from the floor. He balanced on one leg at a time as he pulled them on.

"What?"

"I'm not going to be here. I've taken on a lead role with a company in South America. I've been delaying my departure to make sure all provisions for Luke were settled."

"You're leaving me again? But I love you, why are you doing this to me?" Pain lanced through every cell of my body.

Chandler climbed across the bed and wrapped his arms around me. "Come with me," he pleaded. "We can be together and a family there."

“I can’t,” I sobbed. “I can’t leave the country until the stupid investigation is cleared. Can’t you stay longer?”

“I’ve already put them off as long as I can. It’s a done deal. If you can’t come with me, then, I want you in the house.” His arms and comfort fell away from me. “We can make arrangements the next couple of days to get you the keys, and move your stuff in.”

CHANDLER

Mila wasn't home when I stopped by to deliver the keys to the house. I handed them to Daniel.

"She has a home here," he said.

I looked at him and didn't say anything. She was treated like some kid being punished as long as she stayed with Daniel. He wasn't teaching her any lessons on how to be an adult as long as he continued to limit her and Luke into one bedroom. But I needed him on my side. Needed someone who understood finance to keep an eye on her. I didn't want anyone taking advantage of her any more, unfortunately that meant I had to rely on Daniel, even though in my opinion, he was just as guilty as anyone else when it came to shafting Mila.

"Luke can grow up in a place where he has his own space. They can convert my old office into a playroom. But if she doesn't want to live there, she knows how to contact me. I'll get my old leasing agent back out, and I'll rent the place out. But I'd rather she and Luke were in it."

"Are you really going to Argentina?"

I gave him a curt nod. "I am. My old mentor has an opportunity I'd be stupid to pass up," I said.

"Like what took you to Zurich?"

"Exactly, but in a different organization. New country, new company, new opportunities."

Daniel shook his head, "Just like last time."

“No.” I stated flatly. “Last time I had no idea Mila was pregnant. This time, I know what I’m leaving. It’s not permanent. She knows how to contact me. I’ll be in contact with her. I’ll be back state side a few times a year. All support funds are being paid directly into her bank twice a month. I’ll leave the keys to the car in the house. She’s already on the insurance.”

“Are you going to see Luke before you leave?” Daniel asked.

“We already had our goodbyes.” It had been a stressful visit. Mila had been angry with me.

I wanted to blame her, but I couldn’t. This decision was based on business. It was a smart move. Maybe once everything was behind her, and she no longer had the uncertainty of the investigation looming over the horizon, maybe we could find a way to make everything work.

The car to the airport arrived shortly after I got home. Leaving the house felt different this time, not like when I had moved to Zurich, this time it felt more permanent. When I came back this wouldn’t be my place anymore. It will have magically become Mila’s and Luke’s. There was a hint of melancholy in that thought. I was leaving what was mine behind, forever.

The international concourse was crowded with all the overnight travelers expecting to sleep on their flights to other continents. Ideally I should have slept comfortably. Only everything felt off. I was too hot, or too cold. When I had flown down to see Grimes the month previously, the trip had seemed so easy. I slept like a baby. Now, every jostle and bump on the flight had me filching awake.

I felt like the undead by the time we arrived. Making it through customs and retrieving my luggage like a travel worn zombie. I pulled up Grimes’ number on my Argentine phone, something I had picked up after spending an afternoon with him. I knew I would return.

‘Arrived, on the way to the hotel.’ I texted from the back of a cab.

The phone rang.

“You think a text is sufficient. You have arrived!” His voice carried through the bluetooth headphone loudly, as if he were on speaker phone. I pressed the volume down.

“I’m the walking dead,” I confessed.

“Oh, bad flight?”

“Long flight, I couldn’t sleep.”

“Instead of going out, we’ll dine at the hotel’s restaurant then.”

“No, thank you. I really need to get things lined up for tomorrow and then pass out.”

“You’re in Argentina now. Take a siesta, and I’ll be at the hotel for dinner at ten.”

“Ten? Isn’t that late?” I asked.

“It’s actually quite normal for dinner. We do things a bit differently here.”

