

A close-up photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair hugging a man from behind. The woman's eyes are closed and she has a gentle smile. She is holding a single, vibrant pink rose against the man's dark blue shirt. Her hand is visible, with a ring on her finger. The man's head is turned away, and his hair is dark and short. The background is softly blurred, suggesting an indoor setting with warm lighting.

Second Chance
Family

Rosa Mink

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Rosa Mink

Visit me on Facebook and Instagram, or email me at rosaminkwriting@gmail.com

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Prologue

The next pain hit her hard, forcing the breath out of her lungs and she held back a scream of agony. She couldn't do this... she was too young to handle this, but it was too late for that. She walked to the end of the block and found the clinic just before the next wave of pain hit her.

A nurse saw her double over as she walked in and despite the others waiting inside, he rushed over and lifted her, carrying her into an exam room.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"No," she admitted as the next one hit.

"How far along?" he asked seeing her slightly swollen stomach.

"It's time."

"I'll be right back okay," he said as the pain passed. He interrupted the doctor knowing she wouldn't be pleased but the girl was about to give birth and he knew she was terrified.

"What is it Luc?"

"Teenage girl in labor. I'd say she's close."

"I'll be right in, and Luc..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't fall for her like the others," she warned but it was too late.

He hated seeing anyone in pain, but teenage mothers were the hardest. They reminded him too much of his sister and how he'd lost her when she'd been in labor as a teen. It was why he'd become a nurse, to help people. He got back to the exam room and hurried to set things up.

"I'm Dr. Pruett and you are...Joelle?"

"Yeah," she said as another pain hit her.

“What is going on?” the doctor asked rushing over to her. “How can you be...”

“Long story...it’s not Danny’s,” she promised referring to her ex and the doctor’s son.

“Where have you been?” she asked noting the state of her clothes and hair as she checked her progress.

“Hiding...god...it hurts,” she cried as another contraction hit.

“Luc, help her,” Gina said gently. “Joelle, I’m going to need you to push for me. I know it hurts but it’ll be over soon.”

Luc wasn’t sure what was going on, but he wasn’t going to let the girl do it alone and he moved behind her holding her hands as she pushed.

“It’s a girl,” Gina stated a bit later as she went about checking her over. “Joelle...what’s going on sweetheart?” she added after they’d cleaned up both her and the baby.

“I can’t...”

“Who’s the father?” Gina asked seeing the pain and fear flash across her face.

“Rick,” she admitted before averting her face.

“Is this why you ran away? Joelle...”

“I couldn’t let him do it anymore; please don’t tell anyone you’ve seen me.”

“You need to tell the police,” Gina urged.

“I can’t. It’s not that simple Gina; if I tell they’ll hurt me,” she whispered.

“Who Joelle? Who will hurt you?”

“All of them...the group. I don’t know how big it is I just know the few I’ve...met.”

“How long has this been going on?” she asked as Luc seethed.

“Too long, please tell Danny thank you from me,” Joelle said getting up. “And please take care of her.”

“You’re leaving her?” Gina stated trying to stop her. Luc stepped in front of the door and refused to budge. “Joelle talk to us. Tell us what’s going on. How long has Rick been abusing you?”

“Since I was twelve...I realized I was pregnant about eight months ago and I knew I couldn’t stay any longer. I couldn’t let anything happen to her. So, I convinced Danny to help me leave. Please don’t be mad at him. He was just being a good friend. I wouldn’t have had the strength to go if it hadn’t been for him and now, I have to let her go. Please... keep her safe for me.”

“I promise,” she said reluctantly. “But you should still tell someone, your mother should know.”

“She does; she let him, and I can’t let her grow up like that,” she stated her eyes begging them as the tears shimmered wanting to be let out, as she held them in tightly. “You have to know someone who can take her in, love her the way she should be.”

“I do,” Luc said. “My sister’s best friend and her husband have been trying to adopt, they’ll take care of her.”

“Okay...just...just make sure they do. If anything happened to her...” Joelle gazed at the tiny little girl she adored already as a tear slipped down her cheek.

“They’ll love her like their own,” Luc promised her.

“Can you give them this?” she asked holding out the stack of letters she’d written to her throughout the pregnancy. She’d wrapped her silk scarf around them and placed her great-grandmother’s locket in the center wanting her daughter to know she had been loved.

“I will,” he stated. “Would you like to know?”

“No, it’ll be easier if I don’t.”

“Joelle, you don’t have to do this. Come home with me and we’ll...” Gina tried.

“No, I have to go,” she said dropping a kiss on the baby’s head before bolting out the door as fast as her aching body would allow. “Please keep her safe,” she whispered to the stars as she disappeared into the alleyways.

Back inside the clinic Luc settled the baby into the carrier and made his way out to his car. The drive took two days but when he pulled up in front of the house, he knew it had been worth it. The place was enormous, and Nicole and Keith would love the little girl to pieces.

He rang the doorbell and waited.

“Luc?” Nicole said as they came to the door. “What?”

“Can I come in?” he asked as she stared at the baby.

“Of course...Luc what are you doing here with a baby?” she stated as Keith joined them in the living room.

“This is Wendy. Her mother can’t take care of her, she’s sixteen and a runaway. She wants someone to give her a good life, a life she’s never had,” he said before explaining what Joelle had been through.

“She only wants what’s best for Wendy. She wrote her these for when she’s older,” he added handing over the stack of letters. “Help her by taking Wendy, loving her.”

“Keith?” Nicole said glancing at her husband.

“Will she be in the picture?” Keith asked.

“No, I don’t think we’ll ever see her again. She only came to the clinic because she knew Gina through her son. She didn’t want to know where I was bringing her, and I can’t see her changing her mind. She already had it made up along with the papers.”

“Alright, we’ll do it,” he agreed peeking at the little girl inside the carrier.

“Send me a picture every now and then?” Luc said as he left.

“Of course, Luc. Thank you,” Nicole said giving him a hug. “We’ll protect her no matter what.”

“I know; I’ll see you later,” he said as he headed back home. He sent a silent prayer out for Joelle and Wendy then went back with another dent in his heart but at least this teenage mother had thought about the baby unlike several others he’d seen in the last few months. Wendy would have a good life, a great one, and maybe one day she would be able to meet her mother and thank her for it.

Chapter 1

“Heads up we’ve got two new intakes and not enough rooms for them,” a nurse shouted down the hallway.

“Thanks Jeanie,” Luc called over his shoulder as he hurried towards the reception area of the clinic. They’d been swamped the last few weeks ever since they’d gotten that extra grant for additional funding. Once teens knew they could come here and not have to worry about paying the bills or their parents finding out, they’d been coming in droves. Whoever their guardian angel was they might have thought about springing for a few more nurses but he couldn’t begrudge the generosity of them too much.

He made his way back to an exam room with the next patient but halfway down the hallway he stopped poking his head into another to switch off with the nurse in it. His patient was showing distress at the idea of being alone with him and he knew she needed someone else.

“Bev...can you help out here?” he asked quirking his head slightly to indicate that the girl wasn’t comfortable.

“Sure Luc. Deanna will you be okay with my friend Luc here?” she asked, and the girl nodded. “Okay,” she added as they switched place. “She called someone, and they should be here in a bit.”

“Thanks,” he said going in to wait with her, noting the warning that she was likely to bolt if left alone on the chart.

About ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door and the other nurse poked her head around the door. “Deanna, someone’s here for you.”

She stepped aside and allowed another woman to come in. “Deanna...I’m so glad you called me.”

Luc turned at the voice and stared at the owner of it. He watched as she crossed over to the girl and pulled her into a hug.

“Shh...” she soothed as Deanna finally released the emotions she’d been holding in for the last hour and held her as she cried and cried. “It’s okay sweetie, I promise it’ll get better.”

“Joelle?” he said, and the woman raised her head.

“Luc? What are you...” She cut off, her eyes wide with surprise.

“I moved after I got married. How are you?”

“Much better than last time we met. Deanna why don’t we give you a few minutes to get cleaned up. There are some new clothes in the bag. If you need anything just yell, we’ll be right outside.” She ushered Luc out after a nod of agreement from Deanna.

“I hardly recognized you, Joelle,” Luc said surveying her long thick auburn hair and rosy cheeks, a far cry from the shorn hair and dirt-streaked ones she’d had the last time he saw her.

“I’d say that’s a good thing, and I go by Miranda now,” she told him as memories from that time assailed her. She thought she’d gotten over the ache that had been inside her since giving up her daughter, but she hadn’t. She’d just shoved it so far down lately that it’d simply been masked.

“Miranda, honey, what are you doing here?” Dr. Kent asked coming down the hallway towards them.

“I had a call come in that I’ve been waiting for for a while. Deanna stopped into the shelter last year and we were helping her, unfortunately someone found her, and she ran before we could put an end to things. I’ve been looking for her ever since.”

“And you found her here? Lucky for us. Luc, this is Miranda Oliver or maybe I should introduce her as our benefactor,” he said hugging her to his side.

“Benefactor?” Luc asked. “As in the mysterious grant we got from the Stay Young Foundation?”

“Guilty, I started it about four years ago. I’d found a way out and with the help of an amazing man was able to help bring down the people I was running from, bringing his daughter home as I did, and in return he set up the funding for the foundation.”

“That’s great Jo...Miranda,” Luc corrected.

John sent a glance between the two and she knew he was curious about the slip from Luc.

“John, Luc is the one who helped Gina deliver Wendy,” she said softly.

He knew her whole story and knew how much losing her daughter affected her decisions and gently cupped her shoulder in support. “I see, well I should get going. Plenty of patients to see. Miranda, next time you’re in town you’ll have to stop by for dinner with Kelly and me.”

“I will John. I’ll see you later,” she said kissing his cheek.

“Miranda, we should talk,” Luc stated but the door to the exam room opened, and Deanna walked out.

“I can’t,” she replied as she gently pulled the girl to her side, “Maybe some other time.”

“Miranda...”

“It was good to see you again,” she told him before they left. She couldn’t talk about the past. It would hurt too much.

The next few weeks flew by, but she couldn’t stop feeling the emptiness inside her. She couldn’t stop thinking and wondering about what her life would have been like if she hadn’t given up her daughter. Would she still be running from the people who’d stolen her childhood from her, or would she and her daughter be happy?

She hated feeling the emptiness, so she pushed herself even further into her work until she was too tired to think let alone feel. Each child she helped did little to dissuade the hole inside but at least it was one more child off the streets and out of bad situations like the ones she’d been in growing up.

“Miranda, there’s someone here to see you,” her assistant stated from the doorway.

“I’m busy so unless it’s an emergency...”

“He said to tell you it was about Wendy,” she said hesitantly.

“Show him in.” There were only three males in the world who knew about Wendy and only one who had any idea where she was...Luc.

She looked up as he came in and shut the door. “Luc, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve tried calling but they wouldn’t put me through.”

“I’ve been out of the office for the better part of the last three weeks.”

“I heard you brought down another ring this last week. The news said you saved over a dozen girls.”

“We did, but for every dozen we save there’s another dozen just out of our reach. Luc, why are you here?” She had to ask even knowing the only thing they really had to discuss was Wendy, it was the only thing they had in common.

“It’s about Wendy,” he admitted taking out a letter and handing it to her. “Just read it...”

“Okay.” She sighed opening the paper, not wanting to open the door to the past she still couldn’t truly let go of, move on from because she’d given her baby up, left her all alone and she hated that.

Luc, I know this is a lot to ask but please help Keith and Wendy. Once I’m gone, they’re going to need you and Kendra to make it through the pain they’re bound to feel. I can’t thank you enough for giving me the greatest gift ten years ago when you brought us Wendy, she has brought us untold joy and I want that joy to last for her and Keith.

I trust that you’ll know how to bring the happiness back into their lives. This is my last wish Luc...you know the person who should be with them, find her.

“What does this mean?” she asked looking up at him confused and even more worried about her baby now.

“Nicole was diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago. By the time Wendy was ten, it was too far gone. She died a few weeks after she sent me this letter. When I saw you at the clinic it came back to me, and I finally got what it meant.”

“Okay, I’m glad one of us does,” she mused trying to stifle her need to demand answers, all of them immediately.

“She wanted me to find you. Letters weren’t Nicole’s style; she didn’t leave one for anyone else...but you left that entire stack for Wendy. She needs you.”

“She’s thirteen now; she can’t need me.”

“You of all people should know better than that. If you don’t believe me, go and see for yourself. Keith and Wendy live less than an hour from here. Take a trip down this weekend. They like spending the weekend at the park. Wendy plays soccer,” Luc said making her pulse jump.

“Where?” She felt a pang inside her chest at the knowledge that her daughter played soccer like she did.

“Martin Park, here’s a photo of her.” He slid it across to her. “She looks a lot like you other than the hair color.”

Her breath stuck in her chest and tears swam in her eyes. “Her eyes are hazel, mine aren’t.”

“Eyes and hair...she has your smile, at least when you’re both smiling that is.”

Miranda tried to stop from giving in to it, from going, but despite everything, she now knew where to find her daughter and she couldn’t sit still a moment longer. “I’ll go but I’m not sure what you think will happen. If I walk up to them and say guess what...I’m your biological mother they’re both going to be furious.”

“Then don’t tell them right off. Let them get to know you and see how it goes,” he suggested, which was how she found herself sitting in the stands at the soccer field watching the game.

She felt her heart turn over watching Wendy. She was withdrawn from the game even though she was the star of the team and not even winning brought a smile to her face. She watched as Wendy received a hug from a woman and the way her expression tightened. Keith gave her a hug and Miranda was comforted by the gentleness and the love between the two, but Wendy still didn't seem happy.

Across the field another girl caught her attention. The look in her eyes was one Miranda was quite familiar with, the one that haunted her own for far too long. Her phone rang, and she answered welcoming the interruption from the past. "Hi Cassie...I know I'm actually working on something right now. Actually yeah...can you get a roster for a soccer team? The Chester Strikers and specifically player number eight."

"You found someone?" her assistant asked as she typed the information into the computer.

"Yeah, I'm sure of it."

"Becky Norman her parents are...Tracy and Steve Turner, her biological father has joint custody, and his name is Ralph Norman."

"So, there are at least two who have easy access and who knows how many others, thanks Cassie. I think I'm going to hang out here for a bit."

Miranda hung up the phone and watched the girl make her way across the field towards a man and woman. Becky seemed at ease with both and when the man put his arm around her shoulders, she relaxed.

"So, it looks like it's not the stepfather," she said under her breath. She didn't know if it was good or bad though.

The soccer coach approached them, and Becky tensed. It was just the slightest hint but that was enough for her.

Miranda's heart dipped and she tried to hide her anger. She couldn't jump to conclusions, there could be a hundred reasons why Becky wasn't comfortable with the coach, though her gut told her another story. She'd listened to it enough over the last ten years to know when it was right and when it wasn't

and right now, she needed to figure out what this guy was up to and fast.

“You’re going back there, aren’t you?” Luc asked checking in with her a week later.

“I’m going back,” Miranda agreed as she headed up the path through the park. It was early and no one else was around, her favorite time of the day.

“Are you running?”

“Yup, don’t worry I can still talk,” she said with a light laugh. “I found out something about the coach, uncovered his dirty little secrets and in a few hours, he should be picked up by the locals and given a cell for a long time.”

“Wait, Wendy’s soccer coach? No way Miranda, I’ve met the guy a couple times,” Luc said in shock.

“And I’ve met hundreds of them and put most of them away in jails. Look Wendy’s fine, she wasn’t his type, but I’ve found over thirty others who were.”

“Then I’d say it’s a double blessing that you went there, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, thanks Luc. Look I should get going, we have some counselors coming out to meet with the girls and I promised to be there. We want this all taken care of before the games start this afternoon.”

“Alright, bye Miranda.”

“Bye Luc.” She hung up as she headed for the parking lot and her car, reaching it as Wendy and Keith pulled in, and she felt her heart stir seeing her again. She watched as they kicked the ball back and forth, the love of the game showing on Wendy’s face for once.

Miranda forced her gaze away from them and grabbed her bag from the trunk of her car to head over to the bathroom to change before the others showed. She needed to look professional for this. She was representing her foundation after all.

She'd just passed the net when a ball went wide, and she reached out and grabbed it without thinking.

"Nice catch," Wendy said running over to her. "Sorry about almost hitting you. I just can't make that shot."

"Trying to bounce it off the high corner?" she asked handing it back to her.

"How'd you know?"

"I used to play," Miranda admitted before giving her a pointer on how to do it. "Good luck," she added before continuing on to the bathrooms. She needed to get a grip on her emotions, seeing Wendy was one thing but talking to her... seeing her smile at her was an entire other.

Miranda took her time on her appearance. When her phone buzzed with the notification from the police that they were there, she headed back to the parking lot and stashed her bag, taking a few minutes to speak with them as the others began to appear. She nodded when she saw the coach approach Becky and they made their way over to him.

Keith watched as the woman continued to speak with the officers, smiling at his daughter who was for once laughing. Wendy hadn't stopped praising the pointers she'd been given, and he had to admit he was also intrigued. When the large group began to head across the field towards them, his spine stiffened. Something was not right here, the way the police were acting, and the swiftness of the woman's movement had his protective instincts in high gear.

"Jeremy Pike?" the officer stated stopping in front of the coach.

"Yes...officers, what can I do for you?" he replied as his gaze flickered over the group.

"Step away from the girl please," the officer stated as his hand rested on Becky's shoulder.

"What is this all about?" he asked taking a step forward away from Becky and the rest of the team.

“Turn around and place your hands behind your back please,” the officer stated firmly.

“What?” he said as the officer took hold of his arm. “Let go of me.”

“Jeremy Pike you’re under arrest for child abuse, molestation, and a whole lot of other things it’s best I don’t say in front of the crowd,” he said slapping the cuffs on him.

The group of adults looked at one another in shock before they began demanding answers.

“What the hell?”

“You’ve got to be kidding...”

“This is some sick joke, right?”

On and on they shouted and argued as the cops led Jeremy away. Keith put an arm around Wendy who looked on in confusion and he sighed a breath of relief feeling that she didn’t know what it all meant. He saw several of the fathers getting up to go after the police and Jeremy, but they were stalled by the woman from earlier who stepped forward lifting her hands to quiet them.

“Everyone please,” she said motioning for them to sit. “I know this is a very emotional situation and while I personally agree with what some of you may be thinking of doing right now, it’s not the answer.”

“How the hell would you know?” Delia’s father asked as she cried softly against his chest.

“Was this really necessary...to do this like this?” another inquired.

“What exactly is going on and who are you?” Becky’s stepfather stated as she leaned back into him and her mother.

“My name is Miranda Oliver. I work for the Stay Young Foundation and in this situation, we felt it best to handle this the way the police have.”

“Wait, I saw you here at last week’s game,” Tom, Marissa’s father, stated.

“I was here, we’d received a tip from a concerned party, and we began to investigate it. I stopped in to see how far it went.”

“How far what went?” Delia’s father stated.

“To see how many of the girls he’s been abusing in one form or another,” Kelsey, the nineteen-year-old who had agreed to talk to them and come forward, answered for her.

“I understand that right now everyone is in shock, confused, and angry,” Miranda said bring the focus back onto her. “We also understand that this is a delicate situation which is why the police have agreed to not conduct interviews with anyone unwilling to speak with them. The men and women you see behind me are counselors who we have brought in for you and your families to speak with today, tomorrow, or anytime in the future. Please don’t think we’re simply here to offer platitudes. Stay Young is fully dedicated to providing counseling to anyone who may need it; all you have to do is simply call.

“If you would prefer to speak with your children at home first, please do so, but do take one of the folders the counselors have in case you decide you need our help,” she added when some seemed to close off at the idea. “No matter if it’s big or small, please speak with someone, each other if nothing else.”

Miranda stepped back and allowed the counselors to hand out packets to the families as she covertly watched the group. She knew the second that Becky had decided to run, and she also knew that her parents weren’t the ones she needed to hear from right then.

“Becky...” Tracy called after her as Steve started out behind her.

Miranda stopped them with a gentle hand saying quietly, “Don’t, I know this hurts but right now she needs a moment. Let me go.”

“She’s my *daughter*,” Tracy stated. “How do you think you can help her?”

“Because I can...I promise I will not do anything to upset her. I know what I’m doing,” she told them before jogging after Becky.

Keith watched her go sensing there was more to the story than they knew. He glanced down at Wendy and hugged her. “Wen...”

“He never touched me Dad, I swear,” she said hugging him back. He nodded silently saying a thank you prayer and hoped the same could be said for the others.

Chapter 2

“Becky,” Miranda said gently as she approached the girl hugging her knees to her chest tightly and crying openly. She knelt down beside her and put a hand on her back knowing how she felt right now.

“Go away,” she sobbed.

“I’m not going anywhere not until you’ve stopped crying and it will stop.”

“No, it won’t. What he did...it won’t stop...”

“Becky, look at me,” she said moving around to sit in front of her not caring about the expensive trousers she wore. “If he wasn’t the only one you can tell me, and I swear I will find them and make it stop.”

“It was just him but every time I sleep, every time I go out, he’s there. He’s touching me, hurting me, it never stops, and I can’t...everyone will know.”

“Becky, you didn’t do anything wrong,” she said pulling her towards her and wrapping her arms around her. “Shh, it will stop. The pain will go away I promise.”

“How...how can you say that? You don’t know what he’s done.”

“Becky, no matter what he’s done it will fade. Scars will too, it will never fully go away but it won’t define you. You’re thirteen, I know it seems like it’s impossible right now but one day you’ll find out that you can move past it.”

“How? No one’s ever going to understand.”

“They will honey; I know they will. Right now, you need to surround yourself with people who love you, your mom, stepdad, and your dad, they’ll all be there no matter what you tell them. Yes, they’re going to be angry but not at you Becky, *never* at you. None of this was your fault,” she added seeing her panic.

“It won’t matter. My life’s going to be over. When the boys find out they won’t like me anymore, my friends won’t stay I know they won’t.”

“Your true friends will be there for you and as for boys, one day you’ll find someone you can trust, someone who will be able to hold you in every way possible and if they can’t accept what happened that’s their problem not yours. I know it seems like your life is ruined but it’s not. Take it from me, there is so much more out there for you than what he did to you. It will take time, but it will get better,” she said finally getting Becky to look her in the eyes as she told her.

“How do you know? How can you tell me that it’ll get better? Look at you, you’re gorgeous and you’re dressed like a movie star, how would you know?”

“Because when I was twelve my stepfather came into my room and forced himself on me. It continued for years, and it wasn’t just him. He let his friends stay over and neither he nor my mom cared what they did to me. Scars, both visible and non, take time to heal but one day you’ll find yourself falling for someone who won’t care what they are or look like.”

“You’re lying, there’s no way...” Becky said staring at her.

“I’m not lying, Becky.” Miranda lifted the back of her shirt to reveal the scars on her lower back. “These used to stand out so much more than they do now.”

“Oh my god,” Becky cried as a new set of tears overtook her.

“Shh,” she whispered soothing her hair back from her face. “It’ll be okay Becky.”

“You promise?” she finally said wiping her eyes.

“I promise; I know you don’t feel like talking, that you don’t think it’ll help but it will. Keeping it all bottled up inside will make you crazy and that’s when he’ll win. You have the choice in this Becky. *You* have the power not him.”

“You really mean it?”

“I do, and I mean it when I said one day you will find someone too. It may take time but there’s no rush. Now what do you say we head back to your mom and stepdad? You’re so lucky to have them, you have no idea how lucky,” she assured her when she balked at the idea.

“Okay,” Becky said drawing in a deep breath taking the hand Miranda offered her.

Miranda walked Becky back to the soccer field resting her hand on her back and nodding in encouragement as they reached the middle of the field and her parents spied her. Becky took off launching herself into her mother’s arms hugging her tightly. She smiled hoping that together they could all keep her safe.

Most of the team was still there, several members of it were talking to their parents and the counselors and she was glad she’d brought in extras.

Miranda edged around the group catching Michael’s eye and he headed towards her.

“You okay?” he asked gently resting his hand on her back much like she had with Becky.

“Yeah, how are they all doing?” she inquired casting another glance over the group.

“Better than you’d think, Miranda are you really okay? You know you can still talk to me. You may not consider yourself my patient anymore, but I’ll always be here for you.”

“I know Michael. *I* wouldn’t be here today without you. You saved my life and because of that we can help save theirs and thousands of others in their position.”

“So why do you look so haunted? Hell...this is about your daughter, isn’t it? She’d be the same age as these girls,” he said glancing around them.

“She is one of these girls,” she admitted in a whisper. “Wendy is *my* Wendy.”

“How did you find her?”

“Luc, the nurse who helped, who took her to a real family...he apparently moved a couple towns over from here after he got married and when I went to pick up Deanna he was there. Her mother died three years ago, and he asked me to just come see her. Tell me she doesn't need someone,” she said as he casually glanced back over the crowd until his gaze rested briefly on her.

“I can't but is this a good idea? You've never really gotten over having to give her up and if she doesn't want a relationship with you...I know you Miranda it'll break your heart. Please think about what you're going to do.”

“I have, all week. I know she'll probably never accept me, but I have to at least see if I can't help, even a little. I'm not going to tell them who I am. It'll be okay and if it's not... well I know the best psychiatrist in the country and have him on speed dial. Plus, his office is just a couple floors below mine, so I don't think it'll be hard to get an appointment with him,” she said forcing herself to smile.

“I'm going to hold you to that Mire. We all need you. The foundation wouldn't be what it is without you no matter who put the funding up for it. You're the one who stopped this situation from getting any worse and maybe that's the start to help Wendy. I know she wasn't one of the victims but she's still on the outskirts of it you know that.”

“I do,” she agreed before they were approached by several of the adults who had questions, they didn't want their kids overhearing.

A bit later, she was headed back from the bathroom, needing a few moments to gather herself and her emotions together, when the question came up.

“What about our game?” Delia inquired looking at the other team members.

“We don't have a coach, so I guess we're done,” another girl stated sadly.

“It's not fair. Why should we be punished for what he did?”

A debate quickly started up between the girls and their parents and Miranda caught Michael's gaze. He gave her a look that she couldn't quite decipher but something about it had her walking back over to the group and quieting them down once more.

"Hey...girls sit down. I'm sure whoever's in charge of the league would be willing to accept someone as a new coach. Believe me, I'll make them be if I have to because you're right, you shouldn't be punished or miss out on doing something you love to do because of what happened. I'm sure someone here could step in at least for today?" she added looking around at the adults.

"Most of us don't have a clue about the game, we come and cheer the girls on but that's about it," one of the mothers stated and the others agreed.

"It can't be that hard," Miranda said with a smile towards them. "The girls know what to do you just keep them focused."

"What about you?" Wendy asked shocking her a bit. "You said you played and like you just said, coaching can't be that hard, right?"

"I can't," she said with a laugh to cover her surprise.

"Why not?" Michael stated coming up behind her. "You were planning on being here all day and it's not as if you've never coached before..."

"That's different," she argued as several of the team members turned to her with hopeful faces.

"Coaching is coaching, that's what you told us when Dawn said she'd never coached soccer before only basketball, and you have an advantage, you actually know the game," he countered.

"Please," Wendy said, and she felt herself caving.

"I..."

"Please Miranda," Becky stated coming forward accepting the hug that Wendy gave her and the arm that settled

around her.

“Okay...for today,” she agreed hearing the cheers from the other girls and she quieted them back down a bit, “as long as your parents are okay with it.”

Several of them chuckled and one called out, “I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

“Though your outfit might be,” one of the moms added.

“Yeah, I can’t see you running or even standing around the sidelines coaching in that,” another stated.

“That won’t be a problem,” she replied turning to Michael. “Care to go make a call to get things squared away while I change and see what these girls can do?”

“Now that I can do,” he agreed as the girls headed out onto the field to warm up.

Miranda grabbed her bag and went back to the bathroom to change adding the jacket that matched her jogging outfit so she wouldn’t worry about anyone staring at her top half with only the long tank sports top she wore. She gathered her hair up in a ponytail, slipped back into her sneakers, and she had to admit she was much more comfortable than she had been in her wedges and business attire.

Michael took her bag as she reached the field, and she could tell the surprise on several of the adults’ faces as they looked at her. She knew she looked about twenty right now, it’s why she took so much care about her appearance when she was somewhere for the foundation.

Miranda saw the playbook the coach had been using and carefully leafed through it almost afraid of what it might contain.

She ran them through a few plays watching to see their strengths and weaknesses. Then made a few adjustments to the positions and had them go again cheering when they were able to get down the field for the shot even if their goalie did stop it. The parents watched her with curiosity, but she didn’t care. She was in her element, one she loved just as much as the foundation.

“She’s not bad, is she?” Steve said to Keith as they watched the girls. “Gorgeous, talented and amazing with kids it seems.”

“Are you saying that for my benefit or what Steve?” he asked turning to his friend. “Tracy might get jealous if she heard you talking like that.”

“I can look. After all, I’m not dead but I wouldn’t ever do anything about it. You on the other hand, it’s been a while since you’ve dated and don’t give me that bull about you and Janet.”

“Shouldn’t you be more concerned about Becky than my love life?” he asked regretting it the second Steve tensed. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You’re right but ragging on your love life is keeping my mind off of what Becky didn’t tell us after she came back and if I dwell on it, I’ll go crazy and probably go down to the police station and kill that bastard.”

“At least you know a good attorney,” Keith said patting him on the shoulder for support. “Whatever you need just ask, you and Tracy helped me and Wendy when we lost Nicole. I owe you.”

“Finding a way to keep her around might do that trick. I don’t know what she said to Becky but there’s a huge difference in her already. I hate that I didn’t see any of this. I knew she’d withdrawn a bit but this...when Becky came back, I saw a piece of the old Becky again.”

“And you think *I* can convince her to stick around? Come on the woman is probably married with a houseful of kids already. She’s a natural mother you can tell that.”

“And hot...Keith, man you can’t deny it.”

“We shouldn’t be objectifying her especially after today.”

“We’re not, I’m simply pointing out the truth. She’s stunning, she was a ten in her dress clothes but now, there’s not a number high enough to cover that.”

“You should see her without the jacket on,” Keith said as his mind flashed back to the first time, he saw her.

“You holding out on me?” Steve inquired lifting an eyebrow.

“She was out running this morning, heading to the bathrooms to change, and Wendy was trying to make that shot off the bar. It went wide and Miranda caught it.”

“I take it she wasn’t mad from that look.”

“She gave Wendy some pointers before heading on and Wendy made the shot for the first time following them. She was ecstatic and then I saw Miranda come back out all dressed up and realized she was older than I first thought.”

“Then all hell broke loose...we looked her up online. Her and this foundation, they’re all over the papers from here to New York. Branches of the foundation have been bringing down scum like Pike for the last four years. Her name’s on the front of most of them too, though not her picture,” Steve said passing his phone over.

“Wow, too bad there wasn’t this foundation when Wendy’s birth mother needed them,” Keith said glancing at his friend.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know that Wendy’s adopted. Nicole’s best friend died when she was a teenager giving birth and her brother Luc went into nursing to help others like her. He brought us Wendy when she was only a couple days old asking us to take care of her because her mother wanted her to have a better life than what she could give her. He explained her situation to us, and it was bad Steve, worse than this bad.”

“Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“We wanted to protect Wendy. We planned on telling her when she was older that she was adopted, giving her the letters, her mother wrote her. There were tons of them, each one showing how much she loved her even though she wasn’t even born yet.”

“So, why’d she give her up?” Steve asked as Keith’s heart broke all over again for the girl who’d given him the most incredible gift, being a father.

“Because she had nowhere to go, she ran away after she found out she was pregnant and only made it to the clinic in time to give birth to Wendy before making Luc promise that he’d give her to someone who’d love her, cherish her. When he told us you could see it in his eyes that she hadn’t wanted to do it, but she did for Wendy. We wanted to wait until Wendy was old enough to understand that her birth mother had made the hardest choice for her, and now, maybe it’s time I tell Wendy the truth.”

“That she’s adopted or that and everything else?” Steve asked.

“Everything...and I think I know how to do it too,” he answered watching as Wendy high-fived Miranda’s hand after making a shot.

“You’re going to ask Miranda to help you tell Wendy, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am.” He was determined to do whatever necessary to ensure that Wendy never hurt the way her birth mother did, especially not after today.

“What about Janet?”

“She’s my colleague, besides I’m sure the woman is already married but maybe we could convince her to coach the team, help all the girls through this,” Keith suggested, his heart constricting as he saw his daughter smile brightly as she ran across the field. Maybe this horrible day would bring them something better in the end.

Chapter 3

“Miranda,” Steve called after her as she headed towards the parking lot.

She was exhausted but yet wired from the day. Spending that much time with Wendy had made her heart ache but she couldn't stop herself from staying. She'd seen Wendy smile, laugh, and open up, and it had been great. That's what she needed, to know that she'd made the right choice for her daughter's happiness.

Miranda stopped as he, Tracy, Ralph, Keith, and the girls hurried after her.

“Hi, did I forget something?” she asked as they all stood around staring at her.

“Well, we were hoping you'd do us a couple huge favors,” Wendy said piping up.

“Okay,” she said hesitantly glancing around the group.

“We wanted to know if you'd be our coach, our real coach,” Wendy stated her eyes pleading with her.

“And I was hoping you'd come with me, to talk to my parents,” Becky added. “I don't know if I can...”

“Of course,” she said as she leaned down to look at the girl and pulled her gaze up. “Becky, you can do it, it may take time, but you'll find the words.”

“Could you help me, tonight?” Becky asked her and she nodded.

“Anytime,” Miranda assured her, digging into her bag to take out her card. She grabbed the pen from the clipboard, put her personal numbers on the back of it, and added Michael's in case she wasn't available.

“These are my personal phone numbers, Becky. If you can't do it tonight all you have to do is call me. This one is my friend Michael's, if I'm not in town you can always talk to

him. He's been with me for a long time, and he knows all my secrets," she told her when Becky looked hesitant to take it.

"Really?"

"Yes, we met ten years ago, and he's been my shoulder to lean on ever since."

"Mom, Dad, can we..." Becky glanced towards them then the cars.

"Do you mind?" Tracy asked Miranda writing down their address.

"Anytime," she told them with a gentle smile.

"Wen," Becky said as they started back towards the parking lot. "Mr. Samuels, can Wendy..."

"It's up to you and Wendy," Keith said reading the answer in his daughter's eyes.

"I already know Dad," she said gently hugging Becky to her side.

"Do you want me to pick you up later?" he asked.

"I don't mind if you're there Mr. Samuels, you're like another dad to me too," Becky said, and Miranda applauded her strength.

She followed behind the others taking time to regain her control over her emotions so she could help Becky through this. When they were inside, Miranda saw the fear creep up on Becky and she knew what she needed to say, she needed to say to her mother first. She stalled the adults before they went into the living room behind them.

"I know you're all anxious for her to talk but right now, she needs to be able to talk freely and I don't think she will," she said evenly knowing her words would hurt them.

"What are you saying?" Ralph asked.

"It means she's scared you're going to be mad or disappointed in her, that hearing what she says will make you love her less. In order to get her to fully admit it all she needs total acceptance. I'm not saying that you won't give that to

her,” she said when they began to speak. “I know no matter what she says you’ll love her, but she needs to be able to get it out without seeing anger and what she says will likely cause it in you.”

“What do we do?” Tracy questioned peeking in at her daughter.

“I think the best option right now is for her to talk to you. I’ll be there and if Wendy already knows what she’s likely to say she won’t react as much. Steve, Ralph...I know she’s your daughter and you want to be in there, be there for her but seeing you get angry is going to make her afraid to talk. The first time saying it is the hardest but once she gets it out, she’ll be able to tell you and your anger will help her see how much you really love her.”

“You’re sure?” Steve asked kissing Tracy’s temple as she wiped away a tear.

“I’ve been doing this for eight years. We’ve only been a foundation for four, but I know when someone needs their mother and when they need their father. Becky needs her mom right now.”

“Okay,” Ralph said.

“We’ll wait in the kitchen,” Steve added showing the men towards it.

Miranda found them there playing poker two hours later.

“She’s ready,” she told them. An hour after that she was watching as Becky hugged both her fathers and let out the breath she’d been holding in since they’d begun.

“You were amazing with her,” Keith said startling her. “I don’t know how you can do this...listen to stories like that over and over. I know I shouldn’t, but I want to go down and strangle that man myself.”

“Believe me I feel that way every single day of my life,” she told him. “Sometimes it’s hard to control your anger, especially in some of the circumstances I’ve been in, but you learn to push it away or take it out in other ways.”

“Like running?”

“Yeah...”

“At least it keeps you in shape,” Keith joked. He saw something flash across her face so quickly that he had no time to decipher it. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, the truth is about seven years ago I was using my running to try and outrun everything, the anger that hearing the stories that I have caused along with some personal pain. I took it too far and ended up in the hospital because of it. When I was admitted, I weighed eighty-six pounds. So now, I have to remind myself that as good as running away from it all sounds, I can’t do it.”

“Is that what you meant when you told Becky that Michael knew all your secrets?” he asked curious as to her relationship with the man.

“Partially,” she said as the others came over to them.

“Miranda, I don’t know how to thank you,” Tracy said hugging her.

“There’s no need, truly...I do what I do to help.”

“Would you like to stay for dinner, or do you need to get home?” she asked.

“I should let you have some family time.”

“Please stay, I couldn’t have done it without you. Wen told me I should tell weeks ago but I was scared,” Becky said, and Miranda knew she was going to give in, she had to it seemed. She squatted down beside the two girls on the couch, giving them both smiles.

“You were great sweetie, stronger than you know. And you are a great friend,” she added to Wendy. “I promise you’ll get through this because you have an amazing support system right here,” she said turning half-way around to show Becky the group behind them.

“Thanks to you,” Becky said hugging her. “So please stay.”

“Okay,” she agreed straightening back up.

“Why don’t we give the girls some time together?” Tracy suggested. “I’m sure we can whip up something in the kitchen in no time I mean we do have three men to help, don’t we?”

Miranda felt something strange was going on, but she relented and headed in behind Tracy as the three men followed suit. Tracy began pulling things from the cabinet then searched the fridge and she felt she was stalling.

“Is there something I can help with, for dinner or about Becky?” Miranda asked as the three men watched her and Tracy turned back towards her.

“We saw the scars,” Keith finally said, and she sighed closing her eyes for a second.

“You don’t have to say anything. We don’t...after everything you’ve done for us...” Tracy flailed with her words as Miranda looked back at her.

“It’s fine. Believe me they’re nothing to me anymore. The truth is I don’t have a doctorate degree or anything close to it. The reason I can help is because I’ve been there. Unlike Becky, I had no one to turn to; I was abused by my stepfather and my mother turned a blind eye to it. I ran away with some help from a friend once they allowed their friends to join.”

“Good lord,” Tracy gasped tears flooding her eyes.

“What happened?” Keith asked gently.

“I tried to hide from it until it got to be too much and when I was nineteen, I got a prescription for sleeping pills and swallowed the entire bottle. I woke up in the hospital but only because my roommate had come home early and found me. That’s when I met Michael; he was my doctor and thanks to him I made it out the other side. I used to be ashamed of it all, but he helped me see that I wasn’t the one to blame in any of it. That I couldn’t keep placing the blame on myself. That it wasn’t fair to me to have that hanging over my life.”

“And now you help others?” Steve asked amazed.

“Yeah, it took me a while to accept it all and even after I’d started helping others admit it, I couldn’t let it go.”

“Hence trying to outrun it?” Keith inquired.

“Yeah, that was the second time Michael made me own up to the pain and after that, I decided to take control of my life in every way. I got myself healthy again and then I decided to take down the people who had hurt me, so they couldn’t do it to anyone else.”

“So, the whole practice what you preach thing was just for show?” Steve said with a hint of a smile.

“I was more trying to keep everyone else out of jail; the slimes are free to rot there. About four and a half years ago, I finally was able to get enough proof, enough people to come forward to take down the group and make it stick. When I did, I found that they were holding a young girl that one of them had kidnapped about a year before and her father wanted to know how to thank me,” Miranda told the group. She had to if she wanted any relationship at all with Wendy later.

“What did you tell him?” Tracy asked.

“The truth, why I had done it and that even though they were no longer a threat, and his daughter was back home with him that there were thousands of others out there and the best way to thank me was to help them. He’d offered me millions in dollars, jewelry, cars, houses...and then he brought me the paperwork for Stay Young; that I couldn’t say no to accepting.”

“Wait so you started Stay Young?” Ralph asked as the others stared on in shock.

“Terry provided the funding, and I ran with it.”

“Wow, so when you do something like today, all of those people were there because of you?” Tracy said. “You’re the one who really brought Pike down.”

“I had a hunch last Saturday that he wasn’t the person he claimed to be, a gut feeling that something was truly off with him. It was my call to investigate him fully and we found a

multitude of things to charge him on. He won't get off, believe me."

"You can say that, but it doesn't mean it's necessarily true," Keith warned. "I see evidence get thrown out of court all the time."

"But it's hard to deny when you have fifteen girls willing to stand up and speak," she told them. "That's the number we took to the police yesterday and that's the number that got us the search and arrest warrants today. They found additional things to charge him with on his computer already and it won't get thrown out, none of it will and if his attorney tries well, I can guarantee mine are better."

"The foundation has their own attorneys?" Ralph asked.

"We have three at the main office who help us get legal searches or taps and when it comes to arguing they can't be beat. Terry on top of funding the foundation also set us up with his portfolio manager and they make sure to keep the investments solid so we can hire the best."

"Who works for you?" Keith stated loving the way Miranda's eyes lit up when she talked about the foundation.

"Peter Stone, Carol Wainscot, and Julius Monroe are our three primary attorneys," she answered grinning at his expression. "I take it you've heard of them."

"Who hasn't? Wasn't Julius the lead prosecutor on the slew of arrests from Oakland?" Keith questioned.

"He was," she said, her voice a bit wooden.

"Wait, that was three years ago and most of those arrests were four..." Keith stopped, watching her closely. "That was the group."

"Yeah," she said with a short nod.

"Holy hell, no wonder you ran," he stated. "Wasn't there a senator in that group?"

"Please, don't ask okay. I've accepted it but..."

“I’m sorry,” he said seeing the pain that flashed across her face before she closed her eyes. “Miranda, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, so now you all know why I do what I do. Any other questions?” Miranda asked trying to stop the reminders of the man Keith had conjured up in her mind.

“One,” Steve said, “will you coach the girls? You were great with them, and I think right now, they need you both on and off the field.”

“I agree,” Ralph stated. “You know what they’re going through and I’m sure there are some who won’t be able to talk to their parents, but they might as a group.”

“Let me see what my schedule looks like compared to theirs and I’ll let you all know,” she said wanting to take a short break to make sure she was doing the right thing.

“Sounds fair,” Tracy said with a smile.

“Now would you like some help with that or are you going to pound that meat into hamburger?” Miranda asked nodding towards the mallet in her hand.

“Oh lord,” she said with a laugh. “What on earth was I thinking? Maybe we should just order a pizza?”

“I think it’s salvageable,” Miranda told her checking the cabinet where she’d seen the pasta. She pulled out the egg noodles and headed back over to her. “How about steak tips or stroganoff?”

“You cook? I mean when do you have time?” Tracy asked knowing how it sounded.

“It relaxes me,” she admitted. “Michael forced me to take cooking classes. I literally ran myself into the hospital. I was at eighty-six pounds, and he was determined to make me eat. Unfortunately, I couldn’t cook a thing and most of the time I lived on ramen noodles or mac-n-cheese.”

“The Michael who was at the field today...the one you gave Becky the number to?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, he’s my lead counselor for the foundation. He’s also my best friend, my therapist when I need one, and

anything else I might possibly need him for, no matter what. He kicked my butt when I needed him to the most.”

“I don’t want to sound like I’m prying,” Tracy said smiling at her as she started the noodles, “but what about your personal life?”

“Yes, I have one. At the moment not much of one, I just got out of a two-year relationship with a great guy.”

“If he’s so great why did things end?” Keith inquired.

“Because he couldn’t accept how much time I spent at or on the foundation. He thought that by hiring new employees I’d have more free time. He just didn’t quite understand why I did it all.”

“And now?” Tracy asked.

“Right now, I’ve been too busy to sleep let alone think about getting back out there. I’m okay being alone. I have the foundation which never rests, and I actually coach a small team of girls at the shelter we partner with,” she told them as her phone rang. “Sorry I have to take this, it’s work.”

Miranda moved out into the hallway to take it, glad it wasn’t anything dire and then went back in to find Keith stirring the meat for her. “Thanks, unfortunately work never rests.”

“Everything okay?” Ralph asked.

“Yeah, we provide grants for clinics and one of them was in danger of being shut down. That was the confirmation that it wasn’t going to happen.”

“How’d you manage that?” Steve asked.

“However I can, this time it was hiring a new director who the medical board can’t argue with despite their attempts. Trust me I find a way to make things happen; I don’t take no for an answer,” she said with a smile as she wondered how it could feel so easy being there.

Chapter 4

“Great job out there today,” Miranda said smiling at the team. “Now go home and get some rest, we have a long weekend ahead of us next week. Three games and you all make the playoffs.”

The exuberant cheers made her laugh. The changes in them, and herself, the past month, was amazing. She was smiling more, laughing easier, and she knew it was all because of Wendy. Most of her wished she could tell Wendy the truth, but Miranda knew it would hurt her...and Keith. He was a tiny reason she was also smiling more. Somehow, he'd managed to sneak into her subconscious and refuse to let go.

“Miranda.”

“Wendy, what's up?” she asked trying to calm her wildly beating heart.

“I was wondering...”

“What sweetie?” She paused in her cleanup to sit down on the bench to talk to her.

“Well, we're supposed to have this father/daughter dance at school in a couple weeks, but I don't have anything to wear for it. I know Becky's mom would take me shopping but I don't want to ask after everything that's gone on.”

“And you want to know if I'll take you?”

“Yeah, you always look amazing and I...I don't know, I want to look nice.”

Miranda tried to stop herself from reading too much into the request. She didn't want to hurt herself by thinking things that weren't true. “I'd love to if your father says it's okay.”

“If her father says what's okay?” Keith asked sliding over to them feeling his gut tighten as Miranda looked up and smiled his way, nearly the same way she was smiling at Wendy.

If he didn't know better, he'd think there was just a hint of love in that gaze. That was crazy, no matter if it were where he was heading, he'd never get that lucky twice in his life. One amazing woman loving him was surely all he'd manage. It wasn't possible that he'd find a second, especially someone as incredible as Miranda. Her strength and resilience was vastly different from Nicole but it attracted him in droves.

"I was hoping Miranda could go shopping with me for a dress to the dance coming up," Wendy stated turning her pleading eyes onto him.

"And she agreed to this?" he asked glancing back over to Miranda.

"I did, depending on what you all have going on I'm free tomorrow and probably next Sunday too."

"Tomorrow's good," Wendy said with a huge smile. "Right Dad?"

"Of course, why don't we meet you at the mall around one and then I'll take you both to dinner afterwards?"

"It sounds good," Miranda said grabbing for the rest of the things. Keith took the big bag of equipment before she could pick it up and Wendy ran out to talk to some of her friends as he walked it to the car for her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Miranda, I know we just met but I was hoping to talk to you about something with Wendy."

"Is everything okay?" she asked seeing the worry cross his face. "You don't think there's something she hasn't told us do you because she's not hiding from this situation Keith that much I know."

"No, it's not about that. Wendy was adopted when she was a baby. Her birth mother...she went through a lot when she was a teen, like you did, and I need to tell her. Nicole and I always had planned to, but we were going to wait until she could understand that her birth mother did what she did for her."

Miranda's heart stalled seeing the understanding in his eyes and she bit down on her tongue trying to keep herself from blurting out the truth. She was in love with her daughter, but she knew it wouldn't work out the way she wanted. Especially since Wendy didn't know about her it seemed.

"You want me to tell her what happened to her mother?"

"I think after everything that happened here and with Becky that she'll understand it better and maybe it'll help her see why she means so much to me and Nicole."

"What do you know about her mother's situation?" she asked, trying to stall for time.

"Not a lot just that she had nowhere to go, no one to turn to...she was sixteen and pregnant by one of the men abusing her. She ran away to protect Wendy and then gave her up when she was born so Wendy wouldn't face something like she did. Nicole's best friend died when she was a teenager during childbirth and her brother Luc is a nurse. He brought Wendy to us when she was a few days old with her name and this stack of letters, a scarf, and locket that were from her mother. We could see in his eyes that she hadn't wanted to give her up and he told us that the look in her eyes when she did it said her heart was breaking into a million pieces. We know she didn't want Wendy to go through that and I honestly don't know how to thank her for doing it."

"Thank her?" Miranda asked trying to keep the tears at bay and her heart from filling with hope.

"She gave me and Nicole the most amazing gift ever. Nicole wanted to be a mother and I wanted to be a father, but we discovered she couldn't have children. We were trying to adopt. It's a long process unless it's private and we'd just lost what we thought would be our child when the birth mother decided not to give the baby away. When Luc showed up, we took one look at Wendy and fell in love with her. Hearing her story, there is nothing we wouldn't have done for Wendy...or her mother."

“You really do understand the pain she went through, don’t you?” Miranda asked giving him a light smile.

“I do, we thought we were going to have this child and then it fell apart; we were crushed. Nicole was a great mother to Wendy and we both miss her but...she needs to know the truth that there was someone else out there who wanted her so badly but couldn’t possibly keep her. We want her to see that the sacrifice she made was for her sake and I think that you can help her see that more than ever after hearing what you went through.”

“Keith...I...I’m,” she started knowing she had to tell him but there was something in his gaze that held her back. “Alright, why don’t we wait until after the season’s over though? We don’t want her dealing with that on top of trying to play and you don’t want her pushing away the pain she’s bound to feel, right?”

“Right,” he agreed. “You’re sure you want to go shopping with her tomorrow? She can be a handful.”

“Believe me going shopping with a teenager is something I love to do and one who’s not in an emotional upheaval will be a wonderful change.”

“You take the girls shopping?”

“Boys too, it’s not just girls in situations like these, yes it’s more prevalent but...sorry,” she said stopping when she realized what she was doing. “I tend to get passionate about my work.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” he stated giving her a smile. “You’re an incredible woman Miranda Oliver.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“It’s true,” he said when she looked away. “You’ve changed all of their lives; these girls were living in hell until you stepped in. If something had happened to Wendy...the thought that despite my best efforts that something like this had nearly harmed her when we had both promised ourselves and her mother that it wouldn’t...”

“What?” Miranda turned back towards him in surprise.

“Wendy was probably five, there was case going on in the next town over with a child being molested and Nicole and I swore we’d never let something like that happen to her. We both made a promise to the other that we’d never let ourselves get too wrapped up in our own lives to see that she was hurting. We promised her mother that we’d never let her hurt the way she had.”

“You’re an amazing father Keith; you truly don’t care who her biological parents were, do you?”

“You mean the scum that created her? *I’m* her father—her dad and that’s never going to change. I don’t want Wendy being hurt because of the man who forced himself on her mother; if I ever met him, I’d kill him for doing something like that to a sixteen-year-old girl.”

Miranda gave him a smile trying to stop the tears that hit her at the unexpected gentleness in his voice for her, even if he didn’t know it was for her.

“Miranda, hey what’s wrong?” he asked seeing them as he took a step closer towards her.

“Sorry,” she said blinking them away. “Sometimes all of this, meeting people who want to protect the people in situations like that it just...”

“What?” he said gently seeing the pain in her eyes.

“Makes it all worse and better at the same time. I now know there are people like you, like Michael, who just want to help and don’t judge, and it makes me wish that I’d found something like it sooner.”

“I’m sorry Miranda I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t, not in a bad way at least.”

“I still made you cry. I don’t want to hurt you more. If you don’t want to talk to Wendy with me, if it’ll stir up too many memories, I’ll understand,” he said taking her hand and squeezing it.

“No, I’d like to talk to her with you. Trying to understand something you’ve never been through...most

people don't ever know what that sort of pain feels like. It makes people do crazy things when they feel that there's nowhere left for them to run to."

"Is that what it was like for you?"

"When I swallowed an entire bottle of sleeping pills? Yeah, I just wanted it all to stop. I wanted the pain to go away, the reminders, and memories they all were too much. When I woke up in that hospital room and Michael came in..." She paused biting her lower lip to push aside the feelings that brought back to her.

"You don't have to tell me Miranda."

"Talking helps though, no matter how much it might hurt in the long run it does help."

"Is that why you hired Michael as your lead counselor for the foundation?"

"One of them," she said giving him a light smile. "No, there's nothing going on with us. He's still my therapist when I need it and he treats me like a daughter."

"I wasn't..."

"No?" she asked lifting an eyebrow his way.

"Alright maybe for a couple moments I was wondering about your relationship with him but that's just because you seemed to let your guard down with him."

"Because he knows all my secrets already and he'll never tell another soul. It's why I have so many therapists ready and willing to help, knowing there's at least one person, one place where you can go and talk, yell, scream, cry, curse, rage...one place where you can feel perfectly safe at, where there is no judgment, no right or wrong way to feel, it's the only thing that can help push you past the pain sometimes, it's the only thing that can keep you from doing something extreme."

"You are amazing Miranda; you have so much strength and determination, conviction to help no matter what. You've helped so many others when you could have run and hid... why?"

“Because they took everything from me. They took my childhood, my security, my...life and I was left with nothing but pain and fear. Heartache that I didn't mean enough to my mother for her to walk away from him. I barely got my life back before I was confronted by someone who reminded me so much of myself and I knew that while I might not ever be able to let go of the past, I could help someone else from doing something as crazy as trying to kill themselves to stop the pain.”

“So, you started helping others and then decided to confront your past?”

“A bit...one of the girls I met was a lot like me, her story was so close to mine and that's when she said a name that took me back; helping her showed me that the only way to truly help someone else was to stand up and stop it. She was fifteen and one of the people who'd abused her was one of the ones who'd abused me. I finally realized that there would always be another girl. That me running away hadn't stopped their perversity it'd simply pushed it onto someone else and I couldn't let that continue.”

“So, you stood up to them?”

“Without them knowing who I was yeah, I wasn't about to come out of the shadows in case they got off. I was still the scared twelve-year-old whose stepfather...” She stopped feeling the bile rise in her throat.

“It's okay. Miranda don't,” Keith said gently seeing the look that crossed her face. “Telling me is only going to make me want to kill the man more than I already do.”

Miranda glanced down trying to stop the nervous laugh that welled up as she looked back towards him. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Because you were an innocent little girl like Wendy is right now and if anyone had... I want to kill him for hurting that girl as a father but seeing the pain that it still brings up in you, I want to kill him for causing that to the woman you are now as a man. Who shouldn't be saying this because you're bound to tell me to back off?”

“I...”

“Ready to go Dad?” Wendy asked flitting back over to them with a smile.

“Yeah sweetie,” he said giving Miranda another smile. “We’ll see you tomorrow still I hope?”

“Of course,” she agreed trying to stop the rush of feelings invading her.

Miranda finally got them under control by the time she met up with him and Wendy the next day and he gave her some cash to pay for anything Wendy wanted to buy with a grateful smile.

“So where should we start?” she asked Wendy unable to stop the smile at the idea of spending the afternoon shopping with her daughter.

“I don’t know; the truth is there’s this guy I sort of like and there’s going to be pictures taken from the dance.”

“And you want him to see you as something other than a little girl?” she offered and saw Wendy nod. “Let’s go see what we can find but whatever you do, don’t rush anything, okay?”

“Oh, trust me that’s not even going to come close to happening any time in the distant future. I just don’t want to be seen as the tomboy anymore. I love soccer, but I don’t want to be one of the guys,” Wendy said with a big grin at her that she loved.

“Good, I think that will ease your dad’s mind a lot.”

“Speaking of my dad, he likes you.”

“What?” Miranda said turning to a rack of dresses trying to hold off the blush hitting her.

“Since he saw you at the park that day he hasn’t gone out with Janet once and I know it’s not just because of what everyone found out.”

“Janet?” she asked, curious but she didn’t want to be curious.

“She was with Dad at the game before you took over; she’s his business partner or something. I like her enough but she’s not my mom or someone I’d want to be my mom. I know a lot of kids whose parents die don’t want someone else in their lives but...can I tell you a secret my dad doesn’t know I know?” Wendy asked softly, a bit anxiously and Miranda knew she needed to get something off her chest.

“You can tell me anything.” She sat down on the bench beside Wendy outside the dressing room.

“I know my mom isn’t my real mom. I’m not supposed to, but I found this stack of letters about a year ago, they’re written to me, and I’d thought they were from my mom, and they are...they’re just not from my mom Nicole.”

“You’re saying...” Miranda stopped realizing she knew part of it and was terrified to hear what she thought about having a birth mother let alone what she’d think to find out it was her.

“I was adopted, and I don’t know why they’ve kept it from me, but her letters are so amazing. I know my mom Nicole loved me and I know Dad loves me but there’s this piece of me that wonders...why she gave me up when none of the letters made it seem like she wanted to, it’s not what I felt at all from them. Why would Dad keep that from me?”

“Maybe they wanted to simply wait to tell you until you were a bit older. They might know why she gave you up. It might not be something that simple. I think after everything we’ve learned the past month, we’d all know that, right?”

“Right,” Wendy agreed giving her a hug. “So, do you like my dad? Because if you wanted to go out with him, I’d totally be okay with it, much more than him and Janet ever.”

“Your dad is an amazing father and man I’m sure, but we don’t know each other that well.”

“Then maybe we should change that tonight at dinner,” Wendy said with a grin before heading in to try on a new dress.

Miranda took a deep breath knowing she needed to come clean before she lost her heart over both of them. They were too perfect for her not to and that terrified her.

Chapter 5

“I was beginning to worry. Wendy, you look beautiful,” Keith said stopping to look at his daughter. “It looks like you bought out the whole mall though.”

“No but we were close, weren’t we, Miranda?” Wendy laughed giving him a hug. “So, you like the new outfit? It’s not too girly?”

“Not at all,” he stated sending Miranda a curious look.

“Why don’t we put these things in the car and then eat?” she suggested. “I don’t know about you but I’m starving.”

“Good idea,” he said leading them outside. “Too girly?”

“She’s trying to grow up some, but she doesn’t want to be too obvious about it. She doesn’t want to be seen as a tomboy, but she honestly can’t stand the girly clothes.”

“She looks amazing and happy, thank you,” he stated then stopped when Miranda held him back slightly as Wendy started putting the bags into the trunk. “What?”

“She knows about being adopted; don’t tell her I told you please, I just wanted you to know that we can take our time with telling her the rest.”

“How?”

“She found the stack of letters about a year ago and thought they were from Nicole; she has questions but she’s okay knowing.”

“I never imagined she’d find them; thank you for telling me even though I’d say she asked you not to?” he guessed, and she nodded.

“Yeah, I just didn’t want you worrying about rushing to tell her the entire story and that she’d be angry and upset about it all; let’s let her get through the rest of the season still and then we’ll tell her the rest.”

“Sure,” he agreed then ushered them both into the restaurant.

The hostess seated them, and they ordered, handing over the menus as a new group came in to eat. Wendy knew a couple of the girls with them and asked to go to the arcade area while their food cooked.

“Just stay where we can keep an eye on you,” he said glad they were seated facing the area.

“Sure Dad,” Wendy said giving them a grin. “You two should talk...get to know each other.”

“Okay what was that?” he asked Miranda as Wendy headed over to the arcade.

“She told me earlier that she’d be okay with me going out with you. I have no idea where it came from...something about you not going out with Janet lately,” she said trying not to blush.

“Ah, seems I’ve been caught in a crush by my own daughter,” he stated with a slight grin.

“Well, I told her I didn’t know you well enough to go out with you and she suggested we get to know each other better tonight.”

“I see and now she’s given us the perfect opportunity in her mind. It’s okay Miranda I get that you don’t feel the same; I’m a big boy I can handle it,” he added although he’d much prefer if she did feel the same.

“It’s not that Keith.” Miranda took a deep breath knowing it was crazy to open up to them further. “I just...I don’t let a lot of people close, and I’ve grown really fond of Wendy, Becky and the others.”

“Fond?”

“They’ve stolen a bit of my heart; I just don’t want something to affect them. Not right now...”

“And if we kept a date secret from them, would you agree to it? Just one date to see what this was?” he asked needing to know if he had any shot at all with her.

“I’d say I’d love to,” she admitted knowing she shouldn’t because her heart would be crushed when they found out the truth.

“I usually work late Tuesday nights; there’s a neighbor who watches Wendy for me. I could skip out of work early and come up to see you?”

“This Tuesday?”

“Too soon?”

“No, alright one date,” she said giving him a smile as they turned to look for Wendy and the others. “Oh my god...”

“Miranda, what’s wrong?” he asked seeing her face pale slightly.

“Don’t panic but can you go get Wendy and the others out of the arcade?”

“Don’t panic? Miranda what’s going on?”

“Do you see the girl sitting at the edge of the arcade and the man watching the others?” she asked as she sent a notification to the police.

“The one in the blue hoodie?”

“Yeah, see the way he’s watching her and the others? She’s a kidnap victim from New York we’ve been keeping an eye out for the last year and a half; I can’t let him get out of here with her. This is the same ruse he used to get her and she’s the same age as the girl we found who helped take her.”

“Holy shit, you’re saying found as in...”

“Murdered,” she stated seeing the understanding in his eyes. She didn’t know how they managed to be here at the same time, but she couldn’t waste the opportunity. “Yes, she was. If he’s here it means he’s ready to dump her because she’s too old for him now. I won’t let anything happen to Wendy and the others, just causally go over to them, alright?”

“What are you going to do?” he asked worry flowing through him of what could happen, the ways the man could hurt any of the kids in the arcade let alone Miranda.

“Mall security is already heading our way and the police will be here any minute; just make sure you’re between him and the girls,” she stated giving him a long look. “You said you’d do anything to protect Wendy well right now she needs that protection; he likes his girls to be between thirteen and fourteen.”

