

BREE WEEKS

THE
TASTE
OF
Kindness

VICES & VIRTUES SERIES

The Taste of Kindness

VICES AND VIRTUES

BREE WEEKS

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Vices and Virtues Series

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Chapter One

Laura

My biggest complaint about my relationship isn't that Max and I fight all the time. It's that we fight over the same things all the time. If there was at least some variety to our arguments, I think I could deal with them a little better. It would certainly make life more interesting.

Unfortunately, we always fight over the same two issues: one, his inability to make a commitment to me, and two, my inability to forgive him for it. I can't help it. I love the guy, and I want to be with him for the rest of my life. There's nothing wrong with that, as I tell Max during nearly every argument we have, which is pretty much an every day occurrence now.

It doesn't help that we work together. Those couples who do that with no issues between them, like Maris and Jacob, amaze me. I don't know how they aren't ready to kill each other at a moment's notice. Max and I can barely say two words during the work day without a fight. Then, we always seem to bring whatever we're arguing about home. We never get a moment's peace.

Judging by his mood on the drive home, we will not get that moment tonight either. We're meeting Maris and Jacob for dinner to celebrate their pregnancy announcement. As their closest friends, Max and I have known about it for a while, along with their immediate families, but we weren't at liberty to share until they made their announcement over the

weekend. Now, we can talk freely about it, and Maris is so excited. I'm glad to share this with her. Max, however, hasn't been as thrilled about the news as I've been.

“Do you realize how expensive children are to raise? I mean, it's fine if you're a rich former athlete or the daughter of a billionaire, but for regular people like us, it's killer. I don't know how people do it.”

“Oh, come on, Max. People figure out ways to do it every day. Regular people, just like us. Sure, it's probably hard, but it's not impossible. And besides, it's not like you have to worry about it. You know, it's not likely that I can have children, at least, not without some medical intervention. So, there's no reason for you to get so upset about it.”

He takes my hand, one of the few sweet things he still does. “I know that it's hard on you to know that you can't. I don't understand the desire to have children, because I simply don't have it, but I know you do, and I'm sorry. I never want you to feel bad about this or be in pain.”

“Thank you, Max. I appreciate that. It was hard when the doctor first told me that getting pregnant would be difficult, if not impossible, but I've tried to look at it from a different view. There are other ways to have a family, and if that's something we want later on, there are lots of options.”

You see that “Or you,” I say sardonically.

“Don't be like that, Laura. I've never hidden the person I am from you. With me, you get what you see. I thought you appreciated that.”

“I do, Max. Of course I do. I just wish—”

“What do you wish? That I was more like Jacob? That I was more normal? Having spent the last couple of years with the guy, I can assure you that he’s not normal. Neither is Maris. He’s my best friend and I know you think a lot of her, but they don’t have any idea what it’s like to be normal.”

“Just calm down while you’re driving, please. I don’t know what you’re getting so upset about. Yes, they’ve both been incredibly fortunate in their lives, but that doesn’t mean that there has to be all this hostility. Besides, I would not say that I wish you were more like Jacob.” I glance at him, but before he has time to question me, I blurt out, “It doesn’t matter what I was going to say. It wasn’t important. We’re almost there. Can’t we just enjoy the evening? Please?”

We sit in silence the rest of the way to the restaurant. I find it a strange comfort. Just a few minutes of peace and quiet. As I get out of the car, by myself, without Max coming to the passenger’s side to help me like the gentleman I always thought I wanted, I’m struck by one pervasive thought. I’m too young to feel this old.

I wonder sometimes where our love went wrong. Was it something I did, or he did? Or was it simply that we’ve grown apart? I can never tell. The thing I do know, however, is that this is not the way I want to spend the rest of my life. Always arguing. Never just enjoying each other. All this tension. It’s killing me. It’s already killed us.

Leaving him has never really crossed my mind, though. He's been the man of my dreams since I met him. When did it become a nightmare?

Chapter Two

Max

While the ladies are in the restroom, I take advantage of having a moment to talk with Jacob. “Laura doesn’t get me. She never has, no matter how much time we spend together.”