“Fine,” I let out a long breath that turned into a yawn. “I’ll schedule a wake up call and meet you in the lobby.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Arriving and checking into the hotel felt like an eternity. It was another eternity as the bell hop brought in my bags, and displayed the room, showing me how the curtains worked, and where extra towels were located. My Spanish was poor, but I managed to stumble over a few words as I handed him a tip.

After kicking off my shoes, I face planted into the bed. I slept. I was bone tired still when the call rang through waking me up.

I hadn’t even closed the curtains before passing out. The city was lit up all around me. It was a spectacular view. It was almost ten. That meant it would be close to eight back home. Bed time. Mila would be half sitting half lying across her bed reading to Luke until he was well and truly asleep.

I stared out at Buenos Aires but what I saw was Mila gently lifting a sleeping Luke and putting him into his toddler bed. Luke wouldn’t even stir; he would be so soundly asleep. She’d adjust his little jammies, and tuck his blanket around him,

tucking a stuffed animal next to him. And then ever so quietly she would lift the side railing into place so he couldn't fall out of bed.

I could see them as clearly as if I were standing there leaning against her door, as I had done before.

What the fuck was I doing here?

I tossed one suitcase and then the second onto the settee that was in the room. I opened one and found a fresh outfit. I had been in these clothes for over twenty four hours at this point. I was beyond travel wrinkled.

I ran a hot wet washcloth over the parts of me that mattered, rummaged through both suitcases until I found my deodorant, and got dressed. I didn't give myself time to shave, and I doubted if it was expected.

Grimes had that look of being kept waiting too long when I made it down to the lobby.

“Oh, good timing. I already put my name in with the hostess. It shouldn't be long now. Shall we get a drink?”

I nodded and followed his lead. I let him order, his Spanish was much better than mine. It was safe to say my Spanish barely existed. Instead of doing a language immersion study, I had spent time with Mila and Luke.

Our waitress brought us drinks, and then took our order, and soon I was pushing food around on a plate, not particularly hungry. I didn't know if I'd ever get used to eating, even a light meal, this late.

Everything in my thoughts kept returning to Mila and Luke. A waitress with similar long wavy hair like Mila turned, and for a split second my heart sped up thinking it was her. I knew better than that. Mila wasn't here, but for some reason, I was.

Grimes was pontificating about something I hadn't really paid much attention to when I realized I shouldn't be here. I held up my hand signaling him to stop.

“Your assistant hasn't booked the apartment we were talking about yet, has she?”

“Not yet. You said you wanted to see what you were getting first. Something about not repeating what you did in Switzerland.”

“Good, good. I don’t think I’m going to be needing a place to stay here.”

“What do you mean?” Grimes asked, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“I’m not staying. I have to go back. Maybe we can work something out later, but the timing isn’t right.”

He shook his head and looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“There’s a woman. She’s not someone I should have left. I need to go back and make things right with her,” I explained. I needed to go back and tell Mila I loved her, and that I would never leave her again.

“You’re making a mistake,” Grimes said. “I’ve never let a female get in the way of my success.”

All I could think as I looked at him was how that was obvious. How now he was a lonely old man eating dinner with another lonely man. I admired his business prowess. I trusted his decisions and analysis, but when it came right down to it, the blanket of money he curled up under every night was nowhere as soft and comforting as sleeping in Mila’s arms.

“No, I think this is a mistake. There will be other business opportunities, there won’t be another woman like her. Did you know I was a father? I practically missed out on knowing my son because I dropped everything to take over for you in Zurich.”

Grimes did not finish his dinner. He grunted and huffed before calmly placing his napkin over his plate.

“You will get nowhere in this world if you think playing games like this is acceptable. You’ve burned a bridge with me tonight Chandler Owens. I won’t forget this betrayal over some floozy who has clearly trapped you. Are you so certain the boy is even yours?”

I spoke through clenched teeth. “You can leave now. Do not say another word you will regret.” I kept my voice low, the anger I felt as my once friend and mentor felt the need to cut me down because I had disappointed him burned hot in my veins.

“The only thing I regret was expecting more from you.” Grimes rose to his feet and calmly walked away.

I resisted the urge to hurl a glass at his back. Instead I finished my dinner, suddenly very hungry. Back in my room I pulled out my laptop. I did a quick search for flights. There was one in a few hours. I booked the flight. I could be home tomorrow evening.

I picked up the room phone and called the front desk.