Miranda watched as Keith headed over to the arcade and slipped over to the bar to speak with the restaurant manager who quickly closed off the other entrances around the place and had someone standing guard at the kitchen doors as mall security reached them. She slipped out past the hostess and pointed out their man moving down the corridor to meet up with the police officers heading their way.

“We keep meeting like this,” the detective said shaking her hand. “I’d say it’s a mix match of good and bad, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, we’ve been trying to locate this girl for the last year because she was already older than most he’s taken. Keith Samuels is inside the arcade with his daughter Wendy and a couple other girls from her grade.”

“From the soccer team?” the man asked, and she nodded.

“Yeah, I came shopping with Wendy today and we were having dinner; the manager knows and is keeping the other doors blocked so the only way in or out is through the front. I’m going to go back in, head to the arcade and to Liza,” she told the group knowing what was needed more than they did right now.

“You’re putting yourself in danger Miranda.”

“I know and I’ll gladly do it knowing you’ve got my back.”

“We can’t talk you out of it can we?”

“Nope, I’m stubborn; ask anyone who knows me.”

“Your track record speaks for itself,” he stated motioning to two plain clothes cops to head in after her. “They’re going to be set up beside this guy so the second he makes a move when he sees us...we’ll grab him.”

“Okay,” she said with a smile as she went back inside the restaurant. The man was still sitting there, and she headed over to the arcade giving Keith a slight shake to keep him back where he was. She headed to Liza and glanced around the room before turning to her.

“You haven’t seen a little boy, have you? He’s about eight, curly brown hair and freckles on his nose?” she asked describing Liza’s brother. “His name’s Liam and I can’t seem to find him anywhere.”

“No,” she said as her gaze narrowed in on her. “Sorry.”

“No? Here I’ve got a picture of him,” she stated crouching down beside her between her and the man. “See isn’t he just the sweetest? He’s been sad since his sister disappeared...Liza.”

“How? You’ve got to go, or he’ll kill me,” Liza whispered as the tears hit her.

“The man in the blue hoodie?” Miranda asked quietly. Liza nodded and she glanced back at the two plain clothes officers and nodded. “He can’t hurt you anymore Liza I promise.”

“He will, he’ll kill me and then Liam.”

“He won’t,” she soothed her as the man got up. “He won’t touch you ever again Liza, I promise.”

“Ashley, it’s time to go,” the man stated, then as he saw the police coming in, he started to lunge for them, but she moved faster and put herself between Liza and the man as the plain clothes officers grabbed him.

“It’s okay Liza; it’ll all be okay,” she stated as they drug the guy out screaming obscenities. “Come on...your bother is safe I promise.”

“He’s really okay? He said he’d taken him too,” Liza cried brokenly holding onto her arm tightly.

“He didn’t sweetie,” Miranda promised leading her into the side room that was blocked off from the rest of the restaurant.

“Miranda?” Keith said coming in behind them with Wendy.

“Hi, you okay Wen?” she asked seeing the girl’s confused expression.

“Yeah, is she okay?” Wendy asked looking at Liza.

“She will be,” Miranda stated turning to Keith. “Can you go get my computer from the trunk of my car?”

“Sure,” he agreed taking her keys as Wendy headed over to her. “I’ll be right back sweetie.”

“I’ll be fine Dad; I’ve got Miranda, don’t I?” she said with a smile.

“Liza, I know it’s scary but it’s okay,” Miranda told her as Wendy looked at her.

“That guy hurt you, didn’t he? Someone hurt my best friend and Miranda helped us; she’ll help you too,” Wendy said making her heart stall at her sincerity.

“I...don’t know how you knew,” Liza said finally, looking at her. The fear, pain and slight hope was all too familiar to her, and she wanted nothing more than to pull the girl into her arms and just hold her tight. She didn’t though. Liza’s stance said don’t touch still. “I didn’t think anyone would be looking for me.”

“Your family has done nothing but look for you Liza,” she promised as Keith returned.

Miranda pulled out her laptop and connected to the internet as she got hold of the police and her office from New York. She waited as they headed over to Liza’s house and she watched as Liza and Wendy talked as they ate.

“You saved her life tonight, didn’t you?” Keith asked.

“In more than one way, I hope. Yes, I’ve kept her breathing but living, it takes a lot longer. He’s damaged her psyche making her think no one else loved her and that if she didn’t do what he wanted he’d have someone kill her brother.”

“What can I do to help? Not just her but others the way you do?” he questioned knowing that his law career and the money didn’t matter after seeing all of this firsthand.

“A million different ways, there’s a dozen laws out there that protect these people and it’s nearly impossible to catch them legally, tonight was a fluke. I only knew about Liza because her family came to us for help. These people act and behave like normal people usually, don’t do things that typically draw attention to themselves. But mostly, they will do anything they can to keep from being caught. It’s why I have in-house attorneys...so we can argue to overstep some personal liberties when the life and safety of so many other kids are in danger.”

“You’re amazing. I know I’ve said it before but it’s true Miranda and if you need more legal help or anything just ask. I may not be Julius Monroe, but I do know a thing or two about the law,” Keith said fighting the urge to pull her into his arms and hold tight, never let her go.

“I might just take you up on that if you’re not careful Keith; we go to court every day it seems, for orders of protection, name changes, guardianships; it doesn’t stop once we have them out from under the people hurting them.”

“I never thought of that; you help them set up new lives, don’t you?”

“If they’re old enough to be on their own and can handle it. If they don’t have any family or if it’s their family, they’re hiding from...most of these kids have no one, they came from the foster system or were runaways who were easy prey. When we get them back, they’re scared and hurting, and they need more than a foster parent who is only in it for the money. We have a network of people who take the kids in become their guardians and help them get back to being kids, teens. So please don’t offer your help if you’re not willing to truly give it. A lot of times it’s not too difficult to get our cases through but occasionally we’ll have a higher profile client against us,” she told him showing him how in depth it really went for the foundation.

“I’m serious Miranda. Anything you need I’ll gladly help with.”

“Thanks Keith...I need to take this,” she said as the computer screen popped up a chat request. “Tabitha, are they home?”

“They’re all here Miranda,” she stated turning the computer around to show the family sitting on the couch holding hands.

“Miranda, they said you had news about Liza?” her mother said nearing tears already.

“I do and it’s good I promise, Julia,” she said getting Liza’s attention over the computer at her mother’s name.

“Mom?” Liza said and she nodded as the girl hurried over. “Mom! Dad...Liam!”

“Oh my god...Liza...oh our baby,” Julia gasped seeing her as the tears fell.

“Liza,” Liam said smiling at her. “Are you coming home?”

“I...you all want me to?”

“Liza of course we want you home honey,” her father stated, and she squeezed Liza’s shoulder as they let her, and her parents talk.

A bit later Miranda stepped back over to them and hugged Liza’s shoulders as she interrupted. “If you answer the door there’s a car waiting to take you to the airport. There’s a helicopter waiting for you there.”

“Now? But we don’t have clothes,” Julia said in shock.

“We’ll take care of everything, there’s a hotel suite reserved, and we have plenty of clothes available. If you want Tabitha can pack some things for you and we’ll have them brought out as soon as possible. I have a member of my team flying out here in the morning and they can bring anything you need.”

“Oh Miranda...thank you,” Julia stated and a few hours later she repeated that phrase over and over as she hugged Liza and then her.

“You’re welcome but you brought her to our attention. I was thankfully just in the right place at the right time,” she said returning the embrace as Liza began to open up to her father who held her tightly.

“If there’s ever anything we can do to help in return,” Julia offered.

“Just take good care of her, she’s going to need someone to talk to and when she pushes don’t take it personally. I’ve already notified the counselors at the office in New York and they’re available whenever you need them. Individual sessions as well as family ones, it’ll take some time, but she’ll make it through,” she stated as Liza hugged Wendy goodbye.

“Your daughter’s beautiful,” Julia said with a smile.

“She’s not...” she said praying Keith hadn’t overheard the comment. “I’m just out with her and her father.”

“Oh, she looks a lot like you, but then you aren’t quite old enough to have a teenager, are you?” Julia stated giving her another hug as they headed to the hotel.

“You okay?” Keith asked coming over as he watched her expression change to worry.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about dinner.”

“Don’t be, seeing all of this...I get it Miranda and it’s alright. I’m a parent so I understand this better than your ex probably did.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?” she said as they gathered their things to head out.

“You have in the last five hours saved a girl’s life, kept another from likely being taken, and reunited a family; how could anyone not see that this is what you were meant to do?”

“It’s not just that Keith. He wanted us to move forward in our relationship, move in together, get married, have a family...”

“You don’t want that?”

“I do but I have to finally let go of the past before that can happen.”

“Are you warning me off Miranda?”

“Cautioning us both I think, I’m...there are a lot of things you don’t know about then...things I haven’t fully accepted,” she said knowing the truth would end this little dream.

“I can take it slow Miranda,” he said pausing beside her car as Wendy watched them.

“I hope so,” she stated before hugging Wendy and giving them both smiles as she left.

Chapter 6

“You are so busted Dad,” Wendy said smiling fully up at him.

“What are you talking about?” Keith asked as they drove home.

“You like Miranda...really like her, don't you?”

“And would you be okay with that if I did? If I started seeing her?”

“I'd be totally fine with it but...she's different don't you think?”

“Meaning what Wendy?” he asked as she watched him carefully.

“I mean that...she really knows what she's talking about with things such as what happened to Becky and stuff like that,” Wendy added making him fight to not laugh at how overprotective his daughter was of Miranda. Would she be okay if something real happened between them?

“I already know sweetie and I'm not going to hurt her.”

“So, you know that she was abused? She told you that?”

“We saw some scars on her back the night Becky told us all what happened. You're awfully protective over her Wen; what's going on?” he asked wondering if he should back off his feelings for her sake.

“I don't know; it's just that ever since we saw her in the park when she told me how to make that goal...it's like I know her or something. It sounds crazy but she's amazing and if you wanted her around more I wouldn't argue. I like her Dad; I really like her.”

“So, if I took her out to dinner just the two of us, you'd be okay with that? Because she's worried that dating me might affect you and the other girls,” he warned her, glad she wasn't warning him off the only woman he could reasonably

see himself with going forward, loving even close to the way he'd loved Nicole.

“We all love her as our coach; we're three games from the playoffs but she listens to us too. When we're just practicing, she'll answer our questions as though we're real people and not just kids.”

“Questions as in...”

“Eww, no we're not having the sex talk Dad, and I don't want to know anything else on that subject for a long time. I mean about being thirteen and a teenager, soccer, and boys, how to deal with new emotions that might hit us. She's incredible and if the two of you got closer...I don't think any of us would mind her sticking around more. I certainly wouldn't.”

“Well, we'll see what happens then won't we?” he said and Tuesday evening he pulled up outside Miranda's place and stared in amazement at the building where she lived. He parked in the visitor's lot and went inside where the doorman stalled him. “I'm here to see Miranda Oliver...Keith Samuels.”

“Of course, Mr. Samuels,” he stated leading him to the elevator as he took out a card and swiped it across the pad. He pressed the button for the top floor and stepped back to pick up the phone.

Miranda met him at the door in bare feet as she apologized for not being ready.

“It's okay, this place is...”

“A fortress, Terry purchased it and made me accept it in exchange for the foundation. It's actually come in handy really. There are several people who've tried to come after me because of what I do. Security is top notch, and the view is amazing,” she said opening the curtains to show him the skyline.

“Wow, it is incredible, but I don't know...I can't really see you here. I figured you lived in some little house

surrounded by plants and space, a treehouse and garden, grass for playing with kids.”

“You caught me, that’s what I would love but it’s not as secure and for now this is me,” she stated before pushing open the balcony door and stepping out onto it.

“Yes, this is you,” he agreed seeing the smile that hit her lips as they sat down on the furniture out there. He glanced at the plants and knew he hadn’t been wrong. “The whole floor is yours?”

“Yeah, so out here is my own private little haven. No one can spy on what I do or what I say to the plants or the sky.”

“You like to talk to the plants?”

“Maybe, or maybe it’s just a nice place in the middle of all of the craziness where I can talk openly to anyone. The plants or sky are just ways for me to get things out there for me to hear it and see how it sounds but I talk to Michael here occasionally when I need someone to help me through things, and I can get to know someone new here.”

“I made reservations for dinner, but I can cancel them if you want,” he offered.

“If we go to dinner we’re going to talk about mundane things because I don’t talk about my life or work in public if I can help it. Do you want to really sit there and go around and around things?”

“No, I want to get to know you, the real you Miranda. I just don’t want to make you uncomfortable,” he admitted because this was new to him as well. It’d been a while since he’d really dated anyone—Janet was more dinner partner than date, and never a girl that had a history like hers. He didn’t want to do anything that would make her run from him and what this could become, especially with Wendy in the mix.

“Then the first thing is to know that I’m not going to break Keith; if you try something and I don’t want it to happen I’ll say no like a normal girl would. I’m not going to crumple into a little ball and freak out so please stop acting like I’m

going to have a meltdown, okay?” Miranda gave him a light smile that had him enslaved to her.

“Is it that obvious?” he laughed loosening his tie a bit.

“Thank you for being worried or trying to act like a gentleman but I’m not a twelve-year-old girl anymore, and while I haven’t turned into a free woman that sleeps with everyone I meet, I don’t have any fears regarding a relationship where two people touch, or kiss, or have sex.”

“What about make love?” Keith moved closer to her as he brushed a strand of hair from her cheek, sensing she’d never experienced it once, or else she’d have said it differently.

“Is there a difference?”

“Isn’t there one between being raped and having sex?” he countered gently, sliding his hand along the back of her head and into the thick mass of hair that had teased him for the last month with its silkiness.

“I’ve never been in love. I thought I was this last time but...I wasn’t,” she admitted lowering her forehead to rest against his chin.

Keith pressed a kiss onto it unable to stop himself and pulled her closer to him as he held her. “I’ve wanted to hold you for weeks, everything I learn about you made it that much more difficult for me to resist pulling you into my arms and just holding you.”

“I don’t need a father Keith.” Her words were a warning, but she didn’t pull away making him smile softly to himself, knowing exactly what she needed. Someone to love everything about her, a man who would understand the horror of her childhood and never let it harm her again. She might not need a father in that sense, but she needed a man who was a father to show her the truth of what that relationship should be like, and adore her, protect her, from anything he possibly could, and Keith wanted that to be him.

“That’s good because that’s the last way I feel for you,” he admitted lifting her chin to find her gaze. “I won’t rush

anything; I swear Miranda, I'm just an affectionate person.”

“I don't mind; it's been a while since I've let someone into my life or close. Other than Michael no one's ever stuck around long enough to let me put my guard down and really tell them what I've been through without worrying that it'll disgust them or make them run away. Some of them are okay with it on the surface but as time goes on it gets to be too much for them and then I get hurt because of it.”

“Miranda,” he said gently running a hand down her arm. “It does disgust me as a man and a father to think that anyone could do that to someone but that's with the person who did it to you, not you, never you. I adore Wendy and she was created because of a life like that, if I couldn't accept you and what happened to you then I'm not the man or father I should be, honey.”

“Why don't I make us something to eat here? I'd really like to just spend some time with you without the outside world invading,” Miranda said trying to stop her heart from racing.

“I'd like that. To tell you the truth I can't stand dressing up in a suit and tie.”

“I hate heels. I know I can look like a teenager when I'm out running with no makeup and my hair pulled back and whenever I'm representing the foundation, I make sure to take care with my appearance but here...most of the time I'm in workout or lounge clothes because it's my free space.”

“What would you say if I ran down to the car and grabbed my gym bag? You can change into something that'll make you feel more like you, and we can spend the evening being us and not some strange uncomfortable version of ourselves.”

“I'd say I'll tell Henry to keep an eye on the car in the visitor's lot, make sure it doesn't get towed for being there for more than the typical thirty minutes,” she answered with a smile before calling the front desk as he went down the elevator.

Miranda changed out of the dress and into her favorite pair of yoga pants and tank top before heading into the kitchen to start on the meal.

“Bathroom is on the left there second door down,” she told him as he peeked around the door into the kitchen. She took out the steaks she’d marinated the night before and put them in the pan as she opened a bottle of her favorite wine.

“Something smells amazing,” Keith said coming into the room a bit later dressed in a pair of pants and a t-shirt that molded to his upper half perfectly.

“Confession...I had hoped we could stay in tonight, so I put these in the fridge last night.” She turned around to hand him the glass of wine she’d poured for him.

“Are you trying to seduce me Miss Oliver?” he teased taking it.

“Are you seducible Mr. Samuels?” she countered with a grin.

“For you I could be, you look incredible in that outfit... and my own confession, I’ve always loved a woman in sportswear,” he stated sliding behind her as she turned back to the stove. He slipped his arms around her waist and brought her back against him holding her lightly praying she didn’t pull away because she felt like heaven in his arms.

Miranda tilted her head to the side and leaned it back against his shoulder feeling completely content and she knew she was in danger of losing everything. “Anything else you’d like with dinner?”

“A little taste of dessert if I’m lucky,” he suggested against her ear making her laugh lightly.

“I’m not an easy girl Mr. Samuels and I am not on the menu.”

“Not even a small taste?” he inquired running his hands up and down her arms knowing he was going too fast, but he couldn’t stop himself right now. He needed to kiss her to see if this was all as good as he imagined it was or if he was letting things run away from him.

“Well, maybe a nibble.” She turned around in his arms sliding hers over his shoulders. “This isn’t the fifties; you don’t have to ask permission to kiss me you know.”

“You’re a dangerous woman Miranda.” Keith groaned softly before guiding his lips down to hers. The first touch was electric, and he knew he hadn’t been imagining the connection between them, but he also knew it would be quite easy to get ahead of himself and he forced himself to slow down. He wanted to know her, wanted her to open up with him completely, before they took this anywhere because he wanted Wendy to be happy and with Miranda, he knew they could be.

“Wow...maybe staying in wasn’t such a good idea,” she said quietly when they parted.

“Don’t say things like that Miranda, it makes me want to kiss you again.” He took a step back to grab the wine glass.

“You shouldn’t say things like that because I don’t do this Keith. I don’t sleep with people easily and you...you’ve already overcome so many of my boundaries without even realizing you were doing it.”

“I can go if you want, let you have some space to think things through.”

“No, I want you to stay. We’ll have dinner and we’ll talk some more.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he stated moving back behind her as she turned her attention back to the stove. “Mind if I stay like this while you cook?”

“I think I could get used to this,” she said with a smile as his arms slipped back around her waist and he held her against him gently.

“I could get used to a lot of things with you, I think. Wendy hasn’t always been a fan of me dating and in all honesty, I haven’t really done that much since Nicole died.”

“That was about three years ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, Wendy had just turned ten. Nicole was diagnosed with breast cancer when she was eight. The last few weeks were tough on all of us. Steve and Tracy helped me and Wendy through it. A little over a year ago I started seeing someone, but she and Wendy didn’t get along at all. She wanted the relationship with the lawyer not with the father of a twelve-year-old.”

“She’s an amazing kid.”

“I know and since then I’ve dated some mostly casually.”

“Away from Wendy though? What about Janet?” she asked tilting her head a bit further to see him.

“Janet’s a friend and my business colleague. We went out once as more but the only thing we really talked about was business. Wendy likes her as my business partner but not anything else,” he told her easily, making her happy to hear that.

“Is that why you asked me out? Because Wendy likes me and me her?”

“That’s a bonus; I’ve been unable to stop thinking about you since I saw you running in the park that day. There was something about you that shouted out at me and then when you got closer, I was kicking myself because I thought I was interested in a teenager.”

“I don’t know why everyone thinks I’m that young. I’m twenty-nine but I still get carded everywhere I go no matter what I wear. I got carded for buying cough syrup and spray paint.”

“Hopefully not together,” he teased making her laugh. He stilled hearing it and stared at her.

“What?” she asked sensing his stillness.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything more amazing than your laugh; you don’t do it nearly enough Miranda.”

“It’s difficult in my line of work,” she stated as she finished the meal and slid it onto the plates. “Feel like eating on the balcony?”

“I’d love to, honey.”

“If you want to grab the glasses and wine, silverware is in the top drawer there.” Miranda pointed to it as she finished making the second plate.

“After you,” he stated setting the silverware in the napkins and wrapping it up to carry it easier.

Miranda carried the plates out and set them down on the table before turning on the stereo to her relaxation meditation music.

“Nice...a tranquil oasis in the middle of the bustling city,” Keith said as he set out their flatware and refilled her glass.

“I come out here turn on the music and let the rest fade away if only for five minutes before I go to bed, sometimes it feels like I come home and I’m carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders and other times the silence is so loud that it pushes me back in time to somewhere I don’t want to be.”

“That’s how I felt the first few months after Nicole died. Wendy would be asleep and that was the time we’d catch up on our day or watch a movie and the silence told me how empty the house felt without her there.”

“It never really goes away, does it? It always feels like it’s a bad dream that it couldn’t possibly be real and then you come across something or the phone rings and you know it was. Other times you can almost forget and then one little thing pulls you back there.”

“Sauerkraut,” he stated confusing her. “The first time I smelled sauerkraut after Nicole died, I swore I could see her; she loved the stuff would put it on her hot dogs and polish, would make this beef and cabbage and sauerkraut dish, or eat it straight...every time I smell it now, I remember her.”

“At least most of your memories are good ones, even remembering how she was when she died. There’s a handful of things I remember that were good, everything else I just want to forget.”

“What reminds you of the good?” he asked not wanting her to look sad.

Miranda smiled softly as it easily came to her. “Cotton candy...I met someone when I was fifteen who helped me escape. We went to the fair in town, and we bought this huge thing of cotton candy. I felt so sick after eating it but whenever I smell fresh cotton candy, I can remember that day and for once feeling like a normal person.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t have a regular childhood and high school experience but you’re incredible and I can’t stop thinking about you, wanting to know you,” he stated taking her hand into his.

“Me either...you’re disrupting my plans. I just wanted to focus on the foundation but then I went to that game and then...”

“So, is that a yes to another date?” he questioned leaning closer towards her across the small table.

“Yes Keith, I’d like that,” she stated before he kissed her making her wish things were different.

Chapter 7

“I can’t believe we did it,” Wendy said excitedly as they walked across the park towards the cars. “We made the playoffs! This is insane.”

“It’s hard work that paid off,” Miranda stated giving her a smile. “Now how was the father/daughter dance last night?”

“Perfect, we had a great time, didn’t we Dad?” Wendy asked looking at him.

“We did,” he agreed refusing to move his hand from Miranda’s back as others watched them. “Wish you could have stopped by before we went.”

“Me too,” she replied. “Work sometimes messes up the best wishes though.”

“We understand, don’t we Dad?”

“We do,” Keith said enjoying his daughter’s obvious efforts to promote their relationship. “So, as we weren’t able to spend some time together last night, what do the two of you say we grab a pizza and head home?”

“Make it a movie and pizza and I’m in,” Miranda said glancing at Wendy who was grinning from ear to ear.

“You’ve made her year just now do you know that?” Keith said as they got into the car. Hers was parked at their house and she smiled her reply.

Miranda didn’t want anything to invade what they had right now. The last two weeks had been phenomenal, and she wanted more before the truth ripped them apart.

“She’s made mine by being so enthused with us together so it’s kind of hard not to enjoy it,” she answered as they stopped into the pizza place to order one before she and Wendy slipped over to the video store that sold new and used movies to look around it.

“What about this one?” Wendy asked holding up an ancient romantic comedy that even she knew was a bit too

much for the evening.

“How about we pick something a little more updated and not as obvious?” she suggested laughing at the choice. “Wen, your dad and I are getting to know each other, there’s no reason to push us into watching a movie we wouldn’t be comfortable watching with you in the room.”

“I just wanted to know if you and Dad were getting close.”

“I’m not even going to begin to answer that.”

“I’m not a baby Miranda. I know what happens when a couple starts dating and if you wanted to spend the night, I’d be totally okay with that,” Wendy said, and she couldn’t help but smile at her in return, no matter how crazy it all was.

“Well, that makes one of us.” She picked up a new release that combined a bit of action with a bit of romance and comedy and showed it to her. “What about this one?”

“Okay, I swear you and Dad are never going to progress past hand holding at this rate.”

“Wendy...”

“What I’m serious. I’ve never seen him look at someone the way he looks at you, not even my mom. He loved her so much, was devastated when she died, I know, but with you there’s just something else and he’s so happy again, Miranda.”

“I am too sweetie, but we don’t want to rush into something. Give us some time and let us figure this out on our own timetable, okay?”

“Well can this timetable at least include a bit more family fun? I barely get to see you and I love it when you’re here.”

“So do I Wendy,” she stated hugging her to her side as they headed for the car.

The movie was good, fairly predictable ending and since it was Hollywood it was naturally happy. She knew the truth though; happy endings were only for the movies. All of her happiness and joy was going to end the second they learned the truth and she wouldn’t be welcome here anymore.

“So, what did you think?” Keith asked as Wendy ran to the bathroom.

“Pretty predictable but then again that’s stories for you. They like everything working out for the good guys in the end. Real life doesn’t usually work out that way.”

“You don’t believe in happy endings? You’re the woman who creates them, so how on earth can you not believe that they’re possible?”

“I help create happy moments, relieve the biggest heartaches, but happy endings are a long way off Keith,” she argued gently.

“You make them possible to get there, so why can’t you accept that? What are you holding onto still Miranda?” he questioned far too sweetly for her own good, especially right now.

“My own pain, it keeps me from finding happiness I know but if I let it go or reveal it completely...I can’t do that Keith. I’m not strong enough for that no matter how much I try.”

“Why hold back from letting it go Miranda? Why keep it bottled up if it hurts that much?”

“It’s the only thing in this world that’s kept me moving forward...knowing that there’s so much more hell out there than what I’m living in right now,” she admitted and the concern on his face nearly did her in, nearly made her cave and tell him the truth, all of it.

“Hey Dad,” Wendy said hurrying back into the room. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt but Becky’s on the phone. She wants to know if I can spend the night.”

“And you’re just going to run off and leave us alone for the rest of the evening, I suppose?” he asked giving her a grin.

“Well school is out now and tomorrow’s Sunday...”

“Alright you can go just make sure you behave,” he told her watching as she went back to her bedroom. “Well, it looks

like it's just us for the rest of the day, not going to go scurrying off again, are you?"

"No, I'll be here if you want to go drop her off."

"Good," he said leaning forward to kiss her, but the doorbell interrupted them. "Who could that be?"

"You won't know until you answer it," Miranda teased as he dropped a quick kiss on her lips and got up.

"Steve...Becky didn't expect you so soon."

"We were on our way home and figured we'd save you the trip," Steve stated as they came inside Tracy following them a moment later. "Miranda...nice to see you again."

"Yes, we're dating," Keith said moving back over to the couch before letting Wendy know they were there.

"It's none of our business," Tracy stated shooting a look at her husband to shush up.

"It's fine," Miranda said hugging Wendy as she came out with her bag. "I'll see you later."

"We're still doing the girls night out Wednesday, right?"

"I promise I'll make it," she told her with a smile as Wendy moved over to hug her father. The others said their goodbyes and Miranda controlled her emotions just a bit more realizing she was completely alone with Keith for the first time in weeks with no responsibilities for either of them for the entire night.

"Want to watch another movie?" he offered as he came back over from locking the door.

"No..."

"Do you want some more wine?" he asked sitting down beside her.

"No..."

"Do you want more pizza?" he tried knowing he was about to reach for her.

"No..."

“Miranda, I’m going to need more than just a no here. What do you want, honey?” he questioned as she slid closer to him.

“This,” she said covering his lips with hers. She wound her arms around his neck and let herself enjoy it even as she tried to stop herself. It was crazy to give in, but she had to know just once what it was like to be with him.

“Mmm,” he groaned cupping her face in his hands to slow them down. “Miranda...are you...is this?”

“Yes,” she said meeting his gaze. “I can’t stop thinking about this.”

“Me either but we don’t have to rush...”

“We aren’t Keith. There’s nothing rushed about this,” she stated and sighed in bliss when he returned his lips to hers and kissed her deeply letting his hands trail up and down her body.

“Are you sure?” he asked giving her the chance to say no still.

“Yes, Keith just kiss me,” she said and held onto his shoulders as he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bedroom.

“Are you okay?” Keith asked kissing the top of her head as his hands trailed down her back.

“Perfect,” Miranda stated lifting her lips to his in a light kiss when he leaned up on his elbow and gazed over her.

“You are perfect,” he agreed kissing his way down her back, stopping at the scars on her lower back to kiss each one.

“Keith...stop,” she said trying to turn over to hide them.

“Don’t hide from me, please. After this, please don’t run baby.”

“Keith.” She sighed hearing him call her that.

“Sorry, did I say something wrong?” he asked worried as she closed her eyes.

“No, I’m just not used to men wanting to protect me or calling me anything like that...they never did so it’s not a trigger or anything like that,” she said as he stroked her cheek softly.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“I know, it’s why I can. I never thought it was something it wasn’t Keith. I always knew it was wrong that it shouldn’t be happening but there was nowhere for me to go, no one would have believed me.”

“Baby, you really don’t have to,” he said knowing it would just hurt her to tell it, relive it. He didn’t want that happening now. Not if she wasn’t ready, wasn’t prepared for it. No matter how much he wanted to know, for her to tell him, show him she trusted him.

“I can’t let you in otherwise, you know that don’t you?” she asked as he gathered her up against him.

“I do but there’s no rush.”

“I want to, need to maybe. When my stepfather came into my room that first time, I had no idea what was going on until it was too late. He’d been my stepfather for three years but suddenly everything changed. He would come in almost every night and after the first few, I’d pretend to be asleep, so I didn’t have to look at him. Then they’d have parties, where I’d have to dress up and attend until it was my bedtime.”

“Oh god, baby,” he whispered against the top of her head making her feel safe despite what she was telling him.

“They showed me off and then let the winning bidder that evening come up to my room. They changed as I got older, and they got meaner when I tried to fight back. The scars were from my stepfather for misbehaving. He put them on me and then raped me, a month later I finally ran away,” she said hoping he didn’t ask why, it was too dangerous to get into right now.

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen almost sixteen, I knew if I didn’t, I’d never survive. They were all getting meaner; what they wanted to

do to me grew more perverse and I knew I'd never be safe, so I ran. I got as far away as possible and prayed for something to stop the pain I felt."

"But nothing ever did?" he guessed, and she shook her head, resting it on his chest.

"No, I simply pushed it all aside and did my best to survive another day. I didn't have anything, and I couldn't go to the police because I'd be sent back to them. They destroyed my childhood, and my teenage years were a living hell. I couldn't trust anyone; I did a lot of low things during that time that I'm not proud of, Keith."

"Like what?" he asked seeing the guilt in her eyes.

"Stealing food, money...lying to everyone... pickpocketing..."

"You're serious?" he said, shock in his eyes as she met them.

"Yeah, it's not easy trying to take care of yourself when you can't get a job because you never finished high school. I barely finished my freshman year, none of it stuck because of what was going on at home. I was labeled stupid, no one took the time to see what was really going on until one person pushed their way into my life."

"Cotton candy?" he asked seeing the affection in her eyes as she remembered them.