“I thought you two were getting along better lately. What’s wrong?”

Taking a swig of my beer, I say, “Well, we’re not. I don’t get it. I love her, and I know that she loves me. We just can’t seem to go a day without having an argument. It’s very draining. We used to be so happy together.” A wave of anger runs through me with Jacob’s snicker. “Got something to say?”

“I’m sorry, bro. I just don’t remember many displays of happiness. You guys fight a lot. You know that, right?”

“Sure, we fight. Every couple does. You and Maris aren’t perfectly happy all the time, are you?” I hope not, but I’ll never tell him that

“We’re happy, very happy, actually, and we do fight occasionally. Not nearly as much as you and Laura. Even back during our time on the bus on that first promotional tour Maris’s dad sent us on, you and Laura were at each other’s throats! The only time you weren’t fighting was when you were both in the hospital on painkillers after the accident.”

“Ouch! We weren’t *that* bad, were we?” He doesn’t answer me, but he gives me a gentle pat on the bag and downs the rest

of his beer. “I mean, I know we get on each other’s nerves, but I thought that was fairly normal.”

“Not so much.”

“So, what are you saying? Is our relationship doomed?”

“I don’t think so. Tell me what you love most about her, other than her ass.”

“I’ll thank you for not commenting on her ass. And if we’re leaving her ass out of it, I love her kindness most of all.”

“She is very kind. So are you, by the way. Two very kind people. But you seem to only be kind to other people. Maybe you should concentrate on being kind to each other.”

“What are you boys talking about?” Maris asks as she and Laura quietly return to the table.

“About how kind Max and Laura are.”

Laura rolls her eyes and sits next to me. “Kind, eh? You think we’re kind?”

I throw my keys on the table and Laura bolts past me to get to the bathroom. “You barely said two words to me on the way home. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Max. I’m just concerned about Maris. She’s had really terrible morning sickness, so she’s not able to eat much. We’re just trying to make sure she gets enough calories so she doesn’t waste away. She’s too skinny as it is.”

“I noticed she didn’t eat much at dinner. I thought morning sickness is only for the mornings. Was she sick tonight?”

“Yeah, she’s sick all day long. I made an appointment for her with a nutritionist. She wanted to just talk to the team doctor, but I was having none of it. I told her that the team doctor is accustomed to treating injuries and caring for 300 pound linebackers, not 100 pound pregnant women. She wanted to argue with me, but I wouldn’t let her. I made the appointment anyway.”

I hold her closely, the smell of her shampoo overpowering me, making my dick hard. The phone in my pocket rings, which is the only thing preventing me from taking her to bed right now. I glance at the screen to see who in the world has such horrible timing, but I smile when I see my brother’s name appear. I motion to Laura that I need to take the call. She smiles, kisses me on the cheek, and goes upstairs. “Hey, Sean! How the hell are you?”

“I’m ecstatic, Max! I just got some fabulous news, and I wanted you to be the first one to know. Do you have a few minutes, or is Laura being her wonderful self and distracting you?”

“Well, she’s always wonderful, but no, she just went upstairs. I could go for some good news. What’s up?” As I answer my brother, I hear the shower turn on and smile at the knowledge that Laura will most likely be naked and in bed when I finish the call.

“I got the funding!” I hear his words, but they take a moment to sink in. When they do, I’m nearly speechless. “Are you there, little brother? Did you hear me? I got the funding.”

I gulp what air I can before answering. “I heard you. That *is* fantastic! I’m so proud of you, man. You set your mind to starting this nonprofit, and you did it! Congratulations!”

“Thank you. This means as much to you as it does to me, and I wanted to share it with you as soon as I found out. Though, I didn’t just call to tell you about the funding. I called to ask for your help.”

“Anything. If it’s within my power to do it, you’ve got it.”

“I want you to work with me on this. I need your expertise. Sure, I know the mission, but I know nothing about getting the word out. That’s where you come in. I need you to crank up the publicity machine and get this thing rolling so we can raise money to help as many families as we can.”

My head spins at the magnitude of his request. “I don’t see how I can do that. Between work and Laura, I’m already stretched pretty thin. I’m sure I can find someone to help you, but I don’t think I’ll have time to do that in addition to everything else.”