“Could you arrange for a cab to the airport, and my bags to be brought down?”

“Are you checking out already, sir?”

“I’m checking out.”

I felt more awake than I had for days as adrenaline surged and flowed through my system.

Coming here was a mistake. A mistake I could fix.

MILA

My soul hurt when I woke up in the morning. Chandler was leaving me again. I didn't want him to go, but he was so focused on being a success. His business came before family. I knew that about him, but I had chosen to ignore it, and now I suffered from that choice.

Getting ready for the day was a fight through thick emotional barriers and a fog of pain that swirled around my brain. I made coffee. It didn't help. There was no comfort in its warmth, no answers in the caffeine. My arms hurt to lift, but I still managed to get Luke up and ready for the day.

Dad didn't say much, and I didn't either. What was there to say? I had been left, again.

I delivered Luke to the daycare and then headed into the job at the call center. At some point I was going to have to actually do something about finding a better job. I couldn't just keep complaining about it and saying I needed a new job without actually taking action. Today wasn't that day, today was just another day to feel sad and complain.

I didn't know how to change my situation. I didn't know how to keep Chandler. If being in love with him, and having his son wasn't enough, what would be?

My phone rang.

"Hello?" I could tell by the caller ID it was Agent Klein. I didn't want to speak to him, but I knew I had to."

"Mila, good morning," he was too cheerful. "I was just calling to let you know we have released your phone. You can come

down to the Bureau's office and pick it up at any time during regular office hours."

"Is it over? Am I free yet?" My heart leapt to my throat. Was there a way I could follow Chandler?

"Unfortunately not yet. We need you to stick around."

"Did you put a bug in my phone, some kind of tracker?" I asked. I was only partially joking.

"Would you believe me if I said no?"

I shrugged. "I'm boring, you'll learn that soon enough. Thanks I won't be able to pick it up until my day off."

The call ended, but it had given me an idea. I could follow Chandler, just not right now. I texted him immediately. I didn't have to think about what I wanted to say. I let my emotions bleed out in the text.

'I love you,' the message started. 'Please need me.' Is how it ended.

Tears blurred my vision as I wrote. I wiped them away and sent Chandler another message, 'I love you.'

The only thing keeping me from obsessively checking my phone was work policy, no phones while on company time. But I did look at my messages during break, and during lunch. They were still unread. I wasn't going to let Chandler get away from me. Fine, he didn't want to read my texts, I'd get to him another way.

I sent an email.

When I received one back almost instantly I had a surge of excitement. Chandler emailed me back. Only that excitement died as I read the message, unable to deliver, unknown address, address does not exist. That was stupid, of course that email address existed. It had been his for years.

I had about ten minutes left on my lunch break, so I called his office. My call somehow got rerouted through to the company receptionist desk.

"Chandler Owens, please," I said.

“I’m sorry I’m having problems locating him in our directory. What division is he in?” the receptionist asked.

“He’s the COO,” I responded.

“I’m sorry but our COO is not Chandler Owens.”

“Is Kyle Manning or Kathleen McDonald available? Or their assistants? My name is Mila Jones, and I used to work for Kyle.”

“One moment.” There was a pause filled with hold music.

“Mila? I understand you’re looking for Chandler,” Kyle Manning’s voice filled my ear.

“Yes, he’s relocating to another one of your offices, but I can’t seem to reach him,” I explained.

“That’s probably because he no longer works with Wilson Group. He left us to go on his own about two, maybe three months ago. I’m sorry I don’t have any forwarding contact information for him.”

My heart fell out of my chest. Chandler no longer worked at Wilson, he was off to Argentina and I had no idea if he was getting my messages. He said he would be in contact, but I couldn’t find him.

I struggled to breathe. I couldn’t think.

“Oh, okay, never mind then.” I ended the call.

Routine and autopilot function got me through the rest of my day. Make calls, pick Luke up, make dinner. Dad volunteered to put Luke to bed, I think he saw I was having a hard time. It would have been nice if he had volunteered to cook and do the dishes so that I could have got to bed with Luke. Instead, I functioned like an automaton following a set of instructions. No thought, no emotion, just do.

“Mila!” Chandler’s yell echoed through the house.