"Yeah, Danny, he was sweet; we 'dated' for two weeks before they found out I was seeing someone and put an end to it. His mom's job disappeared, and she was forced to move away. Before they left, Danny found me upset, bawling because of what my stepfather had done, and he saw the wounds. He slipped me enough money for a bus ticket out of town and a fake id; I never had a chance to tell him thank you even."

"What did you do?"

"I eventually found a shelter where teens could stay without fearing the police or social services showing up and I got a job at a diner. I was far enough away from there that I

didn't have to look over my shoulder constantly, but the reminders were all around me. I couldn't sleep so I went to the doctor, and he just wrote out the prescription."

"The sleeping pills?"

Miranda nodded feeling his hold tighten slightly as he ran his hand down her side. "I wasn't going to do it, but that night it was all too much, and I took them. I swallowed the entire bottle, and I can remember the way I felt as they took effect. It's not instantaneous; it's not like you swallow them and then you're out, but I can remember things swirling and then when I woke up, I was in the hospital with a tube down my throat."

"God baby, if something had happened to you, if we'd never met you...I don't know what I'd do," Keith said lifting her face towards his. "You mean so much to me, to us."

"I don't know why I survived, but the doctor asked me questions and then they sent in Michael. He forced me to channel the pain into something else, to give me something to focus on so it wouldn't overwhelm me again. The first thing was getting my GED. Then it was helping a few others I knew were in trouble. After that, things started getting better, but I ran into someone from the past and they brought everything back to mind and I was terrified that they'd come find me to keep me quiet or something worse," she admitted feeling safer than ever, safe enough to tell him almost anything.

"That's why you ran so much? You were trying to outrun the fear?"

"Yeah, and again Michael saved me. He helped me realize that I had to take complete control over it, that I couldn't let it rule everything I did, and it helped. I got myself healthy and then started dating, very causally and it never progressed anywhere, but I helped more people and felt better doing it. Then I met the girl who had escaped from what was essentially my old life and I knew the only thing that would help would be to take them all down."

"So, you did," he said holding her gaze.

“I did and then Terry wanted to help me and others; we started the foundation and I’ve been moving forward through it.”

“But you still won’t believe that happy endings can happen and you’re still holding onto the pain, why?” he asked edging unknowingly to the one subject that would shatter this moment entirely if she told him.

“It’s the only way I know how to survive without fear that I’ll be back in that place where a bottle of sleeping pills seems like the right answer. I’ve accepted what happened to me. I’ve moved forward with parts of my life but there’s still one part of me that refuses to budge from being that sixteen-year-old girl who was forced to do the one thing she didn’t want to do, not even a little bit.”

“What?” he asked when she stopped.

“Die...kill all the connections to her past life,” Miranda lied knowing that despite the safety she felt with him, the rightness, she couldn’t tell him the truth about her and Wendy. They’d hate her and she couldn’t deal with that.

“I don’t know what you want me to say Miranda. Do you want me to be appalled at what you did to survive? Do you want me to yell at you that stealing was wrong? That you should be ashamed of yourself for that, for taking those pills. Because if you are then it’s going to be a long wait, baby,” Keith told her, making her heart flutter. “I can’t tell you that it’s wrong. It’s what happened, and I hate that it hurts you this much, but you can’t let it rule your life. I want you here with me, with me and Wendy, and I know you want it too.”

“I do.” She sighed wondering how long it would last. How long would she be able to enjoy these moments with him without him hating her? She stopped thinking as she turned herself over to his kiss and found a magic she never had before with anyone else.

His hands stroked her body, waking every bit of her. His lips caressed her, feathering over her eyes as he filled her. She was warm everywhere he touched her, where they were joined, and their mouths stole each other’s breaths as he pushed her

over the edge, sending her somewhere she'd never known existed—not outside of dreams.

Chapter 8

“Alright what’s going on with you Miranda?” Michael questioned slipping into her office and shutting the door Friday afternoon the next week.

“What do you mean?” she asked giving him a light hug when he reached her.

“I mean, you’re sleeping with him, aren’t you?”

“Personal much?” she teased because she didn’t want to admit that she was because it’d been too perfect. Michael walked them over to the sofas to talk easier and she knew he wouldn’t just let it go, not with her.

“Have you told them the truth?”

“No, I can’t do that to them. Wendy knows she was adopted but to tell her that I’m the one who gave her up, let alone telling Keith that...I can’t. I’d rather they never know and like me.”

“They’re going to love you more if you tell them Mire. You can’t keep it all inside. You can’t keep it a secret and continue to have a relationship with them. It’ll eat you alive and I don’t want to find you in the hospital again.”

“But telling them...how do I do that without losing them? When they find out they’re going to push me away I know it.”

“How? Keith has accepted you and your past, hasn’t he? You wouldn’t have slept with him if he hadn’t. I get that telling him where Wendy came from is scary. You’re worried he might start looking at her differently...” Michael suggested, and she shook her head no, glad to know that would never happen at least.

“He already knows about that. Luc told him and Nicole about me when he took Wendy to them.”

“So, what is the problem then? He has to realize that what you did was for her best interests.”

“Until he discovers that it was me who did it. He can say anything he wants when it’s in general but when or if the truth comes out it won’t be that simple. He’s not going to be happy that I’ve kept this from them for the last two months, it’ll just make everything worse.”

“You don’t know that Mire and you won’t until you tell them.”

“I can’t Michael. This I can do, being here and finding others, helping them, is as much as I can handle. I can be there for them without telling them because they’ll never accept me, not when they learn the whole truth.”

“Why? Because you never could accept that what you did was for the best? You nearly killed yourself to drown out the sounds of her cries Miranda, but you have to see that what you did was right for her now. I know you wanted her, wanted to keep her, but look at what you went through after she was born. Could you have given her the life she has right now if you’d kept her? Could you have given any of the girls out there,” he added pointing down to the park area where the girls’ basketball team was practicing, “the lives they have now if you’d kept Wendy back then?”

“Why do you always have to make sense for?” she stated, hating that he was pushing her, but loving him for it as well. For caring enough to push her, didn’t walk away when she refused to talk all those years ago. “I’m scared Michael, if I tell her and she hates me for it...”

“Then I’ll help you through it, but I can’t see that happening; you need to tell Wendy and Keith who you really are to them,” Michael said hugging her tightly as she sighed.

“Okay, I’ll tell them after the season’s over. Don’t tell me to do it any sooner because I won’t risk them both telling me to get out of their lives and disappoint the rest of the team too. There’s more than just us involved in this mess right now.”

“I’ll give you until then, after that if you don’t tell them I will call them in here and do it myself Mire.”

“You’d be violating patient confidentiality rules,” she argued but she knew he would do it for her and only her. Their relationship had slid past doctor patient a long time ago.

She didn’t know why he’d taken her under his wing so much back then for a long time. It wasn’t until she ran herself into the hospital that she learnt that he had another patient with a similar background as hers.

The differences were slight, mainly that it was her uncle versus the disgusting perverted ring that she endured. Along with the other girl didn’t have a child, but she tried to kill herself a few times. Finally succeeded despite Michael’s attempts to help. He hadn’t wanted to see her go down the same path and slowly, he became more like family than doctor. But unlike some family, he didn’t let her hide from her fears, or coddle her if it would be harmful in the long run.

“You mean more than some rule Miranda. I just want you to be happy and until they know the truth you won’t be because you’ll still be hiding. I’ll see you later, alright?”

“I’m fine for now but keep your schedule open for after I tell them because it’s bound to be when I’ll need to talk to you.”

“Anytime honey,” he promised as he headed out.

Miranda sighed grabbing her bags to leave for the day. She was supposed to have dinner with Keith and Wendy tonight along with Becky and her parents but that wasn’t for hours still. Before she could do that, she needed to clear her mind, and there was only one thing that did that. She drove out to the park and changed into her running gear then started out slowly.

Her phone rang and she glanced at the number before answering, “Hello...”

“Miranda it’s Luc, are you okay?”

“I just ran up a hill. I’m a bit out of breath,” she told him as she slowed down to a walk.

“Sorry I just had a few minutes here at work and thought I’d give you a call, see how things were going.”

“It’s good, all of the girls are starting to get past it. Becky is slowly opening up more and with Wendy’s help she’ll be fine to go back to school next year.”

“I meant with you and Wendy and Keith.”

“She’s great; she’s smiling.”

“And you and Keith?”

“He’s her father.”

“So why is it that I got a lengthy email from Wendy boasting about the wonderful Miranda who’s stolen her dad’s heart away from Janet and made them all happy?”

A hint of a smile hit her lips, but she fought it, knowing what still lay ahead of them. “For now, until the truth comes out...”

“You haven’t told them?”

“Not yet, I’m waiting until the season’s over because I don’t want things to be weird between us when they learn everything. I’m going to tell them just not yet.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help. I’ll let them know it was my idea to come see them in the first place,” Luc offered, and Miranda let out a silent sigh.

“Thanks Luc but right now I’m okay. We’ve got playoff games this weekend and if we win them, we’ll be into the tournament which is the next Thursday through Saturday. It’s just a week.”

“Okay I’ll talk to you later Miranda.”

“Bye Luc,” she replied hanging up as the idea that she only had a week left in their lives squeezed her heart painfully. More than anything, she wanted more time with them. That wasn’t possible though, so she pushed herself back into pace and ran until she couldn’t breathe.

Miranda changed again this time into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that she loved for its softness and headed over to Keith’s to meet up with them. She parked on the side and grabbed her bags as she made her way to the door. Wendy tossed it open

and hugged her before pulling her inside and she laughed dropping a kiss onto the top of her head.

“We’ve missed you,” Keith said coming up behind them. He slid an arm around her waist and leaned over dropping a kiss onto her smiling lips.

“You saw me Wednesday.”

“Seems like an eternity,” he stated taking her bags. “I’ll just put these in the guest room.”

“Come off it Dad, I know you two don’t use separate rooms and I’m okay with that,” Wendy said giving them both long looks. “So have you two decided to make this more permanent?”

“Easy there, kiddo, there’s no rush, right Mire?” Keith said kissing her temple.

“None,” she agreed leading Wendy into the living room. “So, are you excited about tomorrow?”

“Even if we don’t make the tournament we’ve still won because we’ve got you on our side.”

“Someone’s been reading way too many Hallmark cards I think,” Miranda teased to fight the wild pang of longing for it to be true, to never lose the way Wendy was smiling at her right now.

“Everyone ready to go?” Keith inquired making his way back into the room.

They were seated in a back booth to accommodate the six of them and the girls instantly asked to head to the game area once they’d ordered.

“We won’t leave with anyone, and we’ll stick together, right Becky?” Wendy stated.

“Absolutely,” she agreed, and the adults gave in letting them move off.

“They have way too much energy,” Tracy said watching them bounce through the restaurant.

“Hopefully they save some of that for tomorrow. It’ll be a long day if they keep winning,” she stated with a smile.

“But at least the games will be spread out enough to give them time to eat and recharge between them, right?” Steve said.

“Right, speaking of which I forgot the cooler and stuff at work this afternoon.” Miranda sighed as she pulled out her phone and sent Michael a message.

“What stuff?” Keith asked letting his hand trail down her side.

“Oh yogurt, water, sports drinks...stuff to keep them energized but not overwhelm their stomachs.”

“Smart, do you need to drive back to get it?” he questioned hoping she’d say no because he wanted her to spend the night with him again.

“Nope,” she said seeing the response on her screen. “Michael said he’d bring it down in the morning for us.”

“In the morning,” Tracy said looking between them. “Something you’d like to share with the rest of the class?”

“Mire’s spending the night since we’ve got to be at the park so early.”

“So, the two of you are official now?” she asked.

“We’re taking things slowly seeing where they lead,” he answered as Miranda leaned into him more.

Their food made its way to the table and Miranda offered to go get the girls. She stood up and adjusted the waistband of her jeans feeling them slip slightly which was weird because this pair fit her perfectly, she thought as she crossed the room to the girls.

“Is everything okay with Miranda?” Tracy asked quietly watching them go.

“What do you mean?” Keith stated with a bit of worry at her tone.

“Well, she usually wears the same thing for the games but last week it looked different on her, and her jeans are falling off her,” she answered. “Women notice these things better than men, but she’s lost weight and she certainly didn’t need to lose any.”

“I don’t know, she may have. She’s been working nonstop and then coaching the girls. I’ll talk to her later to make sure it’s not too much for her,” Keith told them as the three headed back to the table.

Dinner was good but Miranda barely picked at her food as the knowledge that they only had a week left kept replaying in her mind.

“Want some dessert?” Keith asked beside her ear as he glanced at her plate. “They have chocolate cake, your favorite.”

“I’m really not that hungry, another time maybe,” she replied.

He waited until they were back at the house and Wendy had gone to bed before broaching the subject. “Mire is everything okay?”

“What? Yeah, I’ve been a bit distracted today, haven’t I?” she said seeing the worry in his eyes. “We’re getting close to bringing down a trafficking group and it’s stuck in my head right now.”

“That’s it? You barely touched your dinner and Tracy mentioned that your jeans were falling off of you. She’s right baby.”

“I may have lost a few pounds running with the girls during practice but I’m fine Keith.”

“Yeah?” he asked pulling her up off the couch. He slid his hands to her waist and wrapped them around her watching them overlap. “You weren’t this small when we first started seeing each other, that night when we were cooking at your place, I couldn’t overlap my fingers and now I can.”

“You’re exaggerating,” she said shaking her head at him dismissing it.

“No, I’m not. Damn it baby, I care about you and now that I’ve seen what’s going on, I can’t sit back and say nothing. If us being together is too much on you right now, I’ll back off. As much as I don’t want to, I’ll do it if that makes things easier on you.”

“It’s not Keith and I’m fine honestly.”

“Prove it, how much do you normally weigh?” he asked pulling her down the hallway to the master suite.

Miranda sighed as he stopped in the bathroom. “I don’t know about one-five I guess.”

“Okay and let’s see what it says now,” he stated nodding to the scale.

“Seriously? You want me to do a weigh-in?” she scoffed stepping onto it. She knew what it would say. She wasn’t losing that much. “Oh my god...”

“Now are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” he asked seeing the number come up and her expression.

“I...I’m sorry Keith.” Miranda moved into the bedroom and sat down on the bed as what she’d been doing finally hit her. Showed how easily she’d fallen back into her old patterns trying to avoid facing her fears and what it did to her body. It made sense why Michael was pushing her so much.

“I get that you didn’t see that you’ve lost ten pounds but there’s got to be a reason for it. Baby, talk to me. Tell me what’s going on; is there something I’ve done...something I can do?”

“It’s not you Keith; it’s me through and through. I stress and I forget to eat or else I do like I did today and go run. I thought I learned my lesson the last time.”

“What’s hurting you so much to make you want to outrun it all?” he asked kneeling down in front of her cupping the back of her head gently. “Nothing you tell me will make me leave.”

“I doubt that. I guess it’s just a bit of everything though. Being here with you and Wendy has shown me what a real

family is supposed to be, and it hurts that I never had someone in my corner the way you're there for Wendy. There's nothing you can do to help, it's just me Keith and it's something I have to work through on my own."

"You're not on your own anymore baby. I'm right here and I want to help. I want to wrap you up in my arms and hold onto you forever. I know I shouldn't tell you this already because I know you're being cautious, but I've fallen in love with you Miranda. I never thought it'd be possible to love someone again, to feel this way again but I do. I want to help. I want you to let me help."

"Keith...I...don't know..."

"I get it, baby. I get you're scared and that you've never had someone be there completely for you but I am. There is nothing you could possibly tell me that would make me turn away from you. Nothing Mire," he said again seeing the way her expression closed off. "Please talk to me. Tell me what's going through your head right now."

"I can't do this. I'm sorry Keith I thought I could, but I can't," she said running for the door.

"No." Keith groaned barely reaching the door before she did. "You can't keep running from everything. That's why you've lost so much weight, isn't it? You've been trying to outrun the way you're feeling right now; how you feel when you're with me and Wendy because it terrifies you, doesn't it? You're still that scared little girl who can't believe what's going on, what's happening to them."

"I'm not her. I'm the sixteen-year-old who can't accept the one choice she made that changed everything."

"What choice Mire?"

She bit her lip realizing what she nearly said. "To...run away, which led them to hurting others in my place."

"You can't blame yourself for that. You were trying to survive baby; no one can blame you for that," he said pulling her into his arms. He slid his hands up to cup her face and brought her gaze back to his. "You can't blame yourself for

what they did; you were sixteen and scared. You had no idea what they were going to continue to do; it's not your fault that they hurt someone else.

“Baby, please don't go. Don't run away from me and this,” he added when her eyes filled with tears. “Please stay with us; you gave me my daughter back. She's the one I didn't realize I was missing until you showed up and changed everything. Stay Mire, stay and let me show you what it's like to be loved.”

The tears slid down Miranda's cheeks knowing it was exactly what she wanted, and she wrapped her arms around his neck burying her face in his chest as he held her. She'd give them another week and then she'd be alone again. She just prayed that she could find the strength to accept it all better this time.

Chapter 9

“Good morning baby,” Keith said sliding into the kitchen kissing the side of her neck as she hung up the phone. “What’s wrong?”

“We’re in a bind. I’ve got an emergency guardianship hearing scheduled and Julius is in court arguing for a tap on this trafficking ring, he can’t do it. Carol is in New York this week to help the prosecutors on the Johnson case. Peter is up north for another hearing this afternoon. He can’t do both of them.”

“Mire, baby, stop.” Keith smiled softly, stilling her hands as she flipped through her contacts list. “Where’s the hearing?”

“In town,” she said looking up at him.

“I can do it. I have nothing on my calendar this week.”

“I completely forgot...you’re serious?” she added as his smiling eyes met hers. “This isn’t an easy case though Keith. This family has money coming out their ears; we found her chained in the basement and she’s terrified of even seeing them let alone being in a courtroom with them there.”

“I’m a pretty decent attorney Mire and I’m sure your files are solid. When’s the hearing scheduled for?” he asked, rubbing her arm gently.

“Eleven...”

“Let’s get Wendy settled in for the day and we’ll go look over the case together,” he suggested and as they sat in the courtroom preparing for the hearing to begin, he was amazed at her composure.

Keith quickly realized that the girls’ family was ruthless but their attorney more so and it made him fight harder. He had Michael up on the stand and was asking him the questions, but the judge wasn’t convinced, and Keith needed something more to ensure her safety.

The family called the father onto the stand and Keith sat watching the man. His answers to the questions made Keith's skin crawl and he knew there was no way he'd let this girl go home with him. Miranda tapped on his hand, and he saw the note she slid across to him. He read it and nodded. She was brilliant with reading people; he'd never have thought of trying this himself.

Keith got up and started asking the man the simplest of questions watching as he relaxed more.

"How old was your daughter when you first had sex with her?" he threw in in the middle of them and tightened his control over his emotions as the man answered.

"Nine..."

"Objection," the other attorney shouted as the father began to backtrack.

"It's a relevant question, your honor," Keith said turning to the judge with a pointed look.

"Overruled," the judge stated, and Keith knew they'd won.

"Your honor, we're asking for the safety of our client whose own father just admitted that he's been abusing her for five years, who locked her in the basement, that she be given a chance to breathe away from those who tortured her for years," Keith added as the other attorney fumed.

"Order granted, bailiff take Mr. Anderson into custody," the judge stated, and Miranda breathed a sigh of relief as she held Nina tightly against her side. "Temporary guardianship will be granted to Stay Young pending a final placement of their choosing."

"You're safe. I promise you'll stay safe," Miranda said hugging Nina gently.

"I don't believe it," she whispered as they ushered her out of the closed courtroom.

Miranda opened the back of the waiting car and slid inside with Keith behind them and turned to him with a warm

smile. “Thank you, you were amazing in there.”

“It was your idea, now we just need to find somewhere for Nina to feel safe.”

“I think I’ve got the perfect spot,” she told them giving the driver the address. They pulled up in front of an inviting house with a privacy fence surrounding the outside and she squeezed Nina’s hand as they got out of the car. “The fence is just for your protection, so no one can get inside to you.”

Miranda walked over to the gate and typed in the security code then stepped aside letting Nina go in first.

“Oh my god, this is incredible,” Nina said taking in the open space as a couple came out of the house.

“Miranda we’re so glad you called,” Grace stated hugging her.

“Grace, Mark this is Nina. Nina, do you think you’d be comfortable staying here for a trial run?” she asked the girl who cautiously moved back beside her after greeting the adults.

“I can come out here?” Nina asked them.

“As much as you want Nina,” Grace said holding out her hand. “Why don’t Miranda and I show you around while Mark and...”

“Oh Keith Samuels,” Miranda stated realizing she hadn’t introduced him. “He filled in as attorney for us today since everyone else was busy.”

“We’ll let the men get the bags and have a late lunch?” Grace suggested and Nina agreed.

It was nearly five before they left; Nina finally relaxed with a slew of numbers in case she got scared.

“How did you find them?” Keith asked her.

“Their daughter was kidnapped when she was seven. They found her six months later, but the damage had already been done. Together they helped her through it and she’s now a counselor for the foundation. When we opened our doors,

they offered to help any way they can. Mark is a doctor and Grace is a teacher; they were approved as foster parents already so them being granted guardianship wasn't difficult. Right now, they don't have anyone staying with them, we try to limit the number we put with a family so the kids know they're safe and can speak openly with them."

"You're amazing Miranda. I know how much doing this, hearing their stories must hurt, and yet you're with me."

Miranda smiled at him, loving how humble he was, wasn't boasting and bragging about the win today. "You're an amazing guy Keith and an incredible attorney. Thank you so much for doing this."

"Anytime Mire I mean it."

When they got back to the foundation, she saw Julius' car in the lot and made her way inside to find out the outcome of the hearing.

"Michael told me you two pulled it off," he said coming into the lobby to meet them. "Congratulations Miranda, and Keith, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Keith Samuels," he said shaking hands with the man who leaned over and kissed Miranda's cheek.

"I'm impressed to be honest. I know the attorney the family hired and if you managed to get the father to talk without him stopping it, nice work," Julius stated.

"Nina's safe she's with Grace and Mark but what I want to know is about the tap," she said lifting an eyebrow his way.

"Well after five hours and way too many exhibits being entered...we got it," Julius told her, and she shouted in happiness as she hugged him.

"Two wins in one day," she laughed with a bright smile.

"Three," Peter told her sneaking in behind them.

"You got it?"

"We got it. All evidence is being allowed entry and we got the warrant," Peter answered.

“Okay, I can now go home because nothing could make this day any better.”

“Not even a call from Carol about an hour ago saying the guy cracked on the stand and admitted it after three days of cross examining?” Julius said as Michael joined them.

“If you’re joking, I swear it’s not funny,” she warned.

“No joke, Mire,” Michael stated bringing up the story online. “Nice job today honey.”

“I think the good job goes to these amazing guys,” she said pointing at the three men, “and Carol. All I did was hire them.”

“So modest, what do you say we go grab a drink to celebrate a wonderful days’ work?” Julius suggested but she shook her head.

“Sounds great but I’ve got a ton of work to do if I’m taking off Thursday and Friday for the tournament. Keith, thank you again for helping today; tell Wendy I’ll see her Thursday?”

“You’re staying here tonight?” he asked sliding his arm around her waist wanting to convince her to come home with him.

“I do have a ton of work.”

“Go on Miranda, we’ll handle things here,” Julius said looking towards Michael and Peter who nodded. “You never take time off and you’re starting to look a bit too thin.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can,” Michael argued as he reassessed her. “Julius is right, you’re too thin so go home, or go home with Keith and let him pamper you for a few days; if there’s something we need you for we’ll call.”

“See everyone’s noticing Mire. Come home and let me and Wen spoil you tomorrow before we spend the next three days out in the heat,” Keith said giving her a smile that told her exactly how he was going to spoil her.

“Alright, I guess one day won’t kill me,” Miranda agreed knowing Michael would spill if she refused. “But if there’s anything...”

“We’ll call, now go,” Michael said showing them out.

“I’ve never seen her smile like that at someone before,” Julius said watching them leave.

“None of us have,” Peter agreed.

“She deserves to be happy finally,” Michael stated. “Let’s hope they can continue staying happy because she’s starting to worry me again.”

“What does that mean Michael?” Julius asked.

“Her weight...it’s more than just working too much. She’s keeping so much to herself and it’s not healthy for her.”

“You’re not seriously saying that you think she’d hurt herself again,” Julius stated watching them pull out of the lot.

“There’s one thing she never told you, one thing she’s kept buried so deep and now that it’s coming back out...just keep an eye on her,” Michael warned them.

“Michael, what do you mean there’s something she’s never told us?” Julius questioned following him into his office with Peter close behind. “Is there another person who we didn’t pick up?”

“No, get in here and close the door,” Michael stated knowing he was going to need more help to keep her safe. He walked over to his desk and pulled out a file taking out two photos and laying them down for them to see.

“Whoa...she had blonde hair?” Peter asked staring at the picture.

“No...Michael, you’re telling us, or not telling but showing us without coming out and admitting it that Miranda has a daughter?” Julius asked studying the two photos, noting the hazel eyes that weren’t Miranda’s looking up at him.

“That was Miranda when she was thirteen, and that is Keith’s daughter Wendy.”

“Holy shit...she’s...Jesus Christ,” Julius said sitting down. “Why didn’t she tell us?”

“Miranda didn’t want him to ever find out she was pregnant when she left. She gave up Wendy because she knew she couldn’t provide for her, and she nearly killed herself because of the guilt she felt for doing it.”

“She knows that Wendy is hers, does Keith?” Peter asked.

“Not yet, the nurse who helped take Wendy to Keith and his late wife ran into Miranda at the clinic about three months ago when she went down to get Deanna. He stopped in and showed her a picture of Wendy along with a letter from Nicole asking Luc to help them...to find the person they needed. She went out to see her after seeing this picture,” Michael told them pulling it out. “Miranda couldn’t walk away after seeing that; she knew something was wrong with her and...”

“She had to help, had to know that she wasn’t going through what she had,” Julius stated.

“Yes, when she got there, she realized that Pike was abusing some of the girls and stayed to help them all through it and to coach them. Right now, they’re all happy but Miranda’s not taking care of herself because she’s scared that once they know the truth that she’s Wendy’s mother they’re going to turn their back on her.”

“That guy is completely in love with her,” Peter stated.

“He is and I don’t see him walking away. He knows what she’s been through, and he knows what Wendy’s mother went through so them being one and the same, it shouldn’t change that much but that’s not how Miranda sees it.”

“She’s still caught up in the guilt of giving her up to move forward,” Julius said shaking his head. “So, all of this is because she could never move past doing what she did even if it was for her daughter’s best interest?”

“Yes, her swallowing the entire bottle of pills was to stop from feeling like she’d abandoned Wendy the way her mother abandoned her. She’s never confronted them, not in writing,

or over the phone, or in person. She's never accepted that it wasn't her fault, not deep down in her heart. She still thinks there's something wrong with her that made all of it happen. It won't matter how many people she saves, how many bad guys she puts away, until she can accept that she's worthy of love and acceptance she's never going to let herself believe that Keith and Wendy can love her."

"So, what do we do?" Peter asked. "We can't force her to confront them, and we can't lose her here. She can tell when we're needed in a way no one else can, without her the entire foundation will flounder."

"I agree but there's nothing we can do; it has to come from her, from within her and I think the only way for that to happen is for her to tell Keith and Wendy who she is. She said she would once the season was over because she didn't want the other girls to be affected when she left," Michael warned them.

"She honestly thinks they're going to tell her to leave and not come back?" Peter asked.

"We all know that people who've been through situations like what she did don't always think or see the situation rationally. They push their worries and their fears into the front and that's all they can see," Julius stated. "I'll see what I can find out about the appeal he filed. It shouldn't go anywhere, and I've done my best to keep her from hearing about it...but..."

"Maybe once she tells them she needs to know what they're trying," Michael suggested.

"You now want me to tell her that the sick SOB who started abusing her when she was twelve is trying to get out of jail? That the guy who I'd say is likely to be the sperm donor of her daughter is trying to get free?" Julius questioned wondering when the man went nuts.

"It might be the only thing that will push her into action. She found out they'd abused someone else, and she went after them. If she finds out that he's trying to get out and if she

thinks, there's the slightest possibility that he could find her and by extension Wendy..."

"She just might step forward and confront him, admit that she was the anonymous victim that wouldn't testify," Julius said understanding.

"It's risky, if he does get out, yeah it's highly unlikely, but if he did you know he's going to go straight for her," Peter warned.

"Which is why we have to make sure he never gets out," Michael stated. "I won't let someone hurt Miranda more than she already has been, and that includes her hurting herself."

"We're right behind you," Julius said, and Peter nodded.

"I think it goes without saying that you don't let Miranda know you know until she tells everyone," Michael said giving the others pointed looks.

"Not a word to her," Peter agreed as they finished up their work for the evening wondering what was likely to happen to their friend.

Chapter 10

“Morning gorgeous,” Keith whispered against her ear feeling her stretch lightly.

“Morning,” Miranda replied rolling over to face him with a smile. “I can’t believe the girls did it. We’re playing in the championship round today.”

“All because of their fabulously brilliant coach,” he stated kissing her as he pulled her closer to him. “Think we have time for some morning entertainment before we’re interrupted?”

“Maybe...depends on what you were thinking.” Her eyes fluttered shut when his hand dipped down along her thighs.

“A bit of this, and a lot of this.” He kissed her deeper until they were lost inside the feelings surrounding them.

“Mire, what would you say to moving in with us fully?” he asked as they got dressed a bit later.

“Moving in...here?”

“No into the little treehouse in the backyard,” he teased kissing her again.

“I...it’s a little fast don’t you think? We were going to tell Wendy about her mother, maybe we should hold off until after that.”

“You’re running again Mire. You’ve spent the night here every night for the last week and a half. Wendy loves having you here and there’s no denying that I love it too. I love you baby.”

“Just give me some time to think about it okay? I...I’m still trying to catch up in a lot of ways.”

“Okay...you’re not worried about the slight age difference, are you?”

“Slight age difference?” she asked with a grin as her heart resettled into regular rhythm. “You mean the fact that you’re

turning forty-one whereas I've still got six more months before I'm going to be thirty?"

"Yeah that," he said kissing her smiling lips.

"No, I may only be twenty-nine in years, but I think we can both agree that I'm much older than that in my head. Most people don't really start becoming adults until they're twenty-two whereas I started at sixteen."

"So, by that math you'd be nearly thirty-five?" he teased.

"In my head yeah, my heart and the feelings that I have I'm probably closer to twenty."

"Head old heart young...not a bad way to live Mire."

She wished she could simply agree, but there was far too much that could tear them apart, would tear them apart and soon. "Except when the two are telling me two separate things, my head is saying slow down this is all happening way too fast while my heart...it's saying yes in a million ways Keith. I just need them both to be on the same page."

"At least you've finally admitted that I touch your heart," he said holding her against him running his hands down her arms.

"You do; you and Wendy mean so much to me," she said lifting her chin to look at him. "The last two months being with you all has been incredible and I'll never forget it."

"That sounds like an opening to you walking away Miranda."