“See, that’s not what I’m asking you. I know it’s a big ask, but I can’t think of doing this with anyone else but you. You’re the only other person in the world who knows why this is so important to me. Who lived through that horror of losing our sister. Of having our dad drink himself to death and our mom lose her mind. Think of all the kids in foster care who have missing family members, or worse, dead ones. I’m offering you a full-time job with the organization. I want us to work on this together. I need you.”

The two of us working together to help people in our same situation. Just like we always dreamed. *Could it really be possible?* “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes. I know it’s a lot, but I’m serious. You’re the only one I want to work with me on this. Not only because you’re my brother and you know why I started this thing, you also have the skills I need. I don’t have time to train someone in our message. Plus, I can’t afford to pay a lot, at least, not right now. I need someone who can work for peanuts, but who will work his ass off. I know that’s you. Only you. So, what do you say? Can I count on you?”

Chapter Three

Three Years Later

Laura

Wrangling a two-year-old who's more interested in cartoons than getting ready for the day wasn't the number one thing I dreamed about when I was a kid. I certainly didn't think I'd be doing it by myself, without a husband, or even a boyfriend to help. But here I am, doing just that. "Come on, Allen, just one more bite of oatmeal and then you can get back to watching your show."

He shoves the bowl away with the inevitable, "No!" At least he smiles as he does it. Of course, when he smiles, the movement makes the glob of oatmeal still on his lips fall onto his pants. The ones I just put on him a few minutes ago.

"Someone's having a bad morning, I see," my mom's singsong voice says when she enters my kitchen. "Here, honey, I've got him."

"Grannie!" Allen exclaims, bouncing with excitement when he sees her.

She plants a kiss on top of his head, making a face at the mess of oatmeal surrounding the child. "You go get yourself ready, and I'll take care of this little munchkin!"

"Thanks, Mom! He's exceptionally distracted this morning. I don't know what's going on with him."

"Not to worry," she says, wiping his face gently with his bib and while the two of them make funny faces at each other.

“It’s going to be a beautiful day, and I think I might need help from this little guy pulling up the dead flowers in the front of the house. I thought that would be a good way to get out some of that destructive toddler energy and be productive at the same time.”

“And that’s why you’re a genius, Mom.”

I rush to my bedroom, quickly make my bed, and throw on the clothes I set out when I got out of the shower last night. There used to be a time when taking a shower before bed signaled a night of lovemaking with Max. Those days are long gone. I still miss him every day, but I also still believe I did the right thing in letting him go. He was so excited when he told me about his brother’s offer. It really was his dream job. Not only did it mean working with Sean, but it also meant fulfillment in his work. That’s something many people are never lucky enough to find, and it was so important to him. I couldn’t stand in his way.

Max and Sean had such a difficult time after their older sister disappeared when she was just fifteen years old. Despite the police treating her disappearance as a homicide from the beginning, her body was never found, which I think had to be worse on them than if they knew she had been killed. It’s no wonder that their dad started drinking. When he died, their mom couldn’t deal with the life she’d been given, so she gave up too. Only she’s still here, just not in her right mind, according to Max. I never met her. He didn’t want me to. He could barely bring himself to deal with her, so he thought it would be a burden to bring me into her world. I tried to

convince him that maybe I could help, but I really don't know what I could have done. I can't relate to her situation, so I don't think we would ever have been able to find common ground, other than our love for Max. I somehow didn't think that would be enough.

Though I've never regretted stepping aside and allowing Max to fulfill his dream, it's been quite the lonely journey for me. I couldn't stay in Nashville, no matter how much Maris begged me to. It was just too hard to constantly be reminded of him. I sold our house and sent his half of the money to him, which I found out later he donated to his brother's charity. I suppose that makes sense. After all, he left me for that job and that organization. He had to make sure it succeeded.