I jumped and dropped a mug as I was startled. The mug landed with a splash in the dishwasher. Before I could think, I ran toward the front door. Chandler?

Chandler had burst in without knocking. His familiar carry-on travel briefcase that I remembered from our many overnight business trips was strapped over his chest. He looked frantic, eyes flashing with strong emotion.

I didn't have a chance to say anything before I was in his arms, crushed against him, his mouth on mine. I fell against him, melting into his lips and giving way to the passion he flamed in my core.

"I thought you left," I managed on a soft breath.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I got there and realized it was the second, no, the biggest mistake of my life. I couldn't knowingly leave you and our son behind. I couldn't do it."

"You came back for me?"

He smoothed the hair back from my face and gazed deeply into my eyes. "I came back for us. For you. I love you, Mila. I love you."

"Did you check your messages?" I asked.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and began punching at the touch screen. "I haven't had anything all day. The airplane has wifi, and I still didn't get anything... Well, fuck. This is the wrong phone." He twisted and looked back at the suitcases still out on the stoop. "This is the phone I got to be local in Buenos Aires. My other phone, the one you would have left any messages on is in one of those." He held me close. I could feel his voice rumble through his chest. "What did you say? What did you send me?"

I pushed so that he loosened his grip on me enough that I could look up into his face. "I asked you to wait for me. I told you that I'd follow you as soon as I could if you still wanted me to, and that I couldn't do this without you." I sniffed, and realized I was crying again.

"You won't darling, you won't ever have to do any of this without me."

"What's going on?" Dad asked as he came downstairs. "You're lucky Luke didn't wake up. Chandler? I thought you'd be in Argentina by now."

“I came back.”

“Why?” Dad asked.

“To ask Mila to marry me. To be with my family. I came back so that I didn’t make the same mistake twice.”

“You’re staying?” I couldn’t believe my ears. I could barely believe my eyes that I was seeing him, but I believed my heart.

“I’m staying, and you’re marrying me.” It wasn’t a question.

I nodded in agreement. We were getting married.

Dad smiled, a genuine smile, the first one I had seen for a long time. He ran down the rest of the stairs and threw his arms around both Chandler and I. “We’ve got a wedding to plan.”

He kissed me on the cheek and looked at Chandler and started laughing. “I’m totally calling you son from now on.”

“The hell you are,” Chandler laughed. He looked at me, still smiling and laughing.

“I’ve spent thirty six of the last forty eight hours on airplanes. I’ve been running on adrenaline and caffeine. I’m about to crash,” as Chandler said that, I could see his eyes went a little wild as the exhaustion caught up with him.

“You can sleep—”

“Take him home, he’ll be more comfortable in his own bed,” Dad said as he waved us off with the back of his hand. “Go, go, I can finish the dishes, and Luke and I will be fine. Just be back by lunch time. I’m sure Luke will want to see his father, too.”

I grabbed my keys and purse from the hook and pushed Chandler out the door ahead of me.

My whole car bounced when he hefted the bags into the back.

“You’re not driving the SUV I left.”

“I haven’t gotten around to even checking out the house yet,” I admitted.

Chandler drifted off on the drive to his house. Waking him and getting him out of the car and into the house was like dealing

with a large sleepy Luke. Only with Luke, I could just pick him up. I got the front door locked behind us, and the bag—that was still wrapped over his shoulder and chest—off so that I could peel off his long coat.

“Chandler, I need you to help me out here, I can’t pick you up and carry you up the stairs.”

Something in him must have snapped. He stood upright, his lids still at half mast no longer looked sleepy, but mischievous. “You might not be able to pick me up, but I can pick you up.”

And then he did. I squealed, but didn’t squirm, afraid he might drop me. He carried me as if I wasn’t the armful I was. He kept his eyes on me and never once stumbled the entire walk to his bedroom.

He kicked the door open to his room.

“You’re staying with me tonight,” he said.

“I am, all night. I love you.”

He kissed me then, with me still in his arms. This kiss was somehow different, better. This was the first kiss of the rest of our lives together.

EPILOGUE

CHANDLER

Six Months Later

“Chandler have you seen—”

“No!” I yelled up the stairs.” Mila had been asking me all day if I had seen one thing or another of Luke’s. The kid had taken over the house, his toys were everywhere.