"I'm not walking away," she stated knowing it was going to be more like running when she told them the truth.

"Good, now let's get this day started with a good breakfast for the two most important gals in my life," he told her before making a delicious breakfast of waffles and omelets.

"Wow Dad guess we know who rates around here," Wendy teased hugging her shoulders.

“I’ve got two beautiful girls who have a busy day ahead of them and need lots of energy.”

“But your special waffles and omelet...trying to fatten us up here or something?”

“Well maybe Miranda just a little,” he admitted kissing the top of her head as they cleared the table.

“She’s skinny what’s wrong with that?” Wendy asked.

“I’ve let myself lose too much weight the last few months without realizing it,” Miranda answered. “Yes, I’m naturally skinny but this is a bit too much. Your dad and his friends pointed it out to me last week and this is his way of trying to take care of me.”

“Wow, I guess I never thought that you could be too skinny.”

“Well, you can and I’m going to make sure that I don’t let myself go down that path again.”

“Again?” Wendy asked with concern.

“I let myself get really unhealthy about seven years ago. I ended up in the hospital and Michael pulled me through it. You don’t need to worry a bit about weight though Wen. You are absolutely perfect, and you work out plenty with soccer,” she added making sure Wendy knew she didn’t have to fret over anything.

“Well, are we ready to get this day started?” Keith asked wrapping an arm around each of them.

“Totally Dad,” Wendy answered as they made their way to the park.

The team did great making their way into the championship game and she was as giddy as the girls and parents as the clock wound down and they were ahead by a point. The other team stole the ball and made a goal tying the game with very little time left.

“Whatever happens you guys did great,” Miranda said as they huddled before going back out. “Win, lose or tie I have been so blessed getting to spend time with you all and I want

you to know how special each of you are. So, let's go out there and leave it all on the field. Play your best and be content with the outcome alright? Hands in...one, two, three Strikers!"

Miranda cheered as they started back up and held her breath as Wendy got the ball and headed towards the goal. Wendy was nearly there when the other team tripped her calling a foul as the clock ran out.

Miranda headed out to check on Wendy as she got up and saw the disappointment in her eyes. "Hey, none of that she wasn't playing fair. It's a penalty shot, just you and the goalie. It doesn't matter if it goes in or not, just play Wen."

"Our shot?" Wendy asked smiling up at her.

"The corner?" Miranda replied and Wendy nodded with a grin. "Alright, I love you Wen just play sweetie."

Wendy nodded again and set up the shot as Miranda headed over to the side to watch. Keith snuck down behind her and put his arm on her waist as Wendy started the move. The ball flew towards the net and the goalie jumped but she wasn't tall enough to block it as it hit the corner post and flew into the area behind her.

"Yes!" they shouted as Wendy raced towards them.

Wendy threw her arms around her neck as she bent down, and she hugged her tightly knowing that if nothing else she'd have this one perfect moment with her daughter.

"I did it! I made it," Wendy said as Keith hugged her and the rest of the team came over to celebrate.

"You were incredible Wen, perfect," she said as they lined up to congratulate the other team as good sports.

The other coach stopped Miranda as they shook hands. "Your daughter's an incredible player; she should look into the summer travel league."

"She's not mine."

"Sorry, niece...sister...she's incredible," he said heading off as she took a moment to catch her breath. That was the

second person who'd made the connection and commented on it to her. How many others had?

"Everything okay?" Keith asked coming over to her.

"Yeah, he was just saying how amazing Wendy is."

"She loves playing again thanks to you. I heard nothing but praise about you and your tips that first day and then it was Miranda's so cool, Miranda's so nice, you've stolen the hearts of the Samuels clan."

"They're stealing mine," she admitted as they went to get the trophy.

They took the team out to celebrate and she happily sat watching them interact as Michael headed towards her.

"You did good honey."

"They did the hard work," Miranda argued but couldn't help but smile.

"For you, because of you, so are you going to tell them soon?" Michael asked watching her closely.

"Yeah, I have to do it. I can't keep it from them anymore. The team can find a new coach before next year and they'll be able to get past all of this, me included."

"You're so maddening do you know that Mire? You're so sure they'll hate you when the truth comes out but they're not going to; they're going to love you no matter what."

"That's sweet of you to say Michael but we both know it's not going to happen. Can you run the gear back to the foundation for me?" she added wanting off the subject.

"In the trunk of your car?" he asked knowing he couldn't push her into seeing the truth she had to find it herself with her daughter.

"Yeah..."

"I've got your spare key still. I'll see you Monday," he stated kissing her cheek as he left.

"Hi there beautiful, can I buy you a drink?"

“Sorry I’ve got this boyfriend who’s sort of the jealous type. I mean if I let you buy me a drink then everyone’s going to want to,” she replied turning to Keith with a grin as he slid into the booth beside her.

“Boyfriend wow...I’ve been upgraded it seems so maybe I should be considered the winner here today,” he stated sliding his hand into her hair to kiss her.

“Whoa Dad, there are kids present here,” Wendy shouted at them making her blush as she hid her face in Keith’s shoulder.

“Thanks Wen,” he shouted back wrapping his arms around her as the rest of the adults turned to stare at them. “Now I know what living in a zoo feels like.”

“You, what about me? They all want to know the story now,” she said noting the interest in most of the gazes.

“So, let them wonder,” he replied as he kept his spot beside her until they were leaving. “You’re coming back to the house, right?”

“I’ll be there. Michael was supposed to grab some stuff for me from my place so hopefully he put that in the car,” she told him as they parted.

“See you at home Miranda,” Wendy said hugging her and she smiled the entire drive there.

When she pulled up, she saw the second door for the garage open and she laughed rolling down her window as Keith motioned her into it.

“No point leaving your car out in the driveway is there?” he asked handing her the extra garage door opener. “I want you here Mire. Stay with us.”

Miranda knew she shouldn’t take it, but she did, and she gave him a kiss as he pulled her bags out of the trunk groaning at one.

“Geesh what’d you pack? A herd of elephants?”

“It should be some clothes and shoes, why?” she said as he set them down on the bed and started to open them.

“Because this one feels like a set of weights,” Keith stated unzipping the last to help. “Journals?” he asked pulling them out.

“What?” Miranda gasped turning around to see the books in his hands. “Those weren’t supposed to...Keith no.”

Quickly, she moved, trying to get around the bed to stop him from opening one. She made a grab for it and missed as he opened the front page.

Keith glanced at the words written on the top of the page and stopped turning back to her. “What are these?”

“Nothing, they weren’t supposed to be packed.”

Keith turned away from her and flipped through the pages seeing the writing and words but not understanding them at all. He grabbed another book, and it was all the same, each entry a new letter to someone named Wendy and he turned back to her.

“What are these? Why do you have dozens of journals with letters wrote to someone named Wendy? Miranda, where did you get these because this writing...” He stopped, moving to the desk drawer to pull out the stack of letters to his Wendy to compare them to the journals. The writing was an exact match and it finally hit him.

“You know who her mother is, don’t you?” Keith asked turning back towards her. “She’s one of the girls you helped? These are from her to Wendy.”

“Keith, I’m so sorry,” Miranda said seeing the questions in his eyes. “They weren’t supposed to...but I guess Michael wanted to guarantee I told you now that the season...”

“What? Tell me what Mire? That you know who her mother is? Why didn’t you just tell me once I’d told you, why keep it from me?” he asked moving over to her, but she backed away quickly. “Baby whatever it is just tell me, did something happen to her? Is that why you’re so upset?”

“God, I can’t do this. I can’t,” she said feeling the tears hit her.

“Can’t what?” he said moving after her as she grabbed her bag and headed towards the doors. “Miranda what is going on?”

“Dad...Miranda...what’s wrong?” Wendy asked stepping into the hallway glancing between them. “I heard you two down the hall.”

“It’s nothing sweetie,” Keith stated moving towards Miranda.

“I heard you Dad; it’s got something to do with me, doesn’t it? Miranda, I don’t want you to go. I love you,” Wendy said moving over to her. “Please don’t go, I want you to stay.”

“I wish I could sweetie, but I can’t,” she said shaking her head to stop the tears. “You are so beautiful and I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? Miranda?”

“Mire, baby, what is going on?” Keith asked stopping her. “Whatever you know about those journals...”

“What journals?” Wendy asked looking between them again as she grabbed one from his hands and opened it. “These are from her, from my mother.”

“Wen,” Keith said trying to stop her and keep Miranda from fleeing.

“You know who she is?” Wendy asked as she flipped through it. “Oh my god, she...she was one of the girls...that’s how you know her.”

“Wendy, sweetie,” Miranda said seeing her expression fall. She couldn’t let her hurt too, she never wanted Wendy to hurt, to think she didn’t love her. “Come here.”

“What?” Keith said wondering about her turnaround as Miranda’s tears stopped and she moved over to hug Wendy tightly before leading her back towards the bedroom. He watched as she rummaged around the bag and pulled out a journal. Holding it tightly to her, she sat Wendy down on the bed then squatted down in front of her.

“You are perfect Wen, nothing about you is bad. You saved her life, knowing you were on the way...it’s what forced her to leave,” Miranda stated as she grabbed the first letter and showed it to her. “Leaving you, was the hardest decision, the most heartbreaking choice she ever made, and these were the only way for her to get through it.”

“So, you know her? She’s still alive?” Wendy asked rereading the first letter before looking at the stack of journals. “Is she okay? Does she have other kids now?”

“Wen, one question at a time,” Keith cautioned moving over to them to sit next to her on the bed. “Mire, you know her?”

Miranda nodded clutching the first journal tightly still as she tried to stop herself from falling apart. “These journals were started when you were three; they were the only way to stop the sound of your cries from hurting. Michael...Michael helped by forcing us to write and these were the only thing that would come out.”

“Miranda, why are you crying?” Wendy asked as she dipped her head. “Did something happen to her? Is that why you didn’t want to tell me?”

“I didn’t want you to hate me, either of you, not after I met you.”

“Not after you met us?” Keith asked confused. “What does that mean?”

“I didn’t come because of Pike. I came because Luc asked me to, because Nicole had asked him to help find me.”

“Luc...Uncle Luc?” Wendy asked and she nodded.

“My name wasn’t Miranda when we met, when I asked him and Gina to keep you safe.”

“You’re...you’re my mother?” Wendy said in shock.

“You’re Joelle,” Keith asked, and Miranda nodded before trying to run for the door.

Chapter 11

“Stop,” Keith said catching her pulling her back against his chest as he held her tightly. “Stop running baby.”

“I can’t do this. I’m so sorry for lying to you,” Miranda said, her voice breaking.

“Miranda stop,” he said gently turning her in his arms letting her bury her face in his chest. “Shh, baby shh.”

“Miranda,” Wendy said, and she couldn’t stop from looking at her for the final confirmation that she wasn’t wanted. “I knew it, deep down I knew you were special to me, please don’t go.”

Miranda shook her head trying to fight the need to run but it was taking over. Her heart pounded, her hands shook as her muscles tensed, all prepared to flee for safety, protection from the heartache that was about to hit.

“Why didn’t you just tell us when you first got here baby?” Keith asked forcing her to sit down on the bed as he knelt in front of her.

“I couldn’t, I never wanted you all to hate me.”

“Hate you?” he asked confused. “Miranda, why would we hate you? You are an incredible woman who we both adore.”

“I get it Miranda,” Wendy said kneeling on the bed beside her. “Why you gave me up, I knew you didn’t want to from your letters, but you had to, and you gave me to Dad.”

Miranda closed her eyes wishing the words were true, but she knew they weren’t. They never were. On the surface they felt it, but underneath, just when she thought it was safe, they turned on her and drug her down to that awful pit.

“I know you love me Miranda,” Wendy went on. “I’m not mad. How could I be?”

“You are everything I ever wanted you to be, but I can’t stay anymore. I can’t do this. I’ll just hurt you both in the

end,” Miranda stated finally opening her eyes. “I do love you Wen, more than you will ever know. I’m so sorry, for everything sweetie.”

She pressed a kiss onto Wendy’s forehead remembering what it felt like to hold her, knowing it’d be the only thing that would get her through this and turned towards Keith. “I never meant to lie to you. I’m sorry Keith. Thank you for giving her everything I never could have.”

“Miranda, baby stop,” he said hearing the goodbye in her voice.

“This isn’t my life, it can’t be,” she told them as she ran from the room and straight to her car.

“Miranda stop!” Keith shouted as she backed out of the driveway.

“Dad, we can’t lose her,” Wendy said running after him.

“We’re not going to Wen,” he promised going back to the bedroom as he tossed the journals and letters into the bag. “You’ve still got your overnight bag packed, right?”

“Yeah why?” she asked holding onto the first journal.

“I’m going to see if you can stay with Becky tonight, and I’m going to go after Miranda. I’m going to bring her home to us.”

“You’re not mad she didn’t tell us?” Wendy asked stopping his insane need to find her until he knew Wendy wanted the same thing.

“Are you Wen?” he asked pausing beside the car.

“I’m not the one who lived through what she did, from the first second she smiled at me at the park I knew there was something about her that I connected to. Her letters, they’re so amazing Dad, and for it to be Miranda...I need her. Mom knew we needed her. I don’t care that she didn’t tell us until now. I just want her back Dad.”

“Me too, Wen,” he said knowing it was true.

Keith pulled into the Turner's driveway and grabbed the bag full of journals as Wendy carried her bag and he rang the doorbell glad when Steve answered quickly.

"Keith, Wendy, what are you all doing here?" he asked letting them in as Tracy and Becky peeked around the living room door.

"Could you all watch Wendy for me tonight?"

"Of course," Tracy said coming up behind Steve. "Is everything alright?"

"Long story really short?" Wendy said glancing at her dad. "Miranda's my mom, my real mom, and she ran out upset after we found out."

"What?" Becky gasped as her jaw dropped.

"I found these journals her friend Michael had put in her car to force her to keep her promise to tell us. She kept telling me to wait until the season was over whenever I mentioned anything more permanent or future plans...I figure she was going to tell us and she thought we'd hate her after knowing the truth," Keith stated as more of the things Miranda said and pushed off came back to mind.

"Why? We all know what she went through as a teenager. She was sixteen when Wendy was born and not telling you first time we met, there was so much else going on then," Tracy said.

"But she thinks it's her fault in a way," Becky told them. "She probably feels like no one could possibly love her or accept the choices she made. Remember the other week at practice, we were talking to her about Nina getting grounded?"

"Yeah, she said she'd never been, but it was a way for parents to put up boundaries, show they cared. But her mom let her be hurt, abandoning her as she thinks she did with me, doesn't she?" Wendy said. "That's not how I feel though Dad."

"I know Wen. I'm going to go to her place see if I can't talk to her," Keith stated. "I love her with or without being Wendy's mother, none of it changes that."

“I knew it,” Steve laughed patting him on the back as he took the bag from him. “You were head over heels for her that first night.”

“I can’t believe we didn’t see it Wen. I mean look at you two,” Becky said showing them the picture from the game. “Other than your hair being blonde...you’re her.”

“Her eyes are green though,” Wendy said looking at it with a smile. “She loves me Dad. I know she does.”

“I already knew that sweetie,” Keith said seeing them through new eyes. “Can I borrow these?”

“The pictures?” Becky asked. “Yeah, we printed out duplicates of most of these to give to Wendy and Miranda anyway.”

“Thanks, Wen I’ll let you know as soon as I find her, okay?”

“I love you Dad. Thank you for loving me even though...” Wendy stopped dinging his heart a bit and he knelt down to hug her tight.

“Even though what? How you were created? Wen, we knew from the very start, but it didn’t matter sweetie, not to me, not to your mom, and definitely not to Miranda. We all love you because of who you are, not how you came to be. Nothing will ever change that,” he promised. “Read the journals, they might just help us both right now.”

“I will,” she agreed with a smile.

“Mr. Samuels, I don’t know if it’ll help any, but this is the number she gave me for her friend Michael. She said he knew all her secrets. He might know where she is if she’s not at home,” Becky said giving him the card.

“Thanks Becky; I’ll let you all know and thanks for letting Wendy stay,” he told Tracy and Steve.

“Anytime Keith, especially when you and Miranda are on your honeymoon,” Tracy said giving him a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“That might not be so easy to get to now.” He sighed as Steve gave him a half hug as he left.

Keith went straight to Miranda’s place and asked the doorman if she was in. “I just need to know if she got here okay. If she doesn’t want to talk to me that’s fine, but she was upset and she drove off in a hurry. Please Henry, I don’t want to find out she was in a car accident because she was crying.”

“She’s not here, Mr. Samuels,” Henry told him. “I haven’t seen her for several days.”

“She’s been with me and our daughter. Please if she does show up, call me to let me know she’s safe.”

“Of course, is everything alright?” Henry asked.

“Not really, I’m sure you know where Miranda works...”

“For the Stay Young Foundation. I know quite a lot about Miss Oliver, Terry ensured I was hired to see that she stayed safe,” Henry admitted relieving him a bit.

“When she was sixteen, she gave up a baby for adoption, that baby is my daughter, and she thinks we’re mad she didn’t tell us when we met. I don’t care and neither does Wendy, we just want her back home with us,” he told the man who nodded giving him a sympathetic look.

“If she comes home, I will call you immediately, Mr. Samuels. She’s an incredible woman who’s been hurt immensely in her past, and I’ve never seen her happier than when she was with you,” Henry assured him, making him feel calmer about that bit.

“I feel the same Henry. Thank you,” he said making his way to the foundation’s offices. He didn’t see her car, but he went to the front door and knocked anyway.

“Keith,” Julius said after his third knock. “Miranda told you?”

“You knew?”

“Not until Michael showed us a picture of Wendy and then of Miranda when she was a teenager after you all left Tuesday.”

“She’s not here I take it?” Keith questioned, wishing she were right there for him to pull into his arms and hold tight, forever.

“No one’s come in all evening, she’s not at home?”

“No. Look, we’re not mad, or hurt, we just want to find her Julius. Do you have any idea where she could be?”

“There are a few places in the city she likes but if she’s upset, the only person she’d turn to is Michael.”

“I’ve got his numbers,” Keith said, and Julius nodded pushing open the door.

“He’ll pick up from the foundation number faster at this time of night.”

“Julius, what’s going on?” Michael asked answering after the second ring.

“I’m here with Keith. Miranda hasn’t contacted you, has she?” Julius said.

“No, she found the journals I put in the trunk and told you?” he asked.

“I found the bag and took it in, I was teasing her about it being weights and when I saw the journals, I opened one and found the letters to Wendy. She finally told us,” Keith answered.

“I take it she didn’t listen when you said you still loved her?” Michael guessed as Keith’s heart panged deeply, making him hurt even more than when Nicole died. If anything happened to Miranda, he’d never survive, partly because he’d never loved this deeply before, but also partly because of Wendy. She wouldn’t recover the loss of Miranda, not on top of Nicole.

“She just kept saying she was sorry and that she couldn’t do it. It’s as though she didn’t even hear what we were saying to her.”

“She won’t, not until she lets go of her guilt for not being able to protect Wendy herself.”

“She did protect her; she made sure she was safe far away from the mess she grew up with.”

“Did she tell you any about that time?” Michael asked.

“Basics, I know it was the group that Julius prosecuted from Oakland, and I know from Luc that her name was really Joelle.”

“It was Joelle Masters-Simmons,” Julius stated holding his gaze as Keith’s eyes widened in shock.

“Simmons as in Senator Simmons? Holy shit,” Keith muttered.

“Yeah, now you know why she ran and why she gave Wendy to Luc and Gina to protect,” Michael said hearing it.

“I can’t believe it. I read what he’d done to the girls. Miranda said she was worried they’d end up killing her once she got older,” Keith said, his blood running cold at the thought of that man hurting his girls.

“It wouldn’t have surprised us,” Julius agreed. “He’s still trying to get the conviction overturned.”

“That sick bastard wants out after he raped her when she was twelve and continued to do so for four years?” he yelled as fury pounded through his veins on top of the fear that he’d never see Miranda again.

“We feel the same way, Keith. We’ve been doing everything we can to keep it from Miranda but now with you and Wendy knowing the truth about who she is, we can’t anymore,” Julius stated.

“If you tell her she’s going to be terrified,” Keith argued.

“Enough to confront them finally we hope,” Michael agreed. “She won’t accept that you and Wendy love her for who she is until she sees for herself that it wasn’t her fault, that she isn’t unlovable.”

“Or until she lets go of the guilt of abandoning Wendy the way she feels her mother abandoned her?” Keith guessed.

“Yeah, that guilt has nearly killed her twice Keith,” Michael warned.

“What? You’re saying when she swallowed those pills... she started the journals when Wendy was three, she would have been nineteen. She tried to kill herself because she felt guilty for giving up Wendy?” His guts twisted in agony of how much pain she must have been in, how much she truly wanted and loved his daughter all this time.

“It’s why I made her write the journals Keith. She could tell her in them how much she loved her, wanted to keep her, the pain she felt not knowing if she was as safe as she prayed, she was,” Michael confirmed.

“All of the weight she’s lost recently is because she’s been worried about us finding out the truth, isn’t it?” Keith felt awful that it’d frightened Miranda so much, made her not feel safe because all he wanted was to keep her safe, always.

“It is,” Michael stated. “I didn’t see it at first. I prayed this wouldn’t be too much for her when she told me that Wendy was her Wendy as we stood on that soccer field. She’s never forgiven herself for not being able to be the one to protect her daughter Keith. It’s why she does anything she can to help other girls who are pregnant from situations like hers. If they choose to give the babies up for adoption, she makes sure the parents are screened thoroughly. No one who comes into the foundation is allowed near them unless she’s got a recommendation from god himself.”

“Then why did she run? If she’s so intent on protecting everyone else why leave me and Wendy tonight?”

“She knows Wendy’s safe with you Keith. She knew that the first week there but the chance to get to know Wendy, to see her, be with her was too much to pass up so she stayed. She wants to be able to love her openly but in her mind Wendy and you will never forgive her for what she’s done, or what’s been done to her. She’s also afraid that by staying with you someone will hurt Wendy simply to get to her,” Michael added making his breath stall.

“Her stepfather?” he asked Michael.

“Yes, it’s why she’s never come forward with her picture with the foundation. She’s terrified that if he knows she’s the one who talked, who got enough girls to go after the group who turned on one another to get him arrested that she’ll be in danger, and they’ll find out about Wendy.”

“And Wendy’s almost the same age she was when she was first abused,” Julius added.

“So, by staying away from us, not accepting that we love her, she thinks Wendy will be safer than if she admits that we mean everything to her and her to us?” Keith questioned.

“Yes, if it came out to the world that Miranda is really Joelle, that her stepfather Senator Simmons is the one who abused her, and then Wendy is brought to light he’s going to know why she ran,” Michael stated.

“Simmons is the sperm donor I take it?” Keith asked.

“He forced everyone else to wear condoms when they... but he wouldn’t,” Julius admitted.

“If that bastard ever gets out and comes anywhere near my girls, I’ll kill him,” he seethed.

“We’re right there with you Keith. We all love Miranda, and we want to keep her safe, but we also want her to know how much people love her,” Michael said.

“We have to find her in order to do that.” Keith sighed knowing this would take a miracle now if she hadn’t turned to Michael.

“I can tell you where she might go, but there’s no guarantee she’ll be there,” Michael warned.

“I’ll look for the next twenty years for her if I have to, Michael. I’m not letting her go. I can’t, and Wendy can’t, so where should I start?” he asked then started writing as they listed off several places and he prayed she’d be at one of them.

Chapter 12

“Hi Wen, you okay?” Keith asked as she got onto the line.

“A little tired, I couldn’t put the journals down last night. Please tell me you’ve found her Dad. I can’t lose another mom, especially not Miranda,” Wendy pleaded making him hurt more with the worry in her voice.

“We haven’t seen her sweetie, but she’s got to be around here. We’ll find her I promise. She wouldn’t just leave, not with the foundation to run. She’s just somewhere we don’t know about right now.”

“You have to read these journals, Dad. I don’t think I’ve cried so much or felt so loved all at the same time and she didn’t even know me.”

“Miranda’s always loved you because you’re a part of her, just like you’re a part of me no matter what honey. You’re my daughter as much as you were Nicole’s and Miranda’s.”

“I know that Dad, but she’s not here anymore and I miss her, but Miranda was here, and I want her back. I can’t explain it but being with her...”

“Makes everything seem better, as though happy endings are possible?” he offered knowing that’s how he felt with her. His life with Nicole was simple, easy expect for her health issues, and their love while battered, was never tested, never questioned. With Miranda...her past brought out feelings inside him he never experienced before, opened a part of his heart that wasn’t just moving through the days, but wanting to live through them with the person he loved most. To make her happy, keep her safe, and feel that love entirely.

“Yeah, did you all name me after her?”

“Your middle name? We did, she’d signed the papers and gave them to Luc to bring with you and we wanted you to know someday how much giving you to us meant to us,” he told her honestly, not about to lie to his daughter now.

“Where have you looked?”

“Everywhere we could think of, anywhere that meant anything to her,” he said naming them off for her.

“There’s one place she wrote about in one of the journals...give me a sec,” Wendy stated digging through the stack she’d read. “Got it, here...”

Wendy, you’re probably wondering where your name came from, and the answer is just as simple as you might have guessed. It’s from the movie Peter Pan. I figured it was better than Tinkerbell, right? It’s been my favorite movie for as long as I can remember because I wanted to be like Peter and never grow up, because it’d mean that my childhood really was as horrible as it was. If I was still a child, it wouldn’t be that way. It would all be a horrible dream that never happened, but it isn’t.

There’s a special place I go to think of you and remember that feeling whenever life gets to be too much. It’s my own little spot where it does feel as though I’m flying. The wind surrounds me and I’m high in the clouds, and I wonder where you are and if you’ve ever felt the single moment of pure joy that comes over me when I’m here. You’ll never know it, but I pretend that you’re with me, holding my hand as my arms are stretched out wide, overlooking the city and lights.

You might hate me, might wish I’d never been a part of your life, and I wouldn’t blame you. But you are for me the one perfect moment of absolute joy, and it’s the one thing that keeps me from flying off of this perch and giving up.

I can’t explain how I can love you so much from so few moments of being with you, of holding you just once, but you are always in my heart. I am always praying that you are safe and that you can feel my love for you even if you don’t know where it’s coming from, my darling girl.

I search for you in every girl I meet, and every time you’re not her, I say another prayer of thanks because it means you’re safe. I love you no matter how hopeless it is to wish for that love in return, but if you ever feel this strange love surround you and you don’t know where it’s from, that’s me sitting here high in the clouds with my arms stretched out wide

wishing your hand was in mine and we could have another perfect moment. I will always love you, forever no matter what. Love Mom.

“I’ve felt that Dad, times when it seemed like there was no one who understood what I was thinking or feeling there’d be this layer of comfort surround me and it was okay. Please find her, so I can tell her that.”

“Wen...” Keith paused to control the emotions coating his throat as he brushed away the tear that fell. “I’m going to find her I promise. I think I know that spot she meant. I’ll let you know if she’s there, sweetie.”

“Okay, I love you Dad.”

“Love you too Wen,” he stated hanging up as he refilled his coffee cup.

“You okay?” Michael asked watching him as Julius went through a list of emails.

“Wendy read me one of the entries from the journals. I thought her letters to Wendy when she was pregnant were heartbreaking but that...she mentioned a spot high in the clouds where she could look out over the city and feel like she was flying. I’m going to head up into the hills.”

“You’ve been up all night; sure you can make the drive?” Julius questioned.

“If it means finding Miranda, yeah.”

“Well for our sake as well as Wendy’s take the driver, he’s outside waiting,” Michael told him. “Miranda will be furious if you allow yourself to get hurt or worse and put Wendy in danger. She has not done everything she has in her life to let that happen Keith.”

“Okay,” he agreed and as the car climbed, he was glad he’d said yes. Despite the coffee he’d consumed he felt himself drifting off.

The second the car stopped he was wide awake, and he looked around before heading down the trail hoping, praying he was right.

Keith turned the final corner and stopped bowing his head in a rush of thanks before slowly making his way towards Miranda. Her eyes were closed as she stood with her arms hanging low and he slipped his hand into hers keeping a tight hold on her in case she stumbled along the ledge. “Mire, baby...”

“How?” she asked as he pulled her away from the edge and sat down as the relief that she was safe overwhelmed him.

“You wrote about this place in one of the journals Wendy read last night. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because we love you, baby. Me, Wendy we both love you. I get that you don’t think we can, that there’s no way we could forgive or accept you, but we do,” he said bringing her over his lap as she started to turn away from him. “No more running Miranda. I won’t let you run from me and our daughter. I will not let you abandon her this time, because that’s what walking away from us will be. You letting her go when she was a baby was not abandoning her Mire. It was making sure she survived, making sure you survived too.”

Miranda shook her head as the tears welled up. “I hated myself for doing it. I wanted to keep her in my arms and never let go.”

“I know you did, baby, I know,” he said gently turning her over his lap to sit facing him. “You had to though, for her and for you. It wasn’t being selfish; it was doing the only thing you could as a mother for our beautiful girl. She knows that baby. I know that. You have to accept that; you kept her safe. You did what you needed to but now, what you need to do and what Wendy needs you to do is to come home. She adores you baby. She loves you and she needs you now.”

“How can she love me? After everything I’ve done...”

“Everything you’ve done has been for her,” Keith said cupping her head gently to hold onto her gaze. “You took down one of the most powerful men in the country to keep her safe, so he would never know she exists. She might not know

that part, but I do, and you cannot begin to imagine how much that means to me as her father. You have no idea how many people love you no matter what you've been through, baby."

"You can't," she argued but he wasn't about to let her get started with it.

"Because you can't love yourself? Look at these Mire, look at them," he said pulling out the photos. "It's so clear you love our daughter. It shines baby. Now look at this one," he added pulling up the one of Wendy looking up at her. "This is our daughter looking at you. It's the same. She loves you."

"Before she knew, but now..."

"Now she knows why she never wondered if she was loved, baby. Because she could feel your love whenever she felt down or sad, it was because you were thinking of her and loving her no matter where she was. She needs her mom. She wants her mom to come home and to hold her."

Miranda closed her eyes shaking her head and he sighed kissing the top of her head.

"Mire, look at me baby. I know exactly who you are, who you were, what happened and who you are now. I know you're scared that by being in her life somehow, he'll find out, but he'll never hurt you or our daughter. I swear on my life he will never hurt either of you again."

"You don't know who I was Keith; you can't know how much pain...how much I just wanted it all to stop."

"I know you felt guilty over leaving Wendy and I know you tried to stop that pain and that guilt which is how you met Michael," he assured her, his lips pressing into her forehead.

"He doesn't know it all, why I couldn't sleep, what was making it impossible for me to breathe..."

"Then tell me, Miranda. Tell me why you thought leaving this world would be better than fighting?" Keith pleaded, unable to imagine never having met her, held her, loved her.

“You’ll hate me, more than you already do,” she whispered making him ache more at the conviction in her tone.