Moving into the studio apartment above my parents' house was a blessing. They don't charge much for rent, and I have free built-in babysitting. There are always perks. I also never told my family the circumstances surrounding Max leaving, which, of course, means that I never told them that I didn't share my pregnancy with him before he left. I expected him to come back to visit, like he said he would, but I'm not bitter. Or maybe I am a little. Regardless, I made some choices back then that I don't regret. Some I do, but I have a wonderful little boy to show for it. So, it couldn't be all bad.

And, though I complain sometimes about being lonely, I don't have some semblance of a social life. My old boyfriend Simon still lives here, and he works for my dad's company. He and I see each other periodically. He would like it to be more, but I don't think I will ever have that kind of relationship ever

again. I loved Max. I still love Max. And nothing will ever change that. I don't care how many promotions my dad gives him. He'll never be quite the same as living here with Max. That makes it a little strange, but I can't help how I feel. I try to always be honest with my emotions with Simon. He's had a hard time accepting that, but I appreciate his efforts.

If either of us gave Dad complete authority over our lives, we would already be married with that white picket fence around it. That God for better judgment. I'm kind, but I'm not stupid. I don't ever want to be married to a man I don't love. No matter the reason. Not even if I truly believe that my son needs a father. And I do. One day, perhaps he'll have one, but not if it means that I have to be in a loveless marriage. The only man I'll ever love is Max.

Voices from the living room bring me out of my fantasy. I must be losing my mind because as I stand here thinking about Max, I think I hear him talking to my mother. Weird. I gather my things and rush out to see what's going when the voices seem to be louder than normal. "What's going on, Mom? Is someone at the door?" My words caught in my throat, I can barely breathe much less speak. Did I truly conjure him, or is my mind playing tricks on me? After three years, is he really standing here at my apartment door? "Max?" I say, astonished at saying his name aloud.

"Hi, Laura," he says, a sheepish grin on his face. My gaze holds his for a moment, but then his turns to the little boy three feet away from him in my mother's arms. The little boy who looks exactly like him. I know the second he recognizes

himself in Allen's little face. I also watch his entire range of emotions as reality sets in. Confusion. Astonishment. Joy. Pride. Then the initial reactions fade and I see other things in his face. Bewilderment. Fear. Betrayal. Pain. Anger. Somehow, after all this time of hoping this day would come, I've never found the words to say when Max discovered the truth. I'm out of time and need to think of something fast.

"Laura," Mom says, noticing the tension in the room, "I'm going to take Allen to his room to play for a while, unless you need my help here."

"No, Mom. Please stay a few minutes. Max should meet his son."

Chapter Four

Max

I hear what she's saying, but the words don't quite register for a moment as things that I should actually understand. *Did she just say he's my son?* I must have misheard it. But as the older woman she referred to as her mother repeats it, I'm beginning to doubt that this is the case either.

"What did you say?" I croak, feeling a bit unsteady. I've always wondered what people meant when they said they feel faint. I think I understand now. Resisting the urge to fall to the floor, I continue staring at the child, recognizing some familiarity in his face. The same almond eyes of his mother co-mingled with my identical arch of the brow and bend of the jaw. Aside from the flaming red hair of his mother, he looks exactly like me. The two women are still speaking, and we're joined now by two men. Everyone seems to be talking at once, but I hear nothing. The little boy, with his head curved into his grandmother's neck, has his eyes on me, and I'm transfixed.

"Max. Max! Are you alright?" I finally understand the words coming out of Laura's mouth.

"His curls," I say, reaching up to twirl a strand of my own curly hair in my fingers.

She smiles and crosses the room, taking the confused child from his even more confused grandmother's arms. He goes willingly, with a faint chuckle and a grunt. She stands in front of me, and though the other people in the room question her, she never takes her eyes off of me. "Yeah," she says. "His

curls are just like yours. I should've taken him a long time ago for his first haircut, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wanted his hair to get long enough to put it in a little ponytail, like you used to wear."

The room is silent now, except for the sounds of my racing heart and the quick, muted breaths of the child. "His name. What's his name?"

"Allen Casey Murchison-Kershaw." My head jerks up to meet her eyes. "Yes, I named him Casey after your sister. I wanted to be able to honor her in some way. Plus, I thought you might like it if you ever got a chance to meet him."