“Chandler Owens, you aren’t being helpful!” Mila shouted back.

“I have guests!”

The guys were out back grilling. It wasn’t exactly planned, and as long as the weather held, I didn’t see why they couldn’t be outside while the packers were inside. I underestimated how much in and out of the house the guys were when they came over. There was a constant back and forth between the kitchen and the grill, food, beer, salt and pepper, more beer. It went on and on.

This wouldn’t have been a problem, except that I also underestimated the amount of packers who would be moving in and around. All of our combined belongings were being boxed up and shipped out. We would leave a week after that.

I stepped out onto the deck. It was the last time the guys would be together like this for at least five years. Five years was a long time, long enough that I decided to sell this place. It didn’t seem worth it to let it sit empty, or have to furnish a house halfway across the world.

“Why aren’t you helping my daughter?” Daniel asked. He was grinning. He never missed an opportunity to take a shot at me now that I was his son-in-law. It was all in fun, but sometimes I thought there might have been a hint of malice in his choice of words.

“You want me to go inside and leave you losers out here to fend for yourselves?” I joked.

“What? No, Chandler has to hang with us,” McLain came to my defense. “We have to fill his head with American football and proper sports memories or he’ll come back talking about rugby and calling soccer, football.” He wrapped his arm around my neck in a friendly chokehold, pulling me off balance.

“You know, we don’t leave for another week.” I held up my hands in a helpless gesture. How was I supposed to hang out with my guys when Mila needed me?

“We are helping you clear out your kitchen. This way you won’t have to worry about what to do with all the leftover food, there won’t be any,” Doug chimed in.

“We can fend for ourselves, why don’t you go check on your wife?” Greg told me.

I was back inside and upstairs without having to be told twice.

“Excuse me,” one of the packers said as she carried an armful of boxes down the hall.

I stepped to the side letting her pass before ducking into Luke’s bedroom.

Mila sat on the floor. She had an open box next to her. Luke was walking back and forth picking up random toys that he could reach and putting them in the box, only to pull the item out and throw it on the floor. Tears dripped down Mila’s cheeks.

“Hey, darling, what’s the matter?” I knelt in front of her.

She lunged into my arms. “I can’t do this,” she wailed.

“You don’t want to leave?” I asked. I had been asking that a lot the past few months.

My once mentor and friend, Marcel Grimes, had not been content with ending our relationship in a toddler-like fit. I was the father of a three year old who didn't have meltdowns at the same level as the one Grimes had. Grimes had to let his contacts in the business community know our association was no more, and to not trust me if I invoked his name as some form of recommendation.

The word got out and even made it to some others that Grimes had burned in the past. When the one door of opportunity was slammed shut in my face, an entire hallway's worth of doors to other opportunities opened up. It turned out that my association with Grimes had not been the benefit I had always thought it to be.

One of those businessmen from Grimes' past, Tom Baker, reached out to me. There was something very interesting developing in New Zealand, and would I be interested in having a conversation? I was very interested, and he flew to the states. That conversation took place on both coasts and lasted the better part of a week.

"How do you feel about New Zealand?" I asked Mila, once my discussion with Tom had essentially wrapped up.

We had ended things with me telling him honestly, I would have to discuss this with my wife. He understood. And that's when the nature of the discussion turned from business to what raising a family in New Zealand would be like.

"I wouldn't have to learn a new language, and watch Luke get better at it than I ever would." Had been one of her pros, it was also a con. She had wanted to learn a second language. The back and forth, the weighing of pros and the cons were discussed off and on for weeks.

We had serious discussions, we had mild ones in the car as either of us thought of something. And the entire time, neither of us could think of a reason why we shouldn't go.

"I thought you wanted to go," I stroked her hair. Our entire life was getting packed away into boxes to be sealed into shipping crates. If she had changed her mind, she had waited until the very last minute to tell me.

She shook her head, and then sat up. “No,” she said, wiping at her tears. “I can’t get anything done. Luke keeps unpacking as soon as I get anything put away. And there are certain toys that need to be packed up together or they are no good, and we’re just moving junk. I’m having issues parenting and packing while you are out drinking and bullshitting with your friends.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Every time I ask you for help, you just say no. I can’t do this.”