“I don’t hate you, baby. I could *never* hate you. I love you and nothing will change that. I loved you for your strength when Luc told us your story and I loved you for allowing us to make sure Wendy was safe. I fell in love with the woman you are now, this incredibly strong passionate woman who gave me my daughter back, who helped stop the pain she and her best friend were going through. I love the woman who let me into her life and opened up to me, who shared her pain and stayed here to help our daughter,” he stated not about to give up on her, he’d never do that.

“I barely slept for years after I walked out of that clinic leaving Wendy with Luc. I held her for a tiny bit and her face was there in my mind. I heard her crying as I left her, and that cry haunted me Keith,” Miranda told him letting the tears stream down her face. “I tried not to think about it, to keep myself from going back and demanding to know where she was because it hurt so much. I wanted her back the instant I left her. When I would close my eyes, I’d see her tiny face and the second I slept I’d hear her cry, and the horror would take over. I didn’t know for sure she was safe, and it was killing me.”

“I’m so sorry baby,” he said softly, his hand gentle on the back of her head, just holding her.

“Every time I heard her cry, I’d hear the truth of what I did behind it, how I just abandoned her to something that could be killing her the way my mother had me, and I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d taken one pill but the second I laid down I heard her, and I couldn’t listen to her anymore, I couldn’t hear the pain in her cries anymore and not know...”

“Baby, oh Mire. Shh, honey,” he said holding her tightly to him as she let go of the emotions that had allowed her to talk and cried into his chest. “Shh...baby...shh...”

Keith sat there gently rocking Miranda as the emotions poured out of her. He tried to find the words to help her see

she hadn't done anything to be ashamed of, that there were no words to truly convey, to comprehend the depth of the pain she'd gone through in her life.

"Mire, baby look at me," he said softly when she finally quieted. "You didn't tell anyone about her during those three years, did you?"

She shook her head no and he soothed his hand down the back of her hair.

"You were keeping it all inside and it hurt so much you thought it would never ease. Then you met Michael and he made you start writing out that pain in those journals, talking about her even if it was just to him, right? You were hurting baby, more than anyone should ever hurt. What you did doesn't mean you don't love Wendy; you loved her so much and the pain of giving her the chance at a happy life along with the pain of what you went through was too much. You shouldn't have had to deal with that at sixteen or nineteen."

"You don't hate me?" Miranda asked sending huge wave of relief through Keith. He'd gotten at least the first battle out it seemed.

"Never baby, I swear I could never and will never hate you."

"But I do," she whispered, and he pulled her tighter to him understanding her more than ever.

"I know you do but just come home with me. Come home and see our daughter, let us take care of you until you can see that you don't have to hate yourself that you can accept our love. We won't rush you. I swear I will never rush you again, baby," he said gently rubbing her back.

"I can't hurt her any more than I already am."

"The only way you'll hurt her is if you don't come back, baby. She's already lost one mother, please don't make it two. She wants you in her life. She wants to love you so let us. Come see for yourself that I'm telling you the truth. You at least owe her the chance to tell you in person, don't you? Confronting the person who hurt you, that's what you

recommend to the kids you save,” he said trying anything he could to get her to come back.

“Yeah...”

“Well, if you think you hurt her by abandoning her, then don’t you owe it to her to let her tell you that herself? She wants to see you, wants to talk to you, so are you going to let her?”

“Okay,” she agreed barely able to open her eyes.

“Good.” Keith sighed knowing it was only the first of many battles to convince her to stay. “Let’s go home.”

“So tired,” Miranda said as he lifted her into his arms and carried her down the path she indicated towards her car. He called the driver and had him pick them up there as he locked her car and lifted her into the backseat with him.

“Do you have Miss Oliver’s keys? We’ll have someone come pick her car up along with yours from the café and take them to your place if you’d like,” the driver offered, and he handed them over before calling Michael letting him know he’d found her.

Keith dialed the Turners, and the instant Wendy came on the line he let out the breath he’d been holding. “I found her; she was where you read Wen.”

“She’s coming home then?” Wendy asked excitedly.

“She’s agreed to hear what you want to tell her in person.”

“What does that mean? I want her to stay, Dad,” she said confused.

“Then that’s what you’ll tell her Wen. She’s scared sweetie. I’ll explain more later, it’s too difficult to do it over the phone.”

“When will you all be here?”

“The driver is taking us back to the house. Miranda’s exhausted so for right now the best thing is to let her sleep. I know you’re anxious to tell her you love her Wen and for her

to stay but there's a lot to work through," he warned her gently.

"Are we going to lose her, Dad? Is she going to leave us because she thinks no one can love her after what happened to her?"

"That's partially it..."

"I don't get it Dad, she told Becky that wouldn't happen that there are hundreds of people who love her and will love her so why won't she believe it for herself?"

"Her situation and Becky's were different sweetie, not just because of you but because she didn't have a mom and dad and stepdad who protected her when the truth came out. On top of that then is the fact that she wanted to make sure you were safe so badly that she let you go but without knowing for sure you were safe it ate at her. You know how much Becky was hurting and what it was like when she told you right? Miranda kept all of it inside for three whole years after you were born. She didn't trust talking to anyone because she was worried somehow someone would find you and hurt you to hurt her."

"Did I ruin her life?" Wendy asked breaking his heart.

"What? Wendy no sweetie, never. You saved her life, never think anything else. Without you she never would have had the courage to leave. If you don't believe that reread the letters...it's all in there Wen," he said repeating what Miranda had last night.

"I just really want her here. I want her to stay Dad and I'm worried she won't and that this time I won't be able to go on the way I did when Mom died."

"It might take some time Wen, but we'll make sure she knows we love her completely. I promise. One day, one battle at a time until there's nothing left for her to wonder."

"Okay...let me know when you're back. I love you Dad."

"You too Wen," he said holding Miranda closer to him as he kissed her temple. "I love you Mire, you're exactly where

you should be baby.”

Chapter 13

“You look like hell brother,” Steve said as they stood in the kitchen late that afternoon.

Keith nodded letting out a deep sigh. “I feel like hell, between what her friends told me and what she told me when I found her...she once said happy endings didn’t happen in real life and all I can do is pray that she’s wrong. Finding her changed our lives even before we knew she was really Wendy’s mother. The fact that she is makes me love her more, but she doesn’t see that.”

“So, what’s the plan here?”

“Make her see how much we love her, take things day by day until she knows that we’re not going anywhere. Her friends think confronting her past, the people who hurt her will help, make her see that she didn’t abandon Wendy the way she was.”

“You mean her stepfather...was he?” Steve asked, and his jaw tightened in fury again.

“Yeah, and he’s never going to have the chance to hurt them. He’ll never know about Wendy, not from us.”

“We won’t say a word man...about anything. Miranda helped Becky and that made her family.”

“I know...I just...you know you felt about Pike? I want to go murder that bastard for hurting Miranda and the idea of him finding out about Wendy, of ever getting out to hurt her or Miranda, it makes me want to get arrested and put in there simply so I can take him out. It’s astonishing that he’s being protected from other inmates. I say turn him loose in the main population and let them finish him off,” Keith said, his tone dark as that anger burnt through him hotly.

“I’ve never seen you like this before not even with that quack who’d hit Nicole.”

“He made me want to punch him but the idea of that slime putting his hands on Miranda, let alone thinking that she

was a year younger than Wendy when he started... I love her because as much as I wanted to hurt Pike for what he did, it's a billion times worse."

"Well take it easy man. Wendy needs you here and so does Miranda. I've seen the way she looks at you, she loves you man."

"I hope so because she means the world to me. I want nothing more than to go in there and just hold her, make everything better but I can't not until she lets go of the past, lets me help her to do that." Keith felt helpless in ways he'd never felt before and he didn't like it, could only imagine the way Miranda felt when she was Wendy's age.

"It'll happen, just give her some time," Steve said making him sigh again. Keith took a drink of the beer he held before pouring it out knowing getting drunk wasn't the answer to this.

"That's what everyone's telling me and what I'm telling Wendy. I just don't know if time will really help."

"We'll get out of your hair, if you need us to watch Wendy any just give us a call."

"Thanks Steve; tell Tracy thanks for me too," he added as Steve left.

Keith waited a few minutes before going to find Wendy knowing he needed to tell her what was going on, what they were going to be facing.

"Hey sweetie," he said finally finding her in the bedroom watching Miranda sleep.

"Don't tell me to go Dad, I have to know she's here," Wendy whispered.

"I know how you feel sweetie," he said sitting down in the chair pulling her onto his lap to hold her as they watched Miranda sleep. "I love you Wen. No matter what you find out from Miranda know that I have always and will always love you for who you are."

“You know who...made me, don't you?” she asked looking up at him.

“It doesn't change who you are Wen. That was one microsecond of your life; the rest that's what matters sweetie.”

“Is she worried that he'll come and hurt me? I'm a year older than she was,” Wendy said worriedly.

“Yes, she's scared that somehow, he'll get out of jail and come after you if he knows about you, but I will never let that happen, Wen. I will never let anyone close enough to hurt you or her again.”

“I love you Dad,” she said snuggling down beside him as they napped knowing it would be a bit before Miranda woke.

Miranda woke with a start sitting up on the bed as the memories hit her and she took a deep breath to stop the tears that welled up as her gaze landed on Keith and Wendy napping in the chair beside the bed. She saw a journal sitting on the table beside them and sighed wishing Michael had given her one more night with them before being forced to tell the truth. She didn't want to miss them the way she was bound to soon, last night was bad enough.

Quietly, she slid out of the bed and made her way to the bathroom returning to the bedroom to find them still sleeping soundly. She thought about waking them, but they looked so peaceful that she let them sleep. It seemed they hadn't done much of it last night either.

Miranda stretched and felt her stomach growl with hunger. The last thing she remembered eating was after the game, but she hadn't done much of it. She made her way into the kitchen and started the pasta she'd planned on making last night for dinner trying to stop herself from running before giving Wendy a chance to tell her to go.

Honestly, she didn't know how she was going to walk away and be able to breathe after this. She'd never imagined finding someone she could be so comfortable with, enjoyed being around but she had and now it was all going to end.

“Dad!” she heard Wendy shout as dinner finished cooking and took a few steps towards the kitchen door hearing the rushed footsteps.

“Miranda,” Keith sighed with relief seeing her in the doorway. “Something smells good, baby.”

“Pasta primavera,” she told them steeling herself for their anger.

“Miranda, stop baby,” Keith said crossing the room to her as Wendy came up behind him. “We don’t hate you. We’re not angry with you; we just want you here, so we can love you.”

“Miranda, you’re here,” Wendy cried rushing over to hug her.

Miranda felt her heart constrict as she slid her arms around Wendy returning it. She soothed her hands down Wendy’s back, wanting to memorize everything about them she possibly could before she was without them again.

“Please don’t go away Miranda,” she said looking up at her. “I don’t want you to go ever.”

“Wendy...”

“No, don’t tell me you’re sorry,” Wendy said stopping her. “You want me to hate you so you can run away but I don’t, I *can’t* hate you, Miranda.”

“Why?” she asked as Keith led them both to the table to sit.

“Because I know why you did what you did and I love you for it,” Wendy answered standing in front of her. “I loved my mom but when I found those letters, I knew why it was possible for me to move forward, I knew that there was someone else out there who loved me. That was you and I want you to stay.”

“I do love you Wendy,” Miranda said slipping a piece of hair behind her ear. “I wanted to keep you so badly even though I knew I couldn’t. I did things I shouldn’t have but I couldn’t keep you.”

“I know Miranda,” Wendy said hugging her again. “I know it all, why you did what you did, all of it and I don’t care. I’m the luckiest girl in the world because I had two amazing moms my entire life. I had you out there protecting me from the start and then you gave me to Dad and Nicole, and now she’s given you back to me. Please don’t go, please stay with me, Mom.”

Miranda closed her eyes hearing the way Wendy said it as she looked at her, the same way she looked at Keith and the tears started. Miranda hugged Wendy back letting herself believe for now that Wendy could accept her, love her, but Keith was another story she knew. Wendy was part of her, they had a connection that was undeniable, but Keith didn’t have to stay with her.

Keith watched as Miranda’s shoulders lowered and he sent a thank you up to Nicole for everything she’d done for them in their lives. He moved over to the chair and slid an arm around each of his girls kissing the top of Wendy’s head then Miranda’s as he let himself hope.

The timer went off and Miranda pulled back slightly as she got up from the chair to take out the food.

They ate in almost silence before she put her fork down and looked at them both. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s usually the lead-in for you running,” Keith said watching her with worry. “You don’t have to run from us. We don’t *want* you to run from us.”

“I’m sorry for not telling you sooner. I was already in a strange place when I came here. I’d run into Luc about a month before then when I went to pick up a girl we’d been looking for and seeing him brought everything back up. He started to say something about Wendy, and I didn’t think I could deal with knowing what it was. Then for the next month I battled with not calling him. I threw myself into work telling myself that you were safe still.”

“What changed?” Wendy asked. “Did you know that Pike was a creep when you came, you thought he was hurting me?”

“I didn’t know about Pike. Luc came to the office because I’d been refusing his calls. I knew if I asked where you were that I’d never be able to stay away, and I wanted to believe that you had the perfect family taking care of you.”

“He told you about Nicole and the letter she wrote to him?” Keith asked.

“Yeah, then he showed me a picture of Wen and I knew there was something wrong. On top of that picture was the letter from Nicole and finding out she was gone...when Luc told me you played soccer I had to come. I saw the look in Becky’s eyes and it’s one I’ve seen too many times in my life. When Pike came near her...I spent the next week finding everything I could to make sure he wasn’t doing anything to you Wen. We got the arrest warrant, and I didn’t want anyone getting hurt or something coming out through the news. I didn’t want the media getting pictures of you, having them possibly be in the papers and TV, so we set it all up for the next morning.”

“You got there early that morning to try and stop thinking about the fact that despite everything Wendy was on the outskirts of something like that,” Keith said watching her closely.

“Yeah, I had to shut the thoughts out and be thankful that although she was near it, it hadn’t happened to her,” she said before looking at her amazing daughter she adored. “When I saw you smiling after making that shot, I knew I couldn’t walk away but we still had everything to get through. By the end of the day, I didn’t want to leave; I should have but I couldn’t.”

“Why do you say that?” Wendy asked her tone showing her hurt. “You say you loved me then and now, but you don’t want me?”

“I’ve wanted you every moment of everyday Wen, but I never wanted you to be part of or know about this side of the world. I wanted you to be blissfully ignorant of it, always,” Miranda said brushing a stray strand of hair from Wendy’s face.

“But I’m not, so where does that leave us?” she questioned. “Do you want to stay still, or do you want to leave?”

“I want to be part of your life however you’ll let me sweetie. I love you Wen, but I’m terrified that someone will try and hurt you to get to me,” she admitted glancing at Keith to let him know there were a million reasons why she should go.

“Are you talking about the person who hurt you, got you pregnant with me?” Wendy asked.

“He’s in jail Wen so he can’t ever just show up if somehow they found us, but I never want him to know about you. I’m scared he’d try to hurt you if he did but there are others who know who I am who aren’t in jail. Some who were part of the group they could never find and then others who simply know about the foundation and me through it.”

“Like Pike and that guy who took Liza?” Wendy asked.

“They’re both in jail, but others who know them, are like them, who we don’t know about but who know about us. My apartment is protected the way it is because about six months after we started the foundation someone broke into the one, I was staying at and held a gun on me to find out where one of the girls were,” Miranda told them, needing them to know the risks of her staying in their lives.

“Jesus Mire,” Keith said understanding more than ever. “You think that by staying here with us that they’ll use Wendy to get you to stop?”

“Or you, or Becky, or the others...”

“You can’t protect everyone, Mom. I know you want to, but you can’t. You can’t protect me by leaving, it’ll just hurt me,” Wendy stated making Miranda look at her. “The only thing that will hurt me is if you walk away and leave me. That would be you abandoning me the way your mom did you. You wanted to protect me when I was a baby and you did by leaving me, giving me to Dad, but now to protect me you have to stay.”

“Wen...”

“No, we can all be more cautious but the way you protect me now is by keeping my heart safe and the only way to do that is to stay with me. You know what can happen when someone is hurting that much,” Wendy said making tears pool in her eyes. “You walking away from me will do that to me and I thought that’s what you didn’t want.”

“I don’t, not ever,” Miranda said kissing the top of Wendy’s head as she pulled her into a hug. She fought against the tears as she moved back cupping her face gently. “I’ll never leave you. I just don’t want to stay if it’ll hurt you more.”

“It won’t Mom—that’s who you are to me. You were before I knew it was true. I knew you were meant to be my mom from that first day. Stay with us forever please, Mom, please.”

“I’ll stay,” she agreed looking over at Keith for his choice.

“We want you right here Mire, right here baby,” he added coming over to hug her as he kissed her temple. “We love you.”

“We do,” Wendy agreed, and she let herself enjoy the rest of dinner.

Afterwards he let her, and Wendy talk about the journals until Wendy couldn’t keep her eyes open anymore. She didn’t want to go to bed but once Miranda assured her, she’d be there she gave in and was asleep before her head hit the pillow. Keith ushered Miranda back to the living room not wanting to pressure her into anything between them. He’d fought enough today, he just wanted to be with her for now.

Miranda snuggled down onto the couch beside him resting her head against his shoulder and her hand on his chest over his heart not wanting to lose the feelings between them, but it was only a matter of time before he grew tired of her. He covered her hand with his and kissed her temple as he

pulled her further into his hold and she was lost. She wanted this, wanted to be with him for always.

“Mire baby I’m not going to stop loving you or thanking you for everything you’ve done for Wendy, me, Becky, and countless others. I love you, that’s not going to go away simply because you didn’t tell us who you are. I just can’t believe I didn’t see it, but it’s been staring at me the entire time,” he said reaching for a photo of her and Wendy.

“The coach at the game yesterday called her my daughter. Liza’s mom did too, and I wanted to tell them and everyone else that I had the tiniest bit to do with her, but she’s yours and Nicole’s. She’s the person she is because of you two,” Miranda said knowing she couldn’t take any credit for how amazing Wendy was. She was hers but yet, she wasn’t, and that hurt more than they’d ever know.

“But none of that would have been possible with you, baby. We wouldn’t have her, wouldn’t have been the parents to her we were if we hadn’t known her history, your history. You’re as much responsible for the way she is as we are, along with Luc who brought her here to us, and then you back to us. The last couple months she’s grown as a person thanks to you and you helping her with Becky.”

“All I did was give her away,” she argued trying to not latch onto it to make it better.

“You did far more than that. Your letters were our guideposts for raising Wendy. We used them to show her how much she was loved by us and you. Don’t sell yourself short baby, we both need you. We both love you and I never want you to leave us.”

“I’ll stay Keith, I just don’t know where we go from here.”

“Right now, to bed so I can hold you and know you’re really here. I just want you next to me Mire, I won’t push you for anything else.”

“You don’t want me anymore?” she said glancing away from him. She’d known this would happen.

“Baby, I want you always, every moment whether you’re here with me or not. I love you, but I’ll give you whatever space or time you need to return to what we were yesterday morning.”

“I don’t need space from this Keith,” she stated before kissing him because it’d tell her the truth and she thanked god that it was the same as before he’d found out she quickly discovered.

Chapter 14

“Keith, it’s good to see you again,” Julius said shaking his hand as the man came into his office. “How’s Miranda?”

“Better I think, she’s been working from the house staying with Wendy.”

“So, what are you doing here? I would have thought you’d be right there with them.”

“I want to be, but I need to know that they’ll both be safe. Miranda’s worried about others coming after Wendy because of who she is and what she does with the foundation. It’s part of the reason why she thought it’d be safer for her to stay away from us.”

“She told you why Terry bought the apartment, didn’t she?” Julius questioned.

“Yeah, what’s going on with the appeal that’s out there?” he asked sitting down leaning forwards towards the desk.

“It’s been denied multiple times and this latest one should be also. I stay in constant contact with the prosecutor who’s working it now. If anything comes up, any new evidence or reasoning he shares it with me instantly. I’ve sat in on every hearing for granting the appeal and he’s good. He’s not about to let the jerk out. Right now, they’re trying to turn over the statements of some of the others but the only thing they’re finding is more proof that the statements are true.”

“So, there’s no truth in the rumors that they’re going for an overturn of the conviction because of jury tampering?” Keith asked, hoping it wasn’t true.

“Where did you hear that?” Julius asked leaning onto the desk.

“Mind if I use the computer?”

“Go ahead,” he said letting him have access to it. He read over the article and picked up the phone cursing under his

breath. “Andrew it’s Julius, I just sent you a link to an article.”

“About what?” he asked, and they could hear typing in the background. “Where the hell did this come from?”

“I have a friend here with me, Keith Samuels, he’s an attorney who helps us out occasionally and he and Miranda are also involved.”

“I haven’t heard anything about an investigation going on. Let me check this out a bit further and see what I can find out. If this is true, then just the hint of it will be enough for him to get a new trial.”

“But wouldn’t that be stupid?” Keith questioned. “If they can prove that the statements the others made are true, he’d be in more trouble, wouldn’t he?”

“We’d have to fight to get the evidence admitted again. We could possibly lose out if he gets a sympathetic enough judge,” Andrew stated.

“We have one thing we didn’t back then though,” Julius replied. “We have Miranda.”

“Meaning what?” Keith asked.

“Meaning she will do anything in her powers to protect those she loves,” Julius said. “If she knows this is going on she will come forward against him.”

“Putting herself in danger even more,” he argued.

“I think it’s the only thing that will show her exactly how much she means to everyone, that it’s not her fault any of it happened, and it will keep Wendy safe. One test and there will be undeniable evidence,” Julius stated.

“What are you talking about?” Andrew asked.

“My teenage daughter Wendy is Miranda’s daughter,” Keith answered.

“Holy shit...that’s why she ran, why she wouldn’t come forward before?” Andrew questioned.

“She didn’t want the possibility of him finding out about her while he was out or when he might get off but now that she knows where Wendy is, has her in her life, she won’t let him get out. She’d come forward and there’s a hundred more things she could probably tell to get them put away for life,” Julius stated.

“You think she’d come forward leaving Wendy in the shadows still to make sure he couldn’t get out. She’ll never use Wendy to keep him in there,” Keith stated. “She wouldn’t put the light on her like that.”

“She would agree to a closed evidence entry regarding her paternity if it were the only way to keep him in there. We can get it entered as a sealed document based on who Miranda is and the other possible threats to Wendy should that information become public knowledge,” he replied.

“If she were sure, it wouldn’t go anywhere yeah, she might agree to it but that would be taking a huge risk,” Keith said wanting to keep them both safe.

“Even if the truth of paternity comes out there’s no way you’ll lose her, based on the circumstances of her birth it was Miranda’s choice to let you and Nicole adopt her. She signed the papers and Wendy is legally yours. Simmons can’t try anything without admitting his guilt, at the least she was fifteen when she got pregnant. He’ll be in jail for a long time with just that.”

“I agree with Julius. Let me look into this and I’ll get back to you. Take care of Miranda, none of us can afford to lose her in any capacity,” Andrew warned before hanging up.

“She’ll be okay. She might not want to do it, but she will for Wendy,” Julius said as his door opened and Michael came into his office.

“What’s going on?” he asked then took a deep breath hearing the latest possibilities. “For right now keep her out of the loop, yes, she needs to confront them, but she needs to feel confident in her decision to stay. We tell her before we know anything, and she will run because it’ll be showing her her worst fears all at once.”

“I don’t know how long I can keep it from her,” Keith said knowing it didn’t feel right.

“I understand that, and had she ran and not came back I’d go ahead and tell her, but she’s already coming around to you and Wendy loving her on her own. I didn’t expect her to stay that first day, but she has and for her that’s huge,” Michael stated. “Just let her enjoy being with you both for a little bit more before we tell her the happiness she’s finding is possibly being threatened.”

Keith agreed and fought against the need to come clean as the next week slid past them. Miranda went back to the office but came home to them each night looking calmer and more relaxed giving him some peace that Michael was right.

Two weeks passed and he woke up feeling something was missing. He looked around the room and didn’t see her; he hurried out of bed heading towards the kitchen. It was empty and he stopped breathing for a moment as he headed to Wendy’s room.

Her bed was half-made and Keith felt panic wash through him. Miranda wouldn’t have taken Wendy and run off, he knew she wouldn’t do that, but there were a hundred other reasons why they weren’t there running through his brain, and it was making it difficult to think. He headed back to the bedroom and opened the closet to grab his shoes. As he turned back towards the bed, he noticed the piece of paper on his nightstand, and he hurried over to it.

*Keith, Wendy and I woke up early. You looked so peaceful that we couldn’t wake you. We’ll be at the park for the morning. She’s looking into the summer soccer league and wanted to come to the meeting at eleven. Meet us there?
Miranda*

Keith sank down onto the bed covering his face with his hands letting out the sigh of relief. He glanced at the clock and realized how late he’d slept in. It wasn’t so surprising since he’d woken up two to three times a night the last two weeks to make sure Miranda was still there.

He changed and drove over to the park finding them out on the soccer field kicking the ball around with a few others. He smiled watching them. They were a lot alike, and it made it easier to see how much he'd been missing the last few years.

"Looks like things are going better," Steve said coming over as Becky joined the group on the field.

"She's even more than the first Miranda we had. Once she said she'd stay it was like she forced herself to believe us and as the days go by, she really is. Look at that smile, it's brighter than the ones she wore before," Keith said, loving that he could help bring that out of her, show everyone just how amazing she truly was.

"I'll take your word for it," he said hugging Tracy against him. "So, what's going on with you? Finding out who Wendy's biological father is and all?"

"I'm still ready to go kill the bastard but it makes the rest fall into place."

"Such as?" Tracy asked.

"You remember the first night after we found out about the group who'd hurt her? I mentioned there was a senator in the group."

"She shut down for a moment, was he?" she said softly.

"Her stepfather," he said with a nod. "She was Joelle Masters-Simmons."

"And he's the donor?" Tracy asked.

"Yeah, he's also trying to get the conviction overturned but Miranda doesn't know about that yet. Julius, Andrew the prosecutor who took over the case, Peter, Michael, and I are the only ones who do. They're investigating allegations about the jury right now. If it does get overturned, they're worried the only way to keep him behind bars is by Miranda coming forward."

"Letting the world know who she was. She's worried about someone finding out about Wendy, isn't she?" Steve

asked.

“And using her against her. There’s one way to guarantee he stays in jail and that’s by entering Wendy’s paternity into the court through a sealed document. We don’t want to do that to Miranda though so unless we know it’s the only option, we’re going to keep things to ourselves,” Keith warned them, wanting them prepared in case he needed them to take Wendy in an instant to help them.

“We won’t say a word. If she hadn’t investigated Pike she might never have come and found Wendy, or the truth here,” Tracy assured him.

“She came for Wendy first,” he admitted. “She ran into Luc, and he urged her to come see Wendy, find out why she wasn’t the same happy girl she’d been.”

“She was worried Wendy was being abused, wasn’t she?” Tracy asked.

“Initially it was her first fear but then she saw Becky and had them start the investigation to assure herself that Wendy, Becky and the others were safe. She was glad that Wendy hadn’t been hurt but it was too close to home for her I think.”

“We knew the girls had been a bit more withdrawn but they’re teens. Now they’re the same girls but just a bit warier of the world,” Tracy said watching them interact with Miranda. “So, what’s going to happen with you two?”

“If I had my way, we’d be getting married and possibly giving Wendy a sibling, but I can’t rush anything,” he stated smiling as Miranda kissed the top of Wendy’s head before jogging over to him. “Morning gorgeous, you should have woken me up.”

“Couldn’t, you were exhausted, and I know it’s because you’re worried, I’ll run out in the middle of the night, but I won’t, I promise I’d never leave without saying good-bye first.”

“I’d prefer if you stopped after ‘I promise to never leave’,” he countered pulling her into his arms for a hug kissing her gently.

“I’ll never disappear from your lives,” she offered knowing it was as much as she could do for right now.

“We’d never let you,” he said turning her around until she was resting back into his arms as they both watched Wendy play.

Miranda felt her phone vibrate in her pocket and pulled it out looking at the number.

“Work,” she said moving away from the crowd to answer. She hung up a few minutes later and went back to Keith as the dilemma shone through her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a girl we’ve been looking for the last few years that just showed up in a detention facility. She’s sixteen now and I need to go.”

“It’s okay Miranda. We both understand,” he said running a hand down her back.

“The facility is near Oakland; I haven’t been back there since I left. I brought them down without actually facing them.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” he asked.

“Yes, but I can’t let you. You need to stay here with Wendy. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone and...”

“And what Mire?”

“I don’t want her that close to there. My ‘mother’ was never charged with anything because no one other than me could corroborate the allegations against her and I won’t let her anywhere near Wendy.”

“You sound positively ferocious there Mama Bear,” he teased giving her a kiss.

“I’d never let her get hurt Keith.”

“I know baby, I know,” he said hugging her against his chest. “We’ll miss you. Let us know what’s going on.”

“I will. I promise I’m not running,” she said reaching up to give him another kiss.

“You’d never lie about work I know that I just wish we could be with you.”

“Me too,” she agreed as she headed back over to Wendy.

“Hey Mom,” Wendy said when she stalled her. “What’s up?”

“I have to go.”

“Go, as in leave?” Wendy asked as her face fell slightly.

“Just for work, we found a girl and I need to talk to her. I wouldn’t go if it weren’t extremely important Wen. I have to talk to her for all of us, okay?”

“What does that mean Mom?” Wendy asked her brows scrunching up in worry.

“It means that I’ve been looking for her for four years. She’s sixteen almost seventeen right now but when she disappeared, she was twelve going on thirteen.”

“Who is she?” Wendy asked seeing the necessity to go written on her face.

“My sister,” she answered giving her a light smile. “I never thought he’d turn on her the way he did me. She was his, but he did, I know it and now I have to get to her before they find out who she is to me.”

“Can I come with you?”

“I’d love for you to be there with me Wen, but I don’t want Angela anywhere near you.”

“Who’s Angela?” Wendy asked confused.

“My ‘mother’ and I won’t let her hurt you to hurt me,” Miranda promised her.

“I’ll be fine Mom. I’ve got you and Dad to protect me. Please, I don’t want to be away from you right now.”

“I don’t want to be away from you right now either, but I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, and you have this soccer

league meeting you wanted to check on.”

“It’ll be here next week. Do you know if she will be?” Wendy asked making her smile as she shook her head.

“No, I don’t,” she said knowing it was truly urgent she get there.

“Then let’s go, she’d be my aunt and close to my age, right? It’s not like I don’t know what happens out there already.”

“Let’s check with your dad,” Miranda said crossing over to Keith.

“What’s going on?” he asked with a smile.

“Wendy won’t let me go without her.”

“Why not Wen? She’ll be back,” Keith said rubbing her shoulder.

“You didn’t tell him who she was did you Mom?” Wendy questioned.

“No,” Miranda said making Wendy nod.

“Who is she?” he asked seeing the determination on Wendy’s face.

“My sister, she was almost three when I left.”

“He?” Keith asked quietly and she nodded.

“I’m positive. They said he had someone close that he kept a firm hand on; I can’t let her slip away from me again.”

“Okay, let’s go,” he said kissing the top of her head as he ushered them out of the park.