Tears well in my eyes for the first time in decades. "Yes, I do like it. Thank you."

"Would you like to hold him?"

Bile fills the top of my throat, and I realize that I don't know the answer to her question. "I've never held a child before. I don't know if I'll do it the right way or not."

Smiling, she passes the child to me. "You'll figure it out. He's not an infant anymore. You won't hurt him."

He's heavier than I thought he'd be. His little body tenses the moment Laura lets him go, but he doesn't balk at a stranger holding him. *Does he intrinsically know who I am? Is that even possible?* As soon as I relax, he follows suit. Our eyes locked in unspoken communication. Everything in the world begins to make sense to me. I have a sense of purpose

like I've never known before. I'm a father. *I'm a father!* I have to be different from I was before. Everything is different now.

He smiles at me, and I know nothing could ever be wrong in the world again.

Except that everything is wrong. I'm suddenly aware of loud voices in the room, and little Allen notices them too. His face wrinkles and contorts suddenly into something I think for a moment might be demonic. He turns red as he looks around the room at the people yelling and screams at the top of his lungs! How can a sound so loud and terrifying come out of the throat of such a small and adorable little person? Laura senses the distress in both of us and comes to our rescue, taking the child back into her arms and gently bouncing him in consolation. "It's alright, baby," she says to the still-screaming child. She turns on the rest of the room and says, "Would you all please stop yelling? Look what you're doing to him! I'll explain everything in a few minutes, but right now, I want you all to be quiet!"

It takes a minute for me to understand what they're upset about in the first place. Though their voices have returned to a normal volume, they continue to berate Laura with questions about who I am and what I'm doing here. One older man, whom I assume to be her father, wants to know where the hell I've been and by what right do I show up here unannounced after all this time. He's not wrong, I admit, but the longer they talk, the more questions I have as well. There's a younger man eyeing me suspiciously. I recognize that look. Territorialism.

He thinks that Laura is his and he resents me being here. I'm going to have to watch myself with that one.

Laura ignores them all, focusing only on Allen, with the occasional glance to me. Each time her eyes meet mine, there are more questions than answers. She knows this, but is she ready to answer them? Only one way to find out. "Laura, I think you and I need to talk."

She nods solemnly and turns to the older man. "Dad, I won't be in to work this morning, and I don't know if I'll be in all day. I'm sorry, but you and Simon are just going to have to handle this meeting without me." She doesn't give them a chance to respond before turning to the other woman in the room. "Mom, I'd like for you to watch Allen as planned, but would you please make sure you stay near the house? He and Max should spend some time together, but I want to talk to him alone first."

The two men start to protest, but Laura puts up a hand to quell their arguments. "This isn't up for debate. I'll see you all later. Please. Give us some privacy for a little while."

Reluctantly, they leave, but that doesn't stop Simon and Laura's father from shooting daggers through me with their eyes. I ignore them, because I have bigger things to worry about than that. I turn to Laura, thinking I might shoot some daggers of my own, but she's in tears, and I don't have the heart. "I know you need an explanation, Max, and I promise, I'll give you one."

“You should have told me, Laura. I had a right to know.”
My attempt to keep my voice steady fails miserably.

“You’re absolutely right. I should have, and I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head, partly to remove the cobwebs and partly to try to give myself time to come to terms with what she’s saying. “I can’t believe that you knew you were pregnant and you let me leave.”

“I didn’t know I was pregnant when you left. I swear! I only found out after you left.” Now, her voice sounds a bit unsteady.

“My phone number has never changed. You could have called me.”

“Yeah, well, the phone works both ways, Max! You didn’t bother calling me much either.”

The unsteadiness in my voice turns to anger. “I didn’t have life-changing news to share with you. It’s going to take me a while to wrap my head around the fact that you kept this from me all this time.” A sudden thought enters my head, and I become even more enraged. “Who else knew about this? Did Jacob and Maris know? What does your family think of me? Did you even tell them about me? You didn’t, did you? Is that why they looked at me like they wanted to kill me when they walked out of here? How could you do something like this to me?”