I looked at my young wife. She didn’t realize how capable she really was. I appreciated that she was not afraid to communicate her frustrations with me. We had both learned the hard way that keeping secrets from each other only led to heartbreak.

“What do you need?” I asked.

She told me what she needed. She needed more hands, more time. “I can’t do this”— she gestured toward the box Luke was enjoying moving things in and out of— “and make sure I have all of our visas and immunizations and travel documents together, and...” She closed her eyes.

I could hear the burden getting bigger and bigger.

“Come on.” I helped her to her feet and scooped Luke up into my arms. “You’re coming with me.”

He giggled and settled as I guided Mila outside.

“Guys, time to be useful.”

“Hey, Mila.” McLain greeted her.

“Crazy day, huh?” Greg said.

“Listen up. Mila needs help locating a few items that are somewhere inside.” I looked at her and nodded for her to take over.

She described the assorted toys and parts she needed.

“It’s like a scavenger hunt,” Greg said as he headed inside.

“Is there a prize?” McLain asked.

“You can have a beer,” Mila answered.

“Sounds like a plan,” he laughed.

I handed Luke over to Daniel. “Make yourself useful.”

Toy parts were discovered. Mila had located and printed off some checklists for foreign travel she wanted. I sorted through which of Luke’s toys were going to be shipped, which would be given away, and which would be packed into the luggage we were taking on the plane. With the extra hands, we were able to get a lot more work done in a very short amount of time. The packers finished putting most of our belongings into boxes and stacked everything in the garage and living room. Everything else we needed to find a way to fit into our luggage, or it was being donated.

“Thank you,” Mila sighed as she leaned against me. “I haven’t felt this relieved since Agent Klein told me I was free and clear.”

Her job had been part of the legal front to a money laundering operation. Mila had simply been the victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and of having bad judgement when it came to jobs.

We all gathered on the back deck, the brisket that had been smoking for hours was ready, and we had all worked up an appetite packing.

“A five year contract, are you serious?” McLain asked me yet again. “I can’t imagine doing anything for five years.”

It made sense that the man whose last two marriages had lasted less than five years combined would think that it was a long time.

“You’re not going to recognize Luke the next time you see him,” McLain said to Daniel.

“It’s not like I’m going to wait for them to come back before I see them again,” he said. “I plan on flying down there.”

“How soon before you think you’ll visit?” Mila asked.

“Give me until after the Superbowl before you start asking,” he said.

“That’s five, six months. We should have the house situated by then, and have a guest room ready for you,” I added.

The evening air was crisp and cool. We had our friends around us, and I had Mila and Luke. I was packed and ready for my next opportunity. And it would be even better since I would be experiencing it with Mila and my son, together, as a family.

“What are you thinking?” Mila asked. “You looked kind of wistful. Regretting leaving?”

“Wistful? Yeah, that might be the right word. I’ll miss this. No regrets, no mistakes. I’ve got you with me, I know I’ve done it right this time.”

“I love you,” she said. She lifted up on her toes and kissed me.

Choosing Mila was the best decision I had ever made.

EXCERPT: 3 SEAL DADDIES FOR CHRISTMAS



I swore I wouldn't come back to my hometown. The moment I arrive home, three blasts from the past want to make me their Christmas miracle.

When my brother tragically died, it left my life in a pile of ash. But an unexpected return to Harbank Spring reunites me with his three military best friends who'd do anything to take care of me.

There's **Alexander Hawke**, a veteran widower with a baby girl whom I shared a drunken kiss with years ago, before I skipped town. I broke his beautiful heart... will he break mine?

Axel Ramsey is the town's playboy silver fox, who makes fun of the fact he isn't a father yet, since he's slept with so many women. Except now, he only has eyes for me.

And I can't forget **Eli Pierce**... the single dad of an adorable little girl in my ice dancing class. The tough and gentle man charms with how deeply he cares and how eager he is to show it.

They all want me - the town's wild child who abandoned them all because I felt responsible for my brother's death. But now, the three men from my past will do anything to convince me I belong with them.

When I move back into my brother's house, I suddenly live with three irresistible men... who are totally off-limits, because they're my *brother's best friends*.

As the festivities for the holiday season begin, it becomes harder and harder to resist...

And keep my secret - that one of them is the father of my *secret baby*.