Chapter 15

“Are you sure you want to go in there alone?” Keith asked as she started to open the car door.

“For right now yeah, I don’t know if she’ll even talk to me, but I plan on helping her. I have to,” Miranda said taking a deep breath in order to do this.

“We know you do Mom. We just don’t want you doing it alone,” Wendy said leaning up between the seats.

“I’m not alone though; I’ve got both of you here with me and Julius is meeting me inside.”

“He is?” Keith said feeling a bit better.

“Yeah, I talked to him earlier and he was already on his way up. I’ll be back soon I hope,” she said giving them both kisses before she headed into the building.

It wasn’t the first juvenile detention center she’d been in to find a girl but this time it was her sister. A sister she really didn’t even know but she felt responsible for what happened to her all the same.

Miranda was ushered into a room, and she took a deep breath when they brought her in a few minutes later. “Alissa?”

“Who are you? The newest social worker from hell?” she said sitting down crossing her arms over her chest as she glared at her.

“No, my name’s Miranda Oliver I work with the Stay Young Foundation. I’m here to help.”

“Help...how?” Alissa sneered.

“By standing up to the people who hurt you, again,” she answered.

“Is that right *Miranda*?”

“It’s what I go by now Alissa. I can call you whatever you want me to,” she assured her.

“Why show up now? After fourteen years you think you could come back? Why?”

“To help you now. I was fifteen when I left. I was scared and hurting, and pregnant.”

“What!?” she said as her eyes grew huge. “No way, they had to use protection.”

“He didn’t with me though; he didn’t touch you, did he? He just let the others,” Miranda said seeing the answer in her eyes.

“From the time I was nine, I’d get to dress up and attend the parties. Then mommy dearest would take me back upstairs and some slime would come into my room. Then it all stopped when the party was busted, and I ran as fast as I could.”

“I wish you had stayed for just a bit longer Alissa. I was looking for you. I’ve been looking for you for the last four years,” she told her seeing the hardness surrounding Alissa. Miranda had adopted that too and it’d taken a long time to let it go.

“Like they looked for you for years after you left? Seems we both knew how to disappear pretty well. So, how’d you find me here? I’m not going by my real name,” Alissa stated.

“I had your prints put on a missing person’s file. If anyone picked you up, I’d know first. Why are you back here Alissa? It’s too close to her,” Miranda said seeing fear in her eyes.

“Well, I’m here to get some money to keep quiet. I’m... I’m pregnant and I can’t do it. I can’t have a baby.”

“How far along are you?” Miranda asked feeling for her.

“About ten weeks, I’ve got to get the money to abort it now.”

“Let me help Alissa, please. If you want an abortion, I can make sure you have one at a real clinic not some back street one where you can get hurt. If you want to carry it then give it up for adoption, I’ll help find the perfect set of parents,

or if you discover you want to keep it, I'll help you find a way to support yourself and the baby. All you have to do is let me help Alissa."

"Why would you want to help me? You got away," Alissa said her face stony.

"And hated myself when I realized that running didn't make any of it better. That's why I had to stop it all, put him in jail."

"But you left *her* out, you never came forward," her sister argued.

"I was the anonymous accuser. I didn't want him to find out that I was still alive let alone about..."

"About what?" Alissa asked when she stopped.

"About Wendy, I wasn't going to risk him finding her if he got off," she said honestly.

"You kept the baby?"

"No, I gave her to someone to take her to a good family, but life has a strange way of helping you correct your mistakes. I wanted her despite coming from him, but I couldn't take care of her and stay hidden. Four months ago, I ran into the person who'd taken her to her family, and he sent me to them. Her adopted mom had died three years ago, and we've gotten to know each other. She gave me a second chance and I'm hoping you will too. Let me be your sister now, let me help you and myself all at the same time."

"You really can help me get out of here? This place scares me Miranda," she said stumbling over her name a bit.

"It'll get easier and if you want to change yours, be called Rusty, I'll do it," she offered with a slight smile.

"I like the name Alissa, but I don't want that last name."

"What about Oliver? It was our grandmother's maiden name," she told her sister.

"Sounds good," Alissa said tensing as the door opened. She looked towards the person coming in and shrank down in

her seat a bit more.

“This is Julius, he’s one of the attorneys from the foundation.”

“You’re the guy who put him in jail,” Alissa said studying him as he moved over to sit next to her.

“I am; the judge signed the papers to release her to your custody Miranda.”

“Already?” Miranda asked giving him a smile.

“Already, they know the foundation is a good choice and if we’re willing to help, we know more of the background than they do. We’ll need to meet with him Monday morning to name a guardian, but he said we could use his chambers.”

“Perfect, so the question is, do you feel like coming with us?” she asked Alissa.

“Get out of here? Hell yeah,” she said with a chuckle. “There are some crazy girls here.”

“Well then, let’s go,” Miranda said knowing that Julius had worked magic if he’d gotten everything worked out this quickly. She watched the guard take Alissa to get her things then turned to him. “How’d you pull this off?”

“He knows the players involved. I said you wanted to help your sister now that you knew where she was, and he agreed. It was Shepherds.”

“That explains it,” she said glad no one else knew the truth behind it all yet. She waited in the lobby for Alissa to make her way back out and she grew a bit worried when she saw the outfit she wore.

“Fashion statement or did you lose your luggage?” Miranda questioned looking her over.

“Street chic, not all of us suddenly get wealthy.”

“I’m not criticizing, believe me I did some pretty horrible things while I was on my own, but I don’t think this is exactly the picture you want to portray is it? I’d rather Keith and Wendy not discover everything about you before you have a

chance to talk to them,” she stated taking off the long cardigan she wore over her tank tops. “Here, wear this and then we won’t have to worry about you being picked up between here and the car.”

“You brought your kid here with you?” Alissa asked in shock.

“She didn’t want to be apart for too long and I didn’t either. I know this will take some getting used to, but we can do it together,” she said holding up the cardigan for her.

Alissa finally turned and put it on before turning back to her with a smile. “Thanks, I guess you’re not so bad.”

“Gee thanks Alissa. Come on, let’s get to the hotel and you can get cleaned up. I’m sure between my bag and Wendy’s we can find something for you to wear so we can go shopping tomorrow. We’ll stay away from Oakland’s prime spots, but you need clothes for Monday and it’s just as easy to stay up here than it is to drive home to only come back.”

“Alright,” she agreed not resisting too much as Miranda slid an arm around her as they walked out.

Keith got out as they approached and paused beside the back door. Wendy hopped out and came towards them with a smile. “Wow, you really are sisters.”

“I don’t see it personally,” Alissa joked. “You on the other hand, you look so much like Jo...Miranda did when she was younger.”

“Other than having blonde hair and hazel eyes you mean?” Wendy asked.

“Yeah, I’m Alissa you must be Wendy and that’d make you Keith,” Alissa stated looking at him a bit warily.

“I am,” he said coming around to slide his arm around Miranda’s waist. “What magic did Julius manage to work?”

“A lot, we visit the judge Monday, but it should hopefully just be a formality. The judge knows our history.”

“You told him?” Alissa asked her looking at Keith.

“I’ve always known what happened to her, until recently not that it was about Miranda but we’re not about to let her slip away, are we Wen?” Keith said kissing Miranda’s temple.

“Never,” she agreed. “Mom’s the greatest.”

“Mom?” Alissa said laughing lightly. “You really do work fast, don’t you Sis?”

“I don’t know *Sis*, do I?”

“You got me. So, what are you going to do with me?”

“Keep you, come on let’s go get comfortable,” she said opening the car door for them. Wendy slid across the backseat and Alissa followed her as Keith opened the front door for her. He slid his hand into hers on the way back to the hotel and she hoped it would all work out.

Monday came faster than they expected, and she walked out of the judge’s office in relief when he granted her guardianship and the name change for Alissa. She now had everything she needed to set Alissa up for a new life.

They stopped in at the apartment and Miranda smiled seeing Alissa look around it in shock.

“This place is incredible.”

“I prefer the house,” Miranda said making Keith and Wendy smile.

“You live with them? Uh how’s this going to work?”

“There’s plenty of room at the house,” Keith offered. “We have a room over the garage that’s a bit more private or else you can just take one down the hallway from Wendy’s.”

“You’d seriously let me move in with you? You’re not worried I’ll just steal everything and run away again?”

“No,” he answered simply. “You’re too much like Mire; you’ve beaten yourself up enough over the mistakes you’ve made. We’ll find a way to all live together.”

“Why don’t we head on over to the house now and that way you can see what it’s like then decide,” Miranda suggested as she grabbed another bag of items she needed.

“You’re almost moved out Mom,” Wendy teased. “So, when are you moving in for real? Getting married, oh, maybe having a baby?”

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” Alissa said hurrying out.

“Did I say something wrong?” Wendy asked as Alissa disappeared.

“Let me check on her,” she said kissing her head. “Lissa?”

“Sorry I just...I can’t do it Miranda. I see you with Wendy and I know that won’t be me. I can’t breathe.”

“Take your time Lissa. Everything will work out the way it should,” she offered knowing it wasn’t really true, but she could always help. “If you want, I can set up an appointment for the doctor...what?” she said when Alissa shook her head.

“I lied.”

“Lied about what?”

“I’m not pregnant, not anymore at least. I was going back to get money to try and get out of doing what I was,” Alissa said the pain in her eyes showing it was the truth.

“Hooking?” she asked wrapping her arms around her sister when she nodded. “Shh, it’s okay Lis. You lost the baby?”

“It’s when I realized I couldn’t do it anymore. You’re so much stronger than I am.”

“Believe me, I’m not that strong. I tried to kill myself when I was nineteen because I hated myself for giving up Wendy, for not knowing if she was being taken care of the way I hoped. I get it, Lissa, I do. You are not that girl anymore; you don’t have to ever be her again and you will learn what it feels like to breathe again. I promise you will Lissa.”

“I’m sorry I lied. I just thought you’d be more willing to help if you thought I were.”

“Don’t worry Lissa, we’ll get through this together, all of us together. We are a family.”

“So, when are you guys getting married because that man is so in love with you, he basically is a puppy,” Alissa said wiping her eyes.

“We’re not getting married. I can’t even think of getting married it’d be too strange with everything going on.”

“Stranger than finding your sixteen almost seventeen-year-old sister after fourteen years?”

“Much stranger, you I know how to help and handle. Keith and marriage...”

“You wouldn’t be in charge or know how to lead. You’d have to follow for once and you’re scared that you’ll mess up, aren’t you?” Alissa asked making her nod as she acknowledged she was right. “Let him lead, he’s been married, pretty decently too if Wendy’s anything to go by; you love him, don’t you?”

“Against my better judgment...yeah.”

“What?” Alissa said studying her for a minute. “You fell for him without him knowing who you were, so you thought he’d tell you to leave once he found out the truth?”

“Pretty smart for a runaway who wasn’t even in high school yet,” she said trying to ignore answering fully.

“It’s in the Oliver genes. So, tell him how you feel, get married, and let him help you through the parts that scare you. Wendy is great, you’re great, and Keith is really great to love you both having full disclosure.”

“Why don’t we head to the house and check it out huh? We can figure the rest out later.”

“Alright but I’m serious Miranda. I really think you should just take the plunge and marry the man, think about giving Wendy a little brother or sister, so she can be an awesome big sister like you.”

“If I were so awesome, I wouldn’t have let you get hurt in the first place.”

“That’s not on you; you did what you had to in order to survive and so did I. Now we’re together and he’s in jail.”

“One thing we can be happy about at least. Let’s go,” she said wrapping her arm around her.

The drive to the house was quiet but the moment they arrived the quiet disappeared and Wendy drug Alissa all over the place showing her around. It was very entertaining to Miranda, and she snuggled down on the couch with Keith until it was time to make dinner. She checked in on Wendy and Alissa listening to music in Wendy’s room then went into the kitchen with a bright smile.

“You okay?” Keith asked sliding his arms around her waist.

“Everything feels good like this is where I’m supposed to be, what I’m supposed to do. Being with you and Wendy, it’s the best feeling in the world.”

“For me too Mire, I love you baby, so much.”

“I...I think I’ve fallen in love with you too Keith. I just...I’ve never felt this way about anyone. Wendy and Alissa are different...this...it’s...”

“Right, perfect, undeniable?” he offered siding a hand behind her head.

“All of it,” she agreed settling into his kiss with ease. She lowered her forehead to rest against his chin as she let out the soft sigh. “Oh yeah, I have.”

“You have what?” he asked confused.

“Fallen in love with you,” she stated meeting his gaze until he kissed her again and her eyes fluttered shut with happiness.

Chapter 16

“Morning,” Keith said coming into the kitchen smiling as she moved the pancake to a plate before turning around to him. “Why do you insist on getting up so early all the time for?”

“Mmm.” Miranda sighed resting against his chest contently. “Well, I have about an hour drive each morning and I like feeding my loves before I go.”

“You could always work from home again,” he suggested sliding his hands down her sides making her wish Wendy and Alissa weren’t going to be up any minute.

“With both Wen and Lissa here? I’d never get anything done. They are so alike it’s crazy.”

“But it’s amazing too,” he stated giving her a kiss. “You’re amazing Mire.”

“Can you believe we’ve all been here almost a month with no bloodshed or blowups?” she asked turning back to finish the pancakes.

“It’s coming but we’ll deal with it,” he assured her rubbing her back simply because he liked being close to her. “You know there’s an extra office in our building; it’s right next to mine and since I’ve been helping you as much as my outside practice you could just work from there at least for most of the week, go into the main office when absolutely needed.”

“Is that so?” Miranda smiled knowing it meant they’d be together much more. “You promise to behave during business hours?”

“I can try. You’re far too distracting sometimes.”

“You say the sweetest things Keith,” she teased because she wanted to wrap her arms around him and kiss him until they were back in bed.

“Only for you, so what do you say? We can carpool even, lunch together to make sure you put the rest of the weight back on,” he stated, his hands resting on her hips.

“Keith I’m okay, I’m back at ninety-nine. I haven’t been running with the girls during practice anymore and you all certainly make sure that I stay well fed.”

“I just don’t want you hurting yourself because you’re worried about everyone else and not yourself. We can’t do this without you Mire; we want you healthy and happy.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m both. I’m not going anywhere, as scared as I am that it’ll all disappear, walking away from Wen and you would drive me back to that place I was at when I was nineteen. I can’t go there again. I won’t go there again. I love you Keith, I never really believed I could feel this way, but I do and it’s all because of you.”

“You changed our lives for the better baby, again and again,” he said kissing her gently as he cupped her cheek. “I adore you; I love you, and I want you here always.”

“Oh, come on, it’s not even seven yet,” Alissa groused as she and Wendy came into the kitchen. “Couldn’t you two do that in the bedroom?”

“Now that’s a very good idea,” Keith whispered into her ear putting a slight red tinge in her cheeks.

“Dad! What on earth did you just say to make Mom blush?” Wendy asked looking between them.

“Not a thing sweetie,” Miranda answered turning back around to turn the stove off as she carried the plate of pancakes over to the table.

“Uh huh, so you two don’t want me to take Wendy to the mall for the day?” Alissa questioned.

“If you two want to go that’s fine,” Keith stated sliding his arms around Miranda’s waist bringing her back up against his chest. “Mire and I are going to look over the extra office in the building and see if it’ll work for her to use so she doesn’t have to drive an hour into the city every day.”

“Really? You’d be right next to Dad?” Wendy asked smiling at the idea.

“I’ll still have to go in on Tuesdays for the afternoon practices I run.”

“But you could always wait until lunch to go in,” Keith suggested. “There’d be less traffic on the road going into the city then.”

“Sounds nice,” she agreed.

“So, the mall?” Alissa said looking between her and Keith.

“Sure, we can drop you off on our way over to the office,” he stated, and she nodded sending a message to Michael and Cassie to let them know where she’d be for the day.

The office was great, and she made a list of what she’d need for it as she went back to the house to change before going to meet the girls at the mall. She found them coming out of the hair salon and she smiled at the un-streaked mass on Alissa’s head.

“What do you think Sis?”

“I think you look amazing Lis. I’ve taken the rest of the day off; what do you say the three of us do a bit of shopping and pampering hmm?”

“Such as?” Wendy asked with a grin.

“Manis, pedis, you’ve already gotten your hair done and it looks great,” she added knowing Wendy had cut off about an inch and a half.

“I thought it looked the exact same,” Wendy said a bit worried.

“It’s the perfect cut for you Wen, but it’s a little shorter than it was this morning. So shall we?” she asked the two and spent the next couple hours laughing with them until they got to a store where Alissa went to try on an outfit.

“Oh no, you are not wearing that Lissa,” Miranda warned when Alissa came back out.

“What’s wrong with it?” Alissa asked looking in the mirror.

“One—it’s not age appropriate. Two—there’s no way I’m letting my seventeen-year-old sister wear that to school.”

“Why do I even have to go back? I’m going to be a seventeen-year-old freshman.”

“No, you’re not. We’ve already gotten the test results back and you’ve earned most of the lower credits. Between that and what you’ve done the last month you’ll be on track,” she reassured her. “Come on Lis, is this really the image you want to portray?”

Alissa took another look in the mirror and sighed shaking her head. “It is more street than chic, isn’t it?”

“What about this?” Wendy said pulling out a new outfit for her.

“We’ll see,” Alissa stated heading back into the changing room. This time when she came out, she looked seventeen and they all agreed it was perfect.

They stopped in the food court for a late lunch and Miranda laughed to herself as they headed over to look at the cell phone accessories while she stood in line for the Chinese. She sent glances towards them every now and then and saw them talking with a couple guys. She recognized one from the pictures Wendy had shown her as the boy she had a crush on and the other appeared to be his older brother from the looks of it.

Miranda took the tray of the food and headed to an empty table setting it down to wait for them to finish. She wasn’t going to embarrass either of them by butting in when it wasn’t needed. Alissa could handle herself and Wendy wasn’t about to admit to liking Chase.

“That’s a lot of food for one person,” a voice said, and she reluctantly pulled her gaze from the girls.

“Not for one,” she replied seeing the person standing there. He was a little younger than her she figured especially from the way he seemed to not care about the back off tone she used.

“I don’t see anyone else,” he said leaning onto the table.

“I do, look you seem like a guy who knows when to scam and right now is one of those times.”

“Who’s going to make me huh? A guy could control you with one hand.”

“Back the hell off,” a new voice stated from behind her, and she let the worry slip away. “You okay baby?” Keith added sliding his hands down her arms as he leaned over to kiss her cheek when she turned her face towards him.

“Perfect now that you’re here,” she told him seeing Alissa and Wendy hurry over.

“Dad,” Wendy said looking between him and the new guy. “Everything okay Mom?”

“Mom?” the guy said before turning his gaze on Alissa. “Well, she’s too old, she’s too young, but how about you?”

“I’d suggest you walk away while you can still do it under your own steam,” Keith warned.

“You’re disgusting creep,” Alissa added taking a seat beside her while Wendy stood behind her chair. “And FYI I’m seventeen so I’m also too young for a skeeze like you.”

Keith stood at the end of the table until he’d left then turned back to them with a light grin. “I think I’m going to have to watch out when the three of you are out and about.”

“Well, if you put a nice big ring on Mom’s finger maybe jerks like that wouldn’t come over and hit on her,” Wendy stated making her laugh.

“Oh, they’ll still come over,” Keith said giving Miranda a kiss before dropping one on Wendy’s head. “You girls are too beautiful to resist.”

“Maybe you need another male around the house,” Alissa suggested. “Babies tend to make jerks run for the hills.”

“Would you two please stop marrying me off and knocking me up?” Miranda said looking between her daughter and sister unable to meet Keith’s gaze.

“Mire,” he said, and she finally lifted her head back to him seeing the answer in it.

“Keith, don’t,” she said quietly as he pulled her up from the chair sliding his arm around her waist.

“Why not? I want to be with you forever, but it’s up to you baby. What do you want?” he asked keeping his gaze on hers.

“You, our family,” she admitted unable to look away from the truth in his eyes.

“What about the idea of marrying me? Does that still send you into a panic?”

“Not so much,” she said knowing Alissa was right, it was time to take the passenger seat and let him drive their relationship.

“And having a baby? If it were to happen?”

Miranda closed her eyes to stop the answer from bursting out. Keith gently cupped her face and she reopened them as she smiled softly. “I...it’s everything I’ve ever dreamt of having.”

“Do you want to have it with me, in the very near future not just as a dream?” he asked praying she said yes.

“Keith, you’re not asking me what I think you are right here are you?” she said feeling slightly breathless.

“I am in a way,” he answered looking over at Wendy and Alissa who were grinning wildly. “What do you say we make this family permanent? You, me, Wendy and Alissa, and anyone else who comes along?”

“Dad, you’ve got to say the words,” Wendy stated.

“I agree Keith,” Alissa added. “A real question for her to make a real decision to finally.”

“Well, seems they want to hear the words Mire, do you?” he asked seeing the flicker of pulse on her neck.

“Yes,” slipped from her lips from somewhere and she couldn’t stop it.

Keith closed his eyes for a moment hearing the first confirmation and he smiled. “Miranda Oliver, will you marry me? Be mine, ours, forever?”

Miranda felt herself shake the tiniest bit but for some reason it was the easiest answer she’d ever given, “Yes, I’d love it.”

“Then I guess you’ll be needing this.” Keith slid his hand into his pocket taking out the ring he’d been carrying around the last two weeks. He showed it to her, and she bit down on her lips trying to stop the stunned gasp that worked its way up her throat.

“Holy cow Dad,” Wendy said grinning from ear to ear as they saw it.

“If you don’t like it...” Keith said when Miranda stayed quiet.

She shook her head as she reached out and kissed him. “It’s gorgeous Keith, absolutely incredible.”

“Should we see if it fits?” he asked feeling like shouting to the world that she’d agreed.

“Yeah,” she agreed smiling at him. “Perfect fit.”

“Just like us,” he replied, “all of us.”

“Oh my god, this is too cool,” Wendy said hopping up and hurrying over to them. She threw her arms around them both and hugged tightly.

“Come on Lis, you’re part of this family too,” Keith stated, and she got up sliding an arm around Miranda and Wendy hugging them both. He dropped a kiss on her head and Miranda saw the tears that hit Alissa.

“You’re alright with this, aren’t you?” she asked Alissa.

“Yeah, I just really want this someday but after everything...”

“You’ll find it, I promise.”

“With everything I’ve done, I don’t think it’ll be possible,” Alissa said, and Miranda knew her sister would have to find the path to it herself, she couldn’t do more than help.

“It will be Lissa; you’ll be fine. We’ll be right here with you the entire time,” she said catching Keith’s gaze and he nodded in agreement.

“Can I tell Becky?” Wendy asked making them all smile.

“You can tonight at practice,” Miranda said as they ate which only made her giddier.

By the time they all finally got over to the park Wendy was bouncing up and down in her seat. Wendy saw Becky out by the field and practically jumped out of the car before it stopped and rushed towards her. Miranda and Keith laughed as they saw her hugging Becky and the odd expression that crossed Becky’s face as it happened.

“What on earth is up with you?” Becky asked laughing once she’d untangled Wendy from her.

“Well...” Wendy said as they reached the group.

“Go ahead,” Keith said seeing the nod from Miranda.

“Mom and Dad are getting married!” she said, and Becky grew nearly as giddy as Wendy still was.

“Congratulations,” Steve said shaking hands with Keith before giving her a hug.

“This is the best news possible,” Tracy added hugging Keith then turning to her with an extra-long one. “We’re so happy for you all.”

“Thanks,” Miranda said smiling before shoos the girls off to practice. She sat contently with Keith as the girls started and laughed when Wendy drug Alissa over to play with her.

“Did we hear correctly?” Kaitlin asked coming over. “You two are getting married?”

“We are,” Keith answered taking her hand into his showing them the ring.

“Geesh brother, that’s a rock,” her husband Larry joked.

“We hope this means you’ll be coaching the girls again. They love you Miranda,” Kaitlin stated. “You connect so well with them.”

“I think Wendy would never speak to me if I didn’t,” she answered.

“Oh, I don’t think she’d be able to manage that one,” Keith said kissing her temple.

“I can’t believe how much she and your sister look alike,” Kaitlin said stopping when they laughed slightly. “What?”

“We thought everyone from the team already knew. There’s a reason why Wendy looks like Mire and Alissa,” Keith told her. “Nicole and I took in Wendy when she was two days old and adopted her.”

“You mean,” Kaitlin said in shock looking between them.

“Wendy’s my daughter. I was sixteen when I had her and running from some people like Pike. I didn’t know where she was until I ran into Luc by accident helping another girl through the foundation. He was Nicole’s teenage best friend’s brother. He helped deliver Wendy and then brought her here to them.”

“Oh, my goodness, I never would have guessed. To look at you...”

“I don’t like wearing the label but when I met Wendy I couldn’t leave, then this guy stole my heart and made me believe in happy endings again,” Miranda said leaning into Keith.

“When Wendy and I found out she was her mom it was like everything finally fell into place,” Keith added. “I was already in love with her and knowing how hard she fought to

survive and the strength it took to make sure Wendy was safe, I could never let her go.”

“You’re going to make me cry,” Kaitlin said giving them a smile. “We’re really happy for you all. You both deserve it.”

“I think so too,” she agreed for once entirely at peace with the path her life had taken.

Chapter 17

“What about this one?” Alissa offered pulling out a dress from the rack.

“I’m thinking something a bit simpler,” Miranda replied seeing the massive skirt on it.

“I think you’d look awesome in it Mom,” Wendy stated hugging her as Carol and Tracy checked the suggestion over.

“It’s a gorgeous dress but we just want something simple Wen,” she said seeing the door open and Michael come in. “You’re late.”

“Sorry, got stuck in a meeting,” he said kissing her cheek.

“Please tell me this isn’t the groom,” the consultant stated hurrying over.

“I think I should feel hurt about that comment,” Michael joked.

“Sorry, I just meant the groom’s not supposed to see the dress until the day; it’s bad luck.”

“I think we’ve all had enough bad luck to fill the city,” Alissa said with a laugh as Becky and Wendy went to look at another dress.

“True and I’m not the groom, just the father figure in Miranda’s life,” Michael assured the girl. “So, what have I missed?”

“Not much, we got started a bit late,” Miranda told him before turning back to the consultant. “So, as I said, it’s going to be a low-key ceremony, family and close friends in a garden setting. I’d prefer something without a train since it’ll just drag on the ground.”

“But something that will still say sassy,” Alissa added with a wink at her.

“Let me pull a few dresses and we’ll see what you think,” the girl stated moving away as Miranda sighed giving the group a look.

“What? You aren’t going to walk down the aisle wearing a white sack,” Alissa countered.

“Just behave,” she warned and when she saw the choices the girl had pulled, she knew they were exactly what she was looking for and not over the top.

“I forgot to ask what your budget was. Today has been so crazy but all of these are under five thousand.”

“Well, I’d prefer not to spend as much as a car on it but I’m flexible on budget,” Miranda admitted trying on the first one. She studied her reflection in the mirror and shook her head.

“Let’s go with the next one,” Megan said helping her out of it. It was a bit better, but she knew it wasn’t the one she wanted. The third was gorgeous and she went out to show her group.

“Mom, oh my gosh, you look awesome.”

“You do Mire,” Alissa agreed. “So, what do you think of it?”

“It’s gorgeous but I don’t know. The first two were okay but not quite what I saw, this one’s closer,” she told them.

“I think you look beautiful Miranda,” Michael said, and she saw the truth in his eyes.

“Thanks.”

“You’re not in love with it, are you?” Carol asked.

“No, but I do think it’s the right direction,” she said wanting their opinion on it.

“Absolutely,” Tracy agreed.

“Totally Mom.”

“Let me go pull a couple others and we’ll see what you think of them,” Megan offered, and she followed her out of the

room to slip out of the dress.

Megan brought in three more two she liked while the other she didn't bother trying on and she went out to show them one of the other two discarding one after she'd tried it on. "Well?"

"Stunning," Carol said.

"It's amazing, Miranda," Becky added.

"It is, but there's still something missing, isn't there?" Michael asked.

"I guess; I just don't know," she answered stopping when a man approached them.

"I couldn't help but overhear and I think I've got the answer in our vault," he said studying her. "It's a one of a kind that's never been on the floor. Would you like to see it?"

"Sure," she agreed and when he came into the room almost ten minutes later, she prepared herself to be disappointed. The moment he pulled it out she fell for it and hoped it'd fit. "It looks tiny."

"You are tiny," Megan replied helping her into it. She slid the zipper up and Miranda's breath stalled feeling it settle perfectly into place. Miranda turned around to see her reflection and a smile settled on her lips.

"You like it?" Megan asked as Joseph stepped into the doorway.

"Yeah, I love it," she stated gladly going back out to show the others. She paused before they reached the group asking the question she knew would come up, "How much is it?"

"Twelve," Megan said checking the tag.

"Okay, I can do that," she stated feeling a bit wasteful using that much for it when she could do so many other things with the amount.

Miranda moved out onto the podium and let the dress settle as the others stared in silence. She turned around to

them waiting for their opinions. “So, what do you think of this one?”

“It’s the one, isn’t it Mire?” Alissa asked with a smile.

“Yeah, it is,” she agreed. “Wen?”

“I love it Mom. It’s like it was made for you.”

“It’s perfect Mire,” Michael stated, and the others agreed.

She couldn’t stop smiling until Becky started crying and she moved over to her crouching down in front of her bringing her face up to hers with a gentle hand. “Becky what’s wrong sweetie?”

“Nothing, I just...you really meant it didn’t you? That day you said it would be possible to move past it and seeing you in that...”

“Ah Becky, it is possible sweetie. It’ll take time and hard work, but it will happen. One day it will be you wearing a gorgeous dress waiting to get married,” Miranda assured her kissing her forehead. Becky slid her arms around her neck and buried her head into her shoulder and she hugged her back reaching out a hand to squeeze Tracy’s knowing it was a good thing to happen.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Megan said a couple minutes later as she wiped away Becky’s tears giving her a smile. “The dress designer is actually here. Joseph went to find him if you’d like?”

“I’d love to meet him,” she said handing Becky a Kleenex kissing the top of her head as Wendy came over to hug them both.

“Is everything alright? Did we need more tissues?” Megan asked concerned.

“We’re good,” Becky said giving them all smiles.

“Miranda, this is Daniel Pruet the dress designer,” she heard Joseph say and she turned around slowly and stood up as shock filled her.

“Danny?”

“Jo, oh my god,” he said crossing over to her. “How?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted returning the hug he pulled her into. She shook her head staring at him as he took in her, the dress, and the group behind them. “Wen, come here sweetie.”

Wendy walked over a bit hesitant, wrapping her arm around her waist as she looked up at Danny.

“Danny this is Wendy, my daughter. Wen this is an old friend of mine. None of us would be here without him,” she said giving him a smile before looking down at her. “He helped me leave town and his mom is the one who delivered you.”

“Wow,” Wendy said relaxing into her.

“This is incredible,” Danny said looking at them then back behind them towards Alissa. “Is that?”

“Lissa, yeah she lives with us now.”

“I thought you gave Wendy to Luc to be adopted. He and Mom refused to tell me where she was because they knew I’d try and find you to help and if I knew where she was, I’d have done more than I did.”