Her face shows her every emotion. “Wow. Those are a lot of questions. I can answer them all, but it’s going to take a little

time. Why don't you just sit down and let me get you some coffee or something and we'll talk. And I'll answer every question that you have, and probably even some that you haven't thought of yet."

"I don't want coffee. Not sure what I want right now, but it's not coffee. At the risk of adding yet another question to your plate, don't you have any for me? Aren't you wondering what I'm doing here? Don't you want to know why I just showed up on your front doorstep unannounced?"

She goes to the kitchen and turns on the coffee pot despite my refusal of refreshments. But she's always wanted a cup of coffee when she had something to think about. Some people get jittery more energy with coffee, but not Laura. It calms her down. Helps her think. I'd forgotten about that until this moment. Before I get lost in a sea of regrets, she answers, "I had wondered when you would come back into my life. I certainly didn't expect it to be today. I thought maybe you'd go to Nashville looking for me and Maris would call me and tell me. And then Allen and I could come and meet you. Maybe I would have been able to prepare you a little bit more for the shock of meeting him. He really is amazing, Max. He's just so perfect. Every time I look into his eyes I see you."

I sit down on the couch next door, somehow talking about him has made my anger dissipate. "I don't know, I thought his eyes looked like yours. Everything else was identical to me, well his eyes and his hair are all yours. Everything else is mine."

She laughs. “So he looks like us both with my red hair, my eyes, your curls, your mouth, your nose. He’s the perfect blend of us both.”

“Let’s hope he doesn’t get our temper.”

“That would be a disaster. I’d make him go live with my mother, although I don’t think she’d mind.” She hesitates, and I know some unsettling news must be coming. “My parents have been wonderful throughout this whole thing. But I didn’t tell them much about you. I just couldn’t. Not that they didn’t ask. Repeatedly. In the state of mind I was in, maybe I wouldn’t say all the right things about you, and I never wanted them to get the wrong idea.”

I can’t stand sitting next to her on the couch anymore. Not because I’m angry, but because being in the same room with her after all this time, being so close to her, is bringing up emotions and urges that I’m not sure I’m ready to fight. I walk to the half open screen door, looking out on the bright sunshine of the morning. I’m met with the sound of angry male voices wafting up through the stairwell. “So they formed their own opinions about me, and they’re probably not that great.” I gesture at the direction of the voices to prove my point. “I’m fairly sure I just heard one of them say he wants to dismember me. It sounds like I’m going to have an uphill battle on my hands. I do have another question, though. I figured out who your mother and father are, obviously, but who was the younger guy? I don’t remember you mentioning a brother.”

“That’s Simon. No, I don’t have any brothers. Simon works for my dad, and he was my boyfriend in high school.”

“And is he your boyfriend now?” I ask as I the hair on the back of my neck stands straight up and blood rushes to my face in anger. Immediately, I regret the question, realizing a little too late of how unfair, and possibly misogynistic, it is “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“Of course, it’s your business, Max. You’re Allen’s father. From now on, anyone who’s in your life is your business.” She sips her coffee, and I attempt to do the same, but I can’t. I’m too jittery as it is, and my stomach won’t allow it. “I promise I won’t let them dismember you,” she says with a chuckle.

“That’s reassuring, although the idea that you even have to say such a thing should be enough to make me run out the door.” A shadow crosses her face and her mouth opens as if she wants to say something, but then she closes it, changing her mind. “Were you about to say that I don’t need any help running out the door?”

“Is that another question?”

“Not one that requires an answer,” I say, finally deciding to drink my coffee.

“Why did you come back, Max?”

“To answer that, I have to explain why I left. Yes, I wanted to help my brother with his nonprofit. The organization is very important to both of us, as you well know. But there’s more to it than that. It was always more about you than anything else.”

“Me?” she asks, nearly choking on her coffee. “What did I have to do with you leaving?”

“You’re my inspiration, Laura. I never felt worthy of you. I thought that if I could just do something good with my life, you’d finally be proud of me.”

“I was always proud of you, Max. You didn’t have to leave for me to be proud of you.”

“Look, obviously I’m not saying this the right way. I think my brain is fried. I know you wanted to talk, but I think I’m going to go. I need some time by myself to think.”