3 SEAL Daddies for Christmas is book 1 in a series of interconnected why choose standalones, and can be enjoyed on its own. Available to binge with KU now!

Chapter 1: Clover

The picturesque town of Harbank Springs hadn't changed much in the four years since I'd last set foot here, like a snapshot had been taken the night my brother died, and both he and the town existed in an ethereal, snowy limbo.

Harbank Springs was a Tourist town at best, and a dawdy postcard at worst. Nestled into the snowy mountains in Minnesota, Harbank was as festive a Christmas town as one could expect from a place that was covered in a layer of thick snow for five months a year. In the Winter, the entire town glowed from festive Christmas lights, trees lining the streets like glittering statues, and the air would fill with the homey scent of hot chocolate, cinnamon and sugar. Tourists poured in from all over to attend the Christmas markets, ski in the

mountains, ice skate on the frozen Lake, and tell us how lucky we were to live in a place like this.

Harbank even drew in tourists in the summer but the numbers were less. That had been my favorite tourist season; mountain climbers and fishermen asked a lot less questions when the town looked like every other lakeside town in America. It really was a bright, beautiful place to live.

And I had never intended to return.

Four years had passed since the worst night of my life. I had placed Harbank Springs firmly in my rearview mirror and out of my mind, trying to leave the guilt behind as well.

Life had a funny way of dragging me back.

“Madison!” I called loudly, attracting the attention of the brunette girl with pigtails who spun in the middle of the ice rink. “Remember to keep your knees together!”

Having spent the past four years scrambling to ensure those years of Ice Skating lessons weren’t a complete waste by teaching the *Tinkerbell Troupe* in Saint Cloud, it was perhaps only natural that when the teacher of the *Little Sprinkles Kids Ice Skating club* in Harbank fell ill, it was up to me to fill her shoes.

“You have no family, right? And at this time of year, six weeks until Christmas? You’d be doing me a *huge* favor. It is our sister club, after all.”

My manager had been *exceptionally* persuasive and how could I say no after she’d laid out how empty and pathetic my life currently was. A woman with no children and family to speak of? Definitely didn’t have Christmas plans.

Technically I didn’t, but I had been looking forward to binging the latest season of *Euphoria* over as much Christmas chocolate that I could get my hands on.

“Lee, lean forward onto your toes when you want to stop,” I called out to a dark-haired boy whose arms windmilled in his weak attempt to end his slide.

Watching as he followed my instructions and came to a stop, it was difficult to keep the smile from my face. It didn't matter where I was or who I was teaching; there was something very satisfying about seeing little faces light up when they realized their ability to do something on the ice. It was the highlight of my day before I would retreat to my room at the Pine Lodge and remain hidden away until my next shift.

This was surely the first time in years that I'd been glad Harbank was flooded with tourists at this time of year. Made it easy for me to slip in under the radar and hopefully slip out again just after Christmas. Assuming Agnes recovered by then.

"Look at me, Clover!" yelled one of the children, a girl with short, curly brown hair and the brightest blue eyes I'd ever seen. She clung to the safety railing, and as soon as she had my attention, she let go and slid a few meters before coming to a stop again.

"Amazing, Hayley!" I called back, clapping my hands together. "I'm so proud of you!"

She flashed me a toothy grin, then her brow furrowed once more and she went back to focusing on her balance. These kids were not as far along as the children I was used to teaching at Tinkerbell and I had six weeks to whip them into shape in order to perform a dance recital.

It would be difficult, but throwing myself into the challenge would keep my mind off everything else.

Especially everyone in Harbank that I was looking to avoid.

The class wrapped up an hour later and I escorted all the exhausted children off the ice. With wide smiles and rosy cheeks from the cold air, they filed off the ice and into the changing room, where they followed my step-by-step instructions on properly removing ice skates. That part they nailed.

Another day drew to a close and I stretched out my tired legs against the reception desk, keeping my back to the door as

Marlene, the second carer, kept an eye on the kids being collected by their parents.

“I swear, no matter how often I do this, chasing kids on the ice is more of a workout than I’m ever prepared for. My legs are throbbing,” I chuckled over my mug of tea. Marlene snorted down at her paperwork, glancing up every time the door buzzed, signalling another child had been collected and swept away into the snowy darkness.