“I’m marrying Keith, Wendy’s father.”

“Incredible, and you in that dress; it’s finally found its owner after all these years.”

“What do you mean?” Alissa asked.

“I made that dress for Jo...”

“It’s Miranda now,” she said when he paused. “Everyone here knows the story.”

“We both helped each other I think,” Danny stated. “You helped me figure me out and I helped you leave but I could never get you out of my head. So about five years ago I sat down and started drawing the sketch for this dress, picturing you in it wishing you would find the fairytale happiness I had.”

“You’re saying you drew this dress for Mom and now, she’s actually going to wear it,” Wendy said laughing. “Undeniable, isn’t it, Mom?”

“It is,” she agreed.

“So, what are you doing now?” Danny asked.

“I run the Stay Young Foundation,” she told him, watching shock run across his face.

“You’re kidding. You took him down? Mom tried to get someone to believe her after you left but no one would.”

“It was hard to get someone to take the first step towards it, but we did.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt but we do have another appointment coming in,” Megan said coming back over to them. “Have you made a decision about the dress?”

“I’ll take it,” she said smiling at the strange twists and turns in life.

“She will,” Danny agreed, “but it’s a gift. I’ll donate a dress to replace it but this one has always been meant for one person. Now that she’s found it everything has finally fallen into place.”

Miranda gave him a smile before going to change and when she got back to the showroom, she saw the group had a couple extra members. “Oh Danny, she’s yours?”

“This is Julia, our daughter,” he said as Joseph came over to them.

“She’s adorable,” she said smiling at her then at Gina who hugged her tightly.

“Wendy filled us in on what’s been going on, how you found them. You have no idea how happy I am that you’re safe,” Gina said cupping her face gently.

“So, I take it this is what you meant by helping you figure out you?” Miranda said giving Danny and Joseph smiles.

“It is, we’ve been together seven years now. Thanks to Mom’s help we now have this gorgeous girl,” he said, and she

turned to Joseph needing to know.

“The dress suggestion?”

“I was positive it was you; Danny had an old photo of you two he kept, and I needed to drag the time out until he’d get here.”

“Thank you,” she said feeling the tears hit her.

“You okay, honey?” Michael asked rubbing her back and she nodded.

“It feels like things are finally going to be good, perfect’s a bit too much, but look around us Michael. Did you ever expect this when we met ten years ago?”

“No, I never expected you to last a year,” he admitted kissing the top of her head, “but I’m very, very glad you proved me wrong again and again.”

“So, when’s the wedding?” Gina asked watching Michael a bit more.

“Two months, we’re holding it in the gardens.”

“Then there’s a reception at the Hoyt,” Wendy added.

“Before Mire and Keith head off on a weeklong honeymoon,” Alissa tagged on. “We keep telling them we’ll be fine on our own for longer than that, but they won’t listen to us.”

“You’re living with Miranda?” Gina asked.

“We’re one big happy family with a lot of dysfunctions thrown in,” Alissa said with a laugh. “I’ve been there for about two months and despite being forced to go to school now it’s the best place I’ve ever been. Mire’s amazing, Wen’s like a sister, and Keith...he’s shown all of us what a real guy is like. How they should be a father, a boyfriend, soon to be husband, and friend.”

“I’d love to meet him sometime,” Gina said smiling at them. “Luc told me the family he took Wendy to was great but a part of me still worried.”

“Uncle Luc and Aunt Kendra are coming in for the wedding. You could come see them there,” Wendy said glancing up at her.

“Absolutely,” Miranda agreed.

“We’d love to,” Danny stated, and she gave them her information not wanting to lose them this time. “It was so good to see you. You have no idea how good.”

“I think I do. Thank you, Danny, for everything. Wendy probably wouldn’t be here, and neither would I if you hadn’t helped me,” she said kissing his cheek before they left.

Miranda relaxed on the couch with Keith that night nearly laying on his chest as she looked up at him with a smile unable to stop.

“Okay not that I’m complaining but what’s going on? You three came home thrilled and the girls ran into their rooms to let us do this.”

“Well, I found my dress,” she started with, and he smiled back at her.

“You did? I didn’t see you carrying anything large in, so I take it you had to have it altered?”

“There are some slight and I mean very slight alterations needed and Danny said he’d do them personally,” she told him waiting to see if he’d remember the name.

“Danny...cotton candy Danny?” he asked making her feel incredibly special knowing he’d really listened when she’d been talking.

“Yeah,” she said telling him what’d happened.

“Mire that’s incredible. So, is this smile for finding your old friend or the dress?”

“Both and because, this is going to sound insane but it’s as though everything happened the way it should have, to lead us all to this spot, for us all to be happy, feel loved.”

“You mean them finding out about Danny and getting his mom to lose her job which prompted you to confide in him

when you found out about Wen.”

“Which led me to leaving and finding Gina because she was the only one, I trusted to help bring Wendy to the world, Luc being the person there, and bringing her to you and Nicole.”

“To then running into him when you were helping another girl, which brought you back to Wendy and me,” he said giving her a light kiss. “I never want you to hurt Mire. If things were entirely different, I’d never want any of that to have happened to you, but it did and now you’re here.”

“And happy, staying, I know the evil out there which makes everything in here worth it Keith. I can trust you to always catch me, hold me, love me. I didn’t think you would after finding out the truth, but I am so happy that you did.”

“A part of me has always loved you Mire, now that love’s for the most astonishing woman who has the biggest heart. You’ve brought so many people together, created so many possibilities and I can’t begin to imagine my life without you in it. I don’t want to imagine my life without you in it.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Why would I when everything I want is right here?” Miranda asked snuggling down against him more. She knew she should go make dinner, but she didn’t want to move. She wanted to stay in his arms forever feeling the joy and love around her.

“Mmm, two months is a long time. So many things can happen,” he said running his hands down her sides as he thought of the ongoing investigation Julius and Andrew were watching carefully. Nothing had come out of it so far, but they were only halfway through the jury members, and he didn’t want any of it to affect them in the future. He wanted her to be as happy as she was right now.

“I’m not going to change my mind about us Keith. You and Wendy own my heart. I couldn’t begin to leave either of you now.”

“Good.” He smiled kissing her again. “I love you baby.”

“You too,” she replied meaning it completely.

Chapter 18

“Mom, are you almost ready?” Wendy asked peeking around the corner of the room partition in the room they were dressing in. “Oh wow.”

“You like the changes Danny made?” Miranda said loving the added touches.

“You look amazing Mom. I can’t believe it’s almost time.”

“Why are you so nervous for, hmm? You have nothing to worry about.

“Except for tripping on my own feet; so, are we ready?” Wendy asked.

“We’re ready,” she agreed moving out into the middle of the room. She smiled seeing her friends there and it was a wonderful feeling.

“Miranda, you look gorgeous,” Tracy said hugging her as they headed to the doors.

“Thanks, everyone ready?” she asked trying to tame down her own nerves.

“All set Mom,” Wendy assured her as they grabbed their bouquets.

Miranda watched as they headed down the aisle and felt Michael rest his hand on her back.

“Last chance to change your mind.”

“Not going to happen,” she promised him. She’d fought for everything in her life, and this was something she had to fight the hardest for because she was fighting herself.

They started up the aisle and her gaze connected with Keith’s. He looked amazing in his suit, and she smiled seeing the look in his eyes as he watched her. They stopped in front of him, and Michael hugged her as he kissed the top of her head.

“I am so proud of you Mire, so proud honey,” he said squeezing her hand as he placed it in Keith’s. “It’s your turn to take care of her now, protect her.”

“Always Michael,” he promised as she turned further towards him. “You are breathtaking, baby.”

“Thank you,” she said softly stepping forward with him.

The ceremony was short and as he slid the band onto her finger her heart burst open, but it was nothing compared to the kiss after the announcement of them as husband and wife. She expected to feel panic, second guessing but she didn’t. All she felt was love for him and Wendy.

The reception flew by, and Miranda changed into a pair of jeans and her favorite tank tops and cardigan before slipping into the car with well wishes all around.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going?” she asked kissing him.

“You’ll see,” he stated holding her against him.

Miranda knew he’d never do anything to hurt her, and she slid her legs over his lap as she kissed him. They continued until they reached the airport and he led her over to a terminal for New York. “Keith, New York?”

“Trust me baby, I know you’d never be able to relax in New York. It’s just a layover,” he promised, and she did, resting against him as they flew to New York. They got off the plane and he distracted her until it was time to get on the plane and she couldn’t believe the end destination.

“Keith are you kidding?” she said smiling at him.

“Never baby,” he stated pulling her into his arms for a kiss. “You like the surprise?”

“I love it almost as much as you,” she assured him as they headed to their seats. “This is incredible, thank you.”

“You’re very welcome baby. I want to make sure you relax, let everyone else deal with the foundation we’re simply going to enjoy ourselves.”

“I told everyone to only call if it was a dire emergency. Michael and Julius are in charge, so we should be good. A week in Athens, I don’t know if I’m going to want to explore or stay in bed all week.”

“How about half and half?” he suggested kissing her as the flight attendants began their intro.

The flight was all night and she slept in his arms not about to move away from him. Now that they were married, she never wanted to be away from him though she knew they couldn’t be together constantly.

When they finally arrived, the sights mesmerized her, and they explored for a bit before heading to their hotel and ordered in dinner. It was a late dinner and extremely cold before they got around to it, but she didn’t mind.

Miranda sighed pushing the plate onto the nightstand. “Best food ever.”

“It was but that may be because we were eating it naked in bed wrapped around each other. We can’t exactly do this at home.” Keith laughed kissing her neck as he moved her hair off her shoulders. He continued down her back and this time when he kissed her scars she didn’t pull away.

“Keith, don’t stop,” she said, and he slid back up beside her turning her over to kiss her deeply. “Mmm.”

“Mmm, is right,” he agreed before kissing her repeatedly until they were lost in each other.

“Can you believe Christmas is in a few days?” Wendy laughed happily as they finished wrapping presents.

“Oh, I can, seeing all of this,” Miranda agreed opening the door carrying the stack out to put under the tree. She straightened feeling a slight roll in her stomach and fought to keep it from showing.

“Are you two finally finished?” Keith asked looking at the growing piles. “We have guests coming in about an hour.”

“We’re finished,” she said leaning into his hold. “Don’t we look ready for guests?”

“You always do,” he agreed lowering his voice to whisper in her ear, “how are you feeling?”

“Okay, I’m serious Keith a bit nauseous but other than that I’m thrilled.”

“I am too, baby. Wendy and Lissa will be too once we tell them.”

“Isn’t it a bit early to do? We’re not even at ten weeks yet. We don’t want anything to happen and disappoint everyone.”

“Nothing is going to happen baby, Gina said everything looked fine. The baby is growing, you’re not feeling horrible or losing weight. After everything we’ve been through the universe wouldn’t hurt us like that.”

“We’ll tell the girls later, for Christmas,” she suggested, and he made sure she stuck to her word. They finished opening presents and he looked at her long and hard making her smile at the silent communication going on between them.

“We do have one more present, if anyone’s interested,” Miranda said turning to look at the girls. “It’s not something that you can open, and it’ll be another six and a half months before it gets here.”

“Oh my god,” Wendy said as she and Alissa looked at each other then back at them. “Oh my god,” she said again, squealing as she raced over to them. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.”

“Wen, breathe sweetie,” she laughed hugging her. “I take it you’re okay with this news?”

“Absolutely,” she said nodding. “I mean we are talking about you and Dad having a baby, right?”

“Yes Wen, we’re pregnant,” she said accepting hugs from her and Alissa as Keith pulled her over his lap.

“Best Christmas ever,” Wendy said tilting her head to smile at them.

“Just wait until next year, we’ll have a five-month-old crying baby here,” Keith stated putting his hands over her stomach. “Right now, he’s growing safe and sound right here.”

“He? Even I know it’s too soon to know what it is,” Alissa said giving him a look.

“A man can hope, can’t he? I’ve got three gorgeous girls living under my roof, but I need another man around here.”

“We’ll see, and who knows if it’s a girl we can always try for another,” she told him with a grin kissing him as the two girls laughed.

Once the girls knew they took over the majority of the cleaning making her rest as much as possible, and she enjoyed every moment of it. The soccer league was starting back up at the end of February and she dressed carefully for the first meeting. They hadn’t announced it to anyone outside of the family and Gina simply because Miranda didn’t want them all babying her. She could handle her job even with the heightened emotions she was feeling, and she didn’t want anyone thinking she couldn’t.

Their first game would be the second weekend of March and she carefully planned a party for the first weekend. She was starting to show more than she could really hide, and she also wanted to reveal the gender to the girls. Keith was thrilled as she knew he’d be, and she glanced around the room sure things were perfect. It was subtle but once she told them, it’d all make sense.

“Looks great in here,” Tracy said coming over to them with Becky.

“Looks like there are more than just the soccer families here though,” Steve added giving them a look.

“We invited a few friends from the foundation,” Miranda admitted seeing that everyone was there. She headed over to Wendy and got everyone’s attention. “We wanted to throw a bit of a party for the girls as we get ready to start the new season, and I hope you don’t mind that we included some of

our friends because I'm really going to need the parents' support this season."

"What does that mean Miranda?" Kaitlin asked.

"It means that I hope I can convince part of you to help with some of the conditioning and running because, it's going to be a bit uncomfortable for me to do it pretty soon," she said smiling as Keith came up behind them.

"It's a girl," he said holding up the pink napkin like a flag as he kissed her temple.

"You're pregnant?" Tracy said smiling as she came over to hug her.

"Yeah, I'll be at twenty weeks in a couple days."

"No way," Kaitlin said reaching her. "Congratulations you guys, this is incredible news."

"It is," Michael agreed patting Keith's shoulder. "Why didn't you say anything before now to me though?"

"Because you would never have been able to keep it a secret," Miranda stated laughing. "You would have instantly been checking up on me hourly, then everyone would have found out."

"So, another girl in your household huh?" Steve teased Keith kissing her cheek. "Congratulations Miranda, you deserve this."

"Thanks Steve," she said hugging Becky who came over with Wendy and Alissa.

"Dad was hoping for a boy," Wendy stated.

"But you should have seen his face when Gina told us it was a girl," Miranda said. "He can complain all he wants about having a houseful of girls, he loves it."

"I do," he agreed letting his hands trail down her back as he pulled her towards him. "Plus, it gives us something else to work on later. I will have another male in the house one day."

"Absolutely, even if we have to buy a boy dog," she teased.

“So, you’re married, pregnant, and with your daughter,” Luc said as he came over. “Bet you didn’t think this would happen last year when we ran into each other.”

“Not in a million years, but you left out finding my little sister, and finding some incredible friends,” she told him.

“New and old right?” Danny said giving her a smile.

“Absolutely,” Miranda agreed and as the season began the team was amazing. She roped the parents into helping more and she loved the changes in her body. She hadn’t been able to think about them last time but now she could especially with Keith beside her.

“You’re glowing,” Michael said as they watched the girls run down the field trying to stop the other team in late May.

“I feel great. All of this is worth it Michael, everything I went through to get here, it was all worth having this. Alright maybe not everything but you know what I mean,” she added as he sent her a look she could read well.

“I do,” he agreed seeing Keith on the phone shooting concerned looks towards her. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” she said not really hearing him as she cheered on the girls as they stole the ball and headed back down the field.

Michael slid over beside Keith and listened to the end of his conversation.

“You’re positive they’re going to overturn it?” Keith asked.

“We’ve tried everything we could, but her mother admitted to trying to bribe one of the jurors. The juror said she refused the money but now they’re saying she had a prejudice against him. I understand this is not what Miranda needs right now considering she’s pregnant, but we have to tell her,” Julius said, and he agreed.

“Come down and we’ll tell her after the game. I don’t want her hearing about this on the TV or radio,” Keith stated hanging up as he turned to him. “You heard?”

“He’s getting out?”

“They’re going to keep him in pending a retrial but the only way to guarantee that he stays there is using Mire and Wendy, and Alissa.”

“We’ll make sure they’re safe—physically, emotionally, spiritually, if necessary,” Michael assured him. “Nothing is going to happen to Mire or the baby.”

“It’s been almost a year. I thought the thing had been shut down and now...is she going to hate me for keeping this from her for this long?” he asked worried that she might pull away from him. That would kill him.

“No, that’s not Mire’s way. She’ll understand we were trying to protect her. She’ll be mad and tell us that she’s not a little kid she doesn’t need protection from it, but she’ll understand.”

“I hope so because I cannot lose her after all of this. We have fought so hard to find this life together,” Keith said hating that something was threatening it, them, Miranda and her happiness.

“I know you have Keith; I’ve been here the entire time.”

“Sorry, I just can’t believe this is happening. I want them safe and happy all of them. They’re all my girls, so how do we make that happen?”

“I have an idea,” Michael said waiting for Julius to get there to fill him in on it.

“You think it’ll work?” Julius asked.

“It’s the only way to keep Wendy from coming out and it’ll put their mother in jail too,” Michael stated.

“But putting all four of them in a room together? It’s risky especially with Mire being pregnant,” Keith warned.

“There will be guards outside. It will all come out and if they think of going on with the appeal, they’ll both find out exactly how far the girls are willing to go to protect themselves.”

“Mire will do anything to keep the baby safe,” Keith admitted. “She’ll do it, I just don’t know if I want her to.”

“I know you want her safe,” Michael said. “We all want her safe, but she needs to confront them for her own peace of mind as well as Alissa’s and the baby’s and Wendy’s.”

“True, so how do we tell her?” Julius asked.

“Tell me what?” Miranda questioned breaking into the group.

“Game’s over?” Keith asked.

“Yeah, we won four to zero. So, what’s so distracting that you didn’t see our daughter score two goals?” she said looking between the men.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” Julius told her knowing they had to. “There was an investigation done about the trial. Your mother tried to bribe one of the jurors and they’re about to overturn the conviction.”

“What?” she gasped placing her hand over her stomach. “No, it’s not possible they can’t let him out, not now.”

“They won’t, they know he’s a flight risk and the community would kill him if they did.”

“So, we have to go through it all again?” she asked as terror gripped her.

“Maybe not,” Michael stated. “Not if you’re willing to come forward or threaten your parents that you and Alissa are coming forward, all four of you in a single room. We can get her to admit to what she did in exchange for keeping it from the press.”

“She’d never be able to show her face if it came out,” Miranda said looking over at Wendy and Alissa. “They don’t find out about Wendy though; no matter what she is kept safe.”

“We promise Mire,” Keith agreed kissing her temple as he worried what would happen if they didn’t agree to it.

Chapter 19

“Lissa, you don’t have to do this,” Miranda stated hugging her as they waited for the guards to show them back to the room.

“I’m not letting you go in there alone. We do this together this time,” Alissa told her keeping her arm around her as they moved through the room.

“They’re not going to try anything Lissa,” she promised seeing the way her sister kept glancing at the prisoners in the community room.

“Sure, they won’t,” her sister scoffed taking her hand as the guard opened the door for them.

“I’ll be right outside. There’s a button just inside the door if you need anything or else just knock on it,” he told them stepping aside.

They walked in and turned to look out the window as they waited for the guards to bring in Richard and Angela. Miranda heard the clink of the cuffs as they them brought into the room.

“We’ll be right outside,” the guard assured them again and she squeezed Alissa’s hand as they turned around.

“What do we have here?” Rick laughed seeing them.

“What we have is a deal for you two,” she stated looking through them.

“What’s that?” Angela questioned.

“You both confess, and we’ll make sure you don’t get sent to a prison where they’ll know what you did. It’d be a real shame if the main population discovered you were a child molester Rick,” Miranda replied sitting down to cover her stomach and keep her daughter safe.

“I didn’t do anything,” he countered. “Besides you honestly think they’d believe a stupid runaway who flunked ninth grade?”

“Don’t you dare call my sister stupid,” Alissa said putting a hand up in front of them as Rick leaned across the table towards them.

“Why are you here now? Got pregnant from some loser and want our money to take care of the problem?” Angela questioned. “You should give it away. You’d make a lousy mother.”

“Shut up,” she said shaking her head to control her anger. “The two of you are going to listen to us or else we’re going to walk out those doors and head straight to the news reporters wanting to know why disgraced Senator Simmons’ daughters ran away from home when they were kids.”

“She’ll make a hell of a better mother than you ever did,” Alissa added. “She’s taken care of me the last year. What’d you ever do for us?”

“Other than let him and others abuse us,” Miranda stated. “Admit it, admit that you let him sneak into your twelve-year-old daughter’s room and rape her. That you let him sell your other daughter’s innocence to the highest bidder.”

“Such drama,” Angela scoffed.

“Yeah? Then I guess you’ll both be willing to take your chances in court, won’t you?” she replied. “Come on Lissa, we’ve got a story to tell.”

“Right behind you,” she agreed.

“Wait,” Rick said lifting his cuffed hands as they started to stand.

“What?” she said looking at them.

“I want to hug my daughters. It’s been years since I’ve seen either and you both always were so much fun.”

“You disgusting scum,” Miranda stated backing towards the door. “You’re going to rot in hell. We’ll make sure of that.”

“I never touched Alissa and as for you, it’s too late for you to file any charges against me,” he laughed. “Never were too smart, were you? Ten years is up, Joelle.”

“Which is why I took you down at nine,” she replied with a smile. “That anonymous accuser, the one that brought the entire thing down? That was me. As for our mother, well, they’ve gotten rid of that statute of limitations when it comes to sex crimes, so she’s not off the hook either this time. I might not have been able to confront you face to face then but now’s a whole other story. You tried to destroy me, but you’ve lost. You’re the one in handcuffs while I’m the one out there living life every day. I’ll be out there, married to a man who loves me, who knows exactly what’s in my past and we’re creating a family that you will never be able to touch.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, I’m not, and they’ll retry you adding in Alissa’s accusations and you both will rot in jail for the rest of your lives. Do you know what happens when you get put into the main population and others find out you’re a child molester? You may have been protected at the last prison you were at but the new one won’t be so cushy,” she said with a smirk. “Let’s just say that I definitely wouldn’t think about turning your back on anyone in the shower or else you’ll find out exactly what it’s like to be raped, beaten, and left for dead.”

“You have no proof,” he replied but she saw the fear in his eyes.

“Oh, I do, you see when I ran away the day after you put those marks on my back, I went to a clinic and had myself checked over. There’s a rape kit in the police’s storage area with your DNA,” Miranda lied. “Still feel like going up against me? Still think either of you will get off when I come forward telling the world that I ran because I was scared, I’d wind up dead with the latest set of scum you were letting into my room? They’ll pull that DNA and you’ll be in the middle of men who murdered for far less than raping a child, or letting your children be raped repeatedly.”

“Why are you doing this Joelle?” Angela demanded.

“Why? You stole our childhoods, our innocence, and belief that the world was a good place, a safe place. A mother is supposed to protect their child not offer them up like a

sexual toy. You ruined the first part of our lives, but we will *not* let you ruin anymore of them. We used to think there were problems with us, that it was the *only* explanation as to why a mother could just walk away when their child was crying out for them because they were scared and felt like the world was crashing in on them. We aren't the ones with problems though, you are. You are sick and demented and the both of you will spend the rest of your lives in jail. You will never get near either of us again, and you sure as hell will never get anywhere near this baby," Miranda said disgusted with how much she'd blamed herself, thought herself to be unlovable for so long. Seeing them here in person, their absolute disregard for anyone but themselves, being so uncaring, it was crystal clear to her she was never the problem, that was entirely on them.

"That's a real mother's love," Alissa stated hugging her.

"You aren't one, to either of us. Don't worry Angela, being raped isn't that bad," Miranda added sarcastically, "it just feels like your soul is being torn apart. You'd be surprised how long it takes the body to recover from it."

Miranda knocked on the door sending a glance back towards the table while they waited for it to open.

"What do we have to do?" Angela asked as it opened.

"Admit the truth, plead guilty to all charges, and we'll walk away with our story kept to ourselves," she replied.

"No Angela," Rick stated.

"Yes, I let you do what you wanted to those girls, so you wouldn't do it to me, and it was satisfying watching them cry, but I won't let myself be put into that situation."

"Turn against me and you'll be buried alive," Rick threatened. "I'll never admit that I raped Joelle over and over again. There is no proof, she's lying about it, and I'm protected by spousal privileges meaning that you can't tell them what I did to her."

"So, you admit it?" Alissa questioned. "You admit that you raped your stepdaughter and allowed your daughter to be

by your friends?”

“Yes, and I’d do it again in an instant for the rewards I got from it,” he said with a laugh that more than disgusted them both.

“That’s all we needed,” Miranda stated pulling out the tape recorder. “Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Angela shouted as they walked out to hand the tape over to Andrew. Her last view of them was of Rick wrapping his cuffed arms around her neck as the guards hurried into the room. Andrew and a guard hurried them out of the area and Miranda hugged Alissa tightly letting go of the fear she’d felt being near them again.

It was later that night when they got the news and she let out a relieved sigh.

“Mom, I love you,” Wendy said coming over and wrapping her arms around her as she snuggled down between her and Keith. “I love you too Dad.”

“We adore you Wen, nothing about any of this changes that,” she promised her.

“I was scared I’d lose you after you went there,” Wendy admitted.

“You’re never going to lose me, and there is no more fear of them hurting you to get to me,” she said kissing the top of her head as Keith held them both and Alissa came over to sit beside her. “Right here is our family.”

“I can’t believe he’s dead,” Alissa stated still in shock.

“Don’t blame yourself Lissa, he’s the one who wrapped his cuffs around her neck and tried to kill her not us. We didn’t do anything other than get the truth from them.”

“I know but we’re free. We’re finally free,” Alissa said letting the tears out.

“We are,” she agreed holding onto the contentment as the last nine weeks of her pregnancy slid past them. She’d been coddled and protected by everyone she knew and although it was a bit irritating, she loved the feeling of being loved.

“Are you ready?” Gina asked as she put on a gown while Luc and Keith moved to her sides.

“Absolutely,” she stated wrapping her hand in Keith’s as the contraction started.

“Okay, give me a big push Miranda,” Gina coached and when she heard the tiny cry her heart burst with joy. “It’s a girl.”

Miranda let out the tears that had been behind the wall when Gina put her daughter in her arms. Keith leaned over kissing the top of her head before tilting her face up towards him and gently kissed away the tears settling a final kiss on her forehead as he cupped the top of their daughter’s head.

“Mire, baby,” he said unable to speak.

“Thank you for loving us all,” she told him with a smile.

Gina and Luc let them have some time with the baby and Miranda knew she’d never want to let her out of her arms. It was the same feeling she’d had with Wendy but this time it was entirely possible to keep her.

She was resting in bed when Gina and Keith came into the room with the baby after running all the required tests.

“I think someone would like to see her Mommy,” Keith said picking her up and bringing her over to the bed.

Miranda bit the inside of her lips as he placed her in her arms and breathed in the sweetness of her. She looked up at him and wrapped her fingers around his hand. “I love you.”

“I love you too baby,” he promised. “Wendy and Lis were wondering if they could come in and see you.”

“Of course, did they get to see her?”

“They’re gaga over her already,” he said returning a moment later with them.

“Mom,” Wendy gushed hurrying over. “She’s so tiny.”

“So were you,” she told her moving over in the bed. “Come here, I want to hold my babies.”

“I’m not a baby though,” Wendy teased slipping in beside her.

“You’ve always been my baby and always will be,” she promised her. “I will never love you any less than your sister.”

“I know Mom. So, have you all decided on a name for her?” she asked as Alissa came over to look at the baby.

“We have,” she told them letting Keith help her sit up more.

“Meet Nicole Alissa Samuels,” he stated, and Wendy smiled.

“Nicole...like Mom?” she asked looking between them.

“Yeah, she took such great care of you for me and then brought you back to me. You don’t mind?” Miranda asked her, giving her a full smile as Wendy shook her head.

“No, I think it’s perfect,” Wendy said, and she agreed as did the rest of her family and friends when they heard.

Miranda was sitting in her office at the main office for the foundation when she heard the knock smiling as Michael came into the space.

“What’s this?” he asked looking at the journals.

“For Wendy and Nicole, it’s no longer the needed therapeutic outlet, it’s just a way for me to show my girls how much I love them.”

“Well Wendy might be able to read them, but I don’t think Nicole will be up for that for a few more years. She’s barely gotten the hang of walking,” he said glancing at her sleeping in the playpen. He looked back at her as she put the last journal on the stack his brow lifting. “There’s three of them there.”

“I know,” she stated with a grin.

“Miranda...are you?” Michael asked in surprise. She handed over the last journal and opened it up to the entry she’d

just written waiting for him to read it. “Keith must be thrilled.”

“I haven’t told him yet. He had to go up to Washington to help so I haven’t had a chance to tell him because I want to do it in person,” she said with a grin.

“What are you doing here for then?”

“Just getting things set up for you all to handle while Keith and I celebrate our anniversary,” she said putting the journals into her bag. “I bet this really was the last thing you ever expected that first day you walked into that hospital room and saw me.”

“As I said before, I didn’t think you’d make it out of that bed let alone that first year, and I pushed you because I didn’t want the world to lose you.”

“Thank you so much, and don’t be mad at Gina. I made her promise to not say a word to anyone including you. Go home to your wife Michael; we’ve all got things to celebrate tonight,” she said hugging him before making her way home.

Alissa called her and they talked while she drove telling her the news. “You can’t say a word yet, I’m sure you’ll know when Keith finally gets home for me to tell him.”

“Promise Sis, I just wanted to say thank you for convincing me to come to college. I think I’m finally figuring myself out.”

“I love you, Lissa. Be safe,” she told her and got home to an empty house. There was a note from Wendy telling her she was spending the night with Becky, and she hoped that they weren’t going out to the party she’d heard whispers about the other day. Wendy was only fifteen she didn’t need to try and force that part of her life forward.

It was a little after eight and she’d gotten Nicole settled in for the night when she felt a smile cross her face. “It’s about time you got home.”

“I can’t sneak up on you, can I?” he asked coming in to wrap his arms around her still small waist. “How are you and baby doing?”

“We’re doing just fine now that his daddy’s home,” she stated turning in his arms.

“Did you just say he?” Keith asked with a huge smile.

Miranda nodded at his joy unable to contain hers. “Looks like there’s going to be another boy in this house after all.”

“Mmm, baby.” He lifted her into his arms as he carried her into the bedroom. “Wendy’s out at Becky’s?”

“All night,” she told him with a kiss. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you more. It’s true because you had our girls and this one to keep you connected while I was all alone.”

“Never alone,” she stated letting him help her off with her top. “I’m always with you.”

“And I’m always with you, and you,” he added dropping a kiss onto her stomach. “Our little Oliver’s growing good I take it?”

“All tests came back perfect,” she assured him. “You really want to name him Oliver?”

“Absolutely, it’s the name that gave you the strength to come out, into our lives. Our little Oliver Daniel Samuels will know how much we love him the second he gets here.”

“But that won’t be for a long, long time,” she said with a quick prayer for them all. “Plenty of time to show his mommy how much you love her.”

“Anytime,” he promised kissing her until she fell asleep with a smile touching her lips.

THANKS

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