“Oh, alright. Are you sure you don’t want to spend some time with Allen? And you had a lot of questions for me. I still want to answer them for you.”

“We can do all that later. Right now, I need some air. Your number is still the same, right?” She nods as I stand, desperately wanting to stay, but knowing that I can’t. “I’ll text you.” Instinctively, I bend down, kissing her on the cheek. The scent of her shampoo tempts me, bringing back sensual memories that I have a hard time getting out of my head.

“Alright. If you’re sure. I’ll wait for your text.” She stands and walks me to the door. “It’s good to see you, Max. I really have missed you.” She glances down the stairs to her parents’ front door, but there’s no one there. Grabbing the back of my head, not content with a peck on the cheek, she pulls my face close to mine. The kiss is deep and passionate. It’s all I can do to keep from scooping her up and taking her to bed right now.

Knowing that would be a mistake, I break off the kiss before it goes too far.

“You always did know how to make it hard for me to think clearly. I’ll text you later, but right now I’d better go.”

I reluctantly leave, kicking myself for being an honorable guy.

Chapter Five

Laura

It's been three days since Max came back into my life, and we still haven't had the chance to talk about his disappearance, Allen, where we stand now. I don't think he's avoiding me. He's been around, trying to get to know Allen, but my family has barely left us alone long enough to breathe in private, much less talk. They mean well, and I know they're just trying to protect me, but I'm going to have to insist that they give us the space we need. It's actually getting ridiculous.

Allen has been tentative regarding Max, but they're getting along a little better. He still doesn't want me out of his eyesight when Max is holding him, but that's getting better. So, I try to stick close. It's difficult, especially given my feelings about Max. The kiss I gave him the other day brought back all my old feelings that I'd considered to be dead. They're not. They are very much alive, and I'm having a hard time fighting them.

"What time will Max be here?" Simon asks. I jump at the sound of his voice, having forgotten that he was visiting my parents.

"Soon. Why?"

"I think I have some things to say to him, so I'm just making a plan."

"What are you talking about, Simon? There's absolutely no reason for you to need to talk to Max about anything."

“Oh, I beg to differ, my dear. I have lots to say. First, I think he’s doing you a disservice by just showing up here out of the blue, disrupting everything. That guy’s got some nerve, don’t you think?”

I shake my head, trying to ignore him. I continue gathering the toys that Allen has strewn throughout my mom’s living room. Though she never seems to mind how messy he leaves the house, it bothers me. “I think no such thing. He’s Allen’s father, and he deserves to have the time to get to know him.”

“And yet you never told him about the baby until he showed up all of a sudden.”

“Mind your business, Simon. This has nothing to do with you and you’re about to step into territory that you shouldn’t.”

“Don’t be obtuse, Laura.” He moves closer to me, and I get the sensation of the walls closing in around me. *Is he going to kiss me?* “You know I’ve pursued you since you came back home. I’ve wanted to take care of you and Allen, and I think you know I can. But, you won’t let me. I thought for a while that you’d be open to the possibility of us getting together, but then when Max showed up, all of that changed.”

I back up, just out of his reach. “Simon, I know that you’ve been interested in me, yes. I also know that you and my father would like nothing more than for us to get together, although I’m not really sure what he’d get out of it. I know that you’d benefit from being his son-in-law.”

“That’s not the only reason I want this, and I think you know it.”

“Please don’t tell me you love me, Simon, because you and I both know that would be a lie. I think you’re fond of me, but that’s as far as it goes. Even when we were kids, you weren’t in love with me.”

He has the audacity to look surprised, but the expression fades as he realizes how right I am. “We could learn. People throughout history married for reasons other than love, and those relationships turned out well. Love is overrated, in my opinion. You need someone to take care of you and Allen. I can do that.”

“I can take care of us. I don’t need you to do that for me. Where do you get off thinking you can talk to me like that?”

“I was just about to ask the same thing,” Max’s voice booms through the air. “If she doesn’t want to be with you, don’t push her.”