“That’s why I’m firmly behind the desk,” Marlene said.

“Oh, of course,” I nodded seriously. “Not at all because you’re only 19 and a trainee.”

Marlene’s head snapped up and her green eyes narrowed playfully. “Definitely not. That’s all a technicality.”

“Mhmm.” Sipping my tea, my eyes closed briefly as warmth swept down my chest like a gentle caress, soothing any lingering cold from the ice. Marlene was my only social interaction since I’d arrived here; she was too young to know anything about the night I left and I was ninety percent sure she didn’t even know who I was. Not really.

To her, I’m just Clover from out of town.

I left the *Dixon* part out when we first met.

“Any plans tonight?” Marlene asked, cutting through my wandering thoughts.

“Same as,” I replied. “I have a date with a good book and some take-out food, then bed by ten.”

“Ew, I hope I’m not that boring when I’m twenty five,” Marlene snorted, scribbling on the forms in front of her. “You come here during tourist season and spend all your time hidden away? Aren’t you even a little bit curious to see everything?”

“If you’ve seen one Christmas town, you’ve seen them all,” I chuckled dryly, draining the last dregs of my cup. “Trust me.”

“If you *say* so.”

“What about you?”

Marlene dropped her pen and turned to me, her eyes flashing and a cheeky smirk across her lips. “David is taking me to the *Headless Reindeer*, no drinking, of course, but he’s going to buy me dinner and it’s going to be a proper little date!”

“Bar food for a date?” I raised a brow and Marlene tossed her hair over one shoulder.

“You’re just jealous that you don’t have a man to treat you right.”

“Ahh yes,” I sighed dramatically. “My chances of a romantic date at the Reindeer are dwindling. Whatever will I do? Such a cheesy place.”

“No one waiting for you back in Saint Cloud?”

“Not a soul,” I faux groaned. “But the men there, could they even compete with a slightly soggy meal from the Reindeer? I mean, that’s one of a kind.”

“It’s tragic,” Marlene agreed. “Sorry, you’re just past your prime, I guess.”

“Oi!” Playfully nudging her shoulder, we fell into light giggles and laughter. For a second, just a single moment, the crushing weight of guilt that had followed me for four years vanished. My shoulders were lighter and breathing was *easy*.

It didn’t last.

“Hayley’s still here,” Marlene noticed and I swiveled around to see her still sitting on the bench, swinging her legs. I’d usually left by now, avoiding all chances of running into any parent that might recognize me, so I was unfamiliar with the pick-up routine.

“Is she usually collected by now?”

“She’s usually picked up first.” Marlene sighed and reached for the phone, dialling a number.

“Hayley, are you okay?” I called over to her. “Not cold or anything?”

Bundled up in a thick jacket and boots, Haley shook her head, although there was minimal movement with the thick scarf

wrapped around her neck.

“M’good!” she grinned at me and I instantly smiled back. She was adorable. Keeping one eye on her, I turned back to Marlene, who chewed on her lower lip as the call rang out.

“No luck?”

Shaking her head, she hung up and tried again. Hayley continued swinging her legs, then tipped her head back and gave the largest yawn I had ever seen. A tightness swept through my gut and I pressed my lips together in a firm line. It was a familiar sight, waiting at the end of a lesson for a parent who is never on time. My parents had been quite a bit older and more often than not, when I was younger, it had been me in that seat waiting for a pickup that often came late. Timekeeping was a struggle in their later years.

At the time, it never bothered me. I loved spending as much time as I could at the rink. I had big dreams of becoming an ice dancer. Now I make do teaching future dancers.

“Still no answer,” Marlene sighed. “Is there any way you can take her home with you?”

My head whipped around to Marlene, eyes wide. “What? Of course not, that would break so many rules!”

“Okay, look, I know you’re not a registered safe adult but she’s staying with you anyway, so what’s the harm?”

Cold tingles swept up my back and my stomach clenched. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Marele glanced up at me and frowned. “Don’t be silly; she’s staying with you at home, right?”

“Home..?”

Two things clicked sharply in my mind as I slowly glanced back to Hayley’s sweet face.

One, Marlene knew exactly who I was and by *home*, she meant the Dixon Estate.

Two, Hayley was Eli’s daughter... and I had to go home.

[Read the full story HERE!](#)

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