Simon shakes his head but smiles at Max. It’s not a pleasant smile, and it sends chills throughout my body. “Look, friend, this isn’t a conversation that really needs your input. I’m not going to raise a stink about you being here to see Allen. I would never keep a man from his child, but you should really learn your place around here. See, while you’ve been out doing whatever it is you’ve been doing with your life, I have been here supporting Laura. Making sure that she had what she needed and didn’t have to do any of this alone. Basically, I’ve been the direct opposite of you.”

“Really? Well, *friend*, I don’t think you’re needed any longer. I’m here now, and I plan to take care of her and my son

for the rest of our lives, if she'll have me."

He turns to me, and I don't know whether to punch him in the gut or kiss him! "What do you say, Laura? Will you have me?"

I stand looking at them both, awestricken and unable to speak. Neither of them is content to remain silent, and they continue to argue. Suddenly, my father makes his presence known. "Yes, Laura. I'd also love to hear the answer to that question as well. You have a decision to make, daughter, and I think you need to make it quickly before things get too far out of control."

My blood boils. "That's it! Everyone out of my house!"

Dad says, "Actually, darling, this is my house."

"I don't care! Everyone out, except for Max. I need to talk to him. The rest of you can go!" I push everyone out, despite their protests.

"Are you sure you want me to be here too?" Max says, but I cut him off with my kiss. It's deep, long, and passionate.

When we finally part, I say, "Stop asking me questions and take me to bed."

He picks me up and grins, "I want to ask you which way to the bedroom, but I'm afraid to ask more questions."

I point toward the back of the hallway, but he's already on his way. I kiss him instead. He drops me, gently, onto the center of the bed, and grins as he looks down on me. "I've waited for this for so long, babe. I've missed you. I've missed

your kiss, I've missed your touch." We waste no time taking off all our clothes.

"We used to take our time getting naked, but I don't want to wait that long this time. I want you now, Max."

"I like the way you think. I'll make a deal with you. We'll slow it down the next time, but I think you're right. I want you now too, babe." He smiles again as he climbs on top of me, positioning himself just outside my opening. "You know what else I've missed?"

"That's another question."

Ignoring me, he pushes himself into me, slowly, completely. "I've missed your pussy. God! It's world-class! So soft, so sweet, so wet! I love it!"

I gasp as his entire length enters me. It's been so long, and I'm surprised to find tears forming in my eyes. Every moment of wishing he were here I've had for the last three years come rushing back to me with each thrust. He knows my body so well. Knows exactly which place to touch and when and where to kiss me. He also knows my mind. Both hands cup the sides of my face, forcing me to look into his eyes. "Laura, look at me. Stay with me, honey. Just feel me take you. Concentrate on that. Focus on me going in and out of you. See how good that feels. It's just the two of us here. Don't let all the rest of that noise spoil this. We've always been really good at this!" As if to emphasize his words, he bends his head to my breast, swirling his tongue around my nipple.

That's all it takes. Fire explodes in my core. I throw back my head, enjoying the sensation as waves of pleasure build inside me. I know what I knew way back when. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Our bodies become one. Moving together, intent only to give each other pleasure. We give in. "I'm coming, Max!"

"Yes, baby! Come for me." With one last intense thrust, it's over. We reach the precipice, and it's glorious!

Epilogue

Max

Getting to know my son over the last three months has been wonderful. So has been getting to know Laura again. I hadn't realized how much I missed her until I saw her again. I sometimes pinch myself when I think that things have turned out the way they have. She's my world, and I'm so happy to have a son to raise with her.

She's getting ready for work while I get Allen dressed for her mom to take him for a play date. I have some work to do with Sean over video chat in a short time, but I love getting a chance to spend time with her and my son as still provide for them.

"I know you have a busy morning, but what would you say to me picking you up for lunch this afternoon? We can go to that new sushi place you've wanted to try."

Her face twists into a knot. "I don't think it's a good idea for me to have sushi right now."

"Why not? You love sushi."

"Well, I don't think it's good for the baby." My head snaps up to find her grinning sheepishly at me. "Yep, there's going to be another baby. Are you alright with that?"

I grab Allen and reach out to her in a group, family hug. "Alright isn't the word, babe. I couldn't be happier."

The End

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