



Lost

IN HIM

ANGEL SANDS, BOOK NINE

CARRIE ELKS

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020522

Edited by Rose David

Proofread by Proofreading by Mich

Cover Designed by Najla Qamber Designs (www.najlaqamberdesigns.com)

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Turning the wheel of his Selenite Gray Mercedes AMG GT with one hand, Chris Vaughn used the other to hit the button that released the gates to his sprawling L.A. house. As soon as his wheels hit the driveway, his stomach sank.

She was here, parked in his driveway, no doubt angry as heck because she had to wait for him. For a moment he considered hitting reverse and hightailing it out of here. But there was no point. She'd no doubt seen him, heard the whirring mechanism of his wrought iron gates. And he knew from experience that when she wanted something, Anya Sky didn't stop until she got it.

When his expensive leather brogues hit the concrete of his driveway, she opened her own car door and climbed out. Her long, tan legs were the first thing he saw. Once upon a time he'd wanted nothing more than to have those wrapped around him constantly.

Now he just wanted them out of here.

"I've been calling you," she said, not bothering with a greeting. This was where they were at. Where they'd been for the last two years. No niceties, no sweet words, just bitter accusations and counter arguments.

He'd paid a lot for her to leave, and it was worth every penny.

"I've been in meetings. I had my phone turned off," he told her.

Her eyes scanned him, taking in the sleek tailored business suit he was wearing. The perfectly knotted tie. Truth be told, he hated wearing this kind of thing. Preferred nothing more than a pair of old, worn jeans and a t-shirt. But his meetings were about money and his job was to make his investors

feel comfortable. If that meant wearing a suit, then he'd do it.

Anya waved her hand, as though his projects weren't important. "I need to talk to you about Luna."

As if she'd heard her name, the back door of Anya's car opened, and their daughter jumped out, her face lighting up when she saw him.

"Daddy!" She ran toward him, her sneakers kicking up dust, and threw herself into his arms. He lifted her up, held her close, and swung her around. Then he dipped his face against her silky hair because nothing in the world smelled better than his kid.

The light of his goddamned life.

"Hey sweetheart." He winked at her. "Did you grow again?"

"Since Saturday?" She frowned, as though trying to decide if that was possible.

"It must have been all that watermelon you ate. Gave you superpowers."

Luna grinned, revealing the gap at the front of her mouth where one of her baby teeth had fallen out, not yet replaced by the adult one. "I love watermelon. Have you got any?"

"We're not staying." Anya lifted an eyebrow at their daughter. "Why don't you get back in the car? Daddy and I need to talk."

He gently put Luna down. "We'll have watermelon next time. Did I tell you I know a guy who has a watermelon farm?"

Luna's eyes widened. She got those from her mom. Pale blue and so expressive it felt like she was telling a story every time you looked at them. The rest of her was him, though. From the dark hair that reflected the sun, to the dimple in her cheek every time she smiled.

And he made sure she smiled a whole damn lot.

"Watermelons grow on a farm?" she whispered.

"Where else would they grow?" Anya sounded bored. She looked at the Cartier Tank on her wrist and sighed. "We need to get home, sweetie. Now jump in the car."

"Can we go to the farm, Daddy?" Luna asked him, her voice full of hope.

"Sure we can. We'll do it soon. Now do what Mommy says." He ruffled her hair. "I'll talk to you tonight, okay?"

"Okay."

She turned and skipped back to the car, yanking the back door open in a way that made him wince. He knew exactly how much Anya's car cost. After all, he'd paid for it. She climbed inside and grabbed her Nintendo Switch,

then pulled the door closed.

“What do you want, Anya?” he asked, as soon as their daughter was out of earshot. Sure, she drove him crazy, but Luna didn’t need to know that.

“We need to talk about the summer.”

“We already talked about the summer. You want to take Luna to visit your parents in Europe. I agreed.”

She tipped her head, her eyes holding his. “There’s been a change of plan. I’ve been offered a role.”

He blinked. “Okay.” Maybe that would make things easier.

“I leave in a week. You’ll need to have Luna while I’m away.”

“What?” He frowned. “I just rearranged my filming schedule.” He wanted to get as much of the movie in the can before Luna came back to L.A., that way he’d be able to spend quality time with her. “I’m going to be on location, too.”

“But you’ll be in California, right?”

“Yeah.” And he’d also be working night and day. For the first time he’d taken on the role of producer, which meant troubleshooting anything and everything that happened on set. The days of sitting in his trailer between takes or playing poker with the crew were over.

He was going to be working twenty-four-seven. He’d designed it that way, figuring he’d miss his kid a little less if he was constantly busy. Anya had insisted that Luna needed to get to know her Hungarian heritage, something he was in complete agreement with.

And there was no way he could change the shooting schedule now. Too much money and too many people were involved. The dates were set, the crew was booked. Heck, he’d even rented a house overlooking the beach to stay in.

Or Neil had. His trusty PA always had those things covered.

“Well I can’t take her with me. I’ll be busy.” She shrugged. “I guess I could send her to Europe alone. My parents could meet her on the other side.”

He ran his hand over his closely cropped hair. He was still getting used to the buzzcut. He preferred to wear his dark hair longer, a little more floppy, but he was about to play the role of an ex-Navy Seal, and for that he needed the look.

There was no way he wanted his daughter traveling to Europe alone. And he had no time to accompany her. “I’ll keep her. Give me a day to sort things

out.”

Anya beamed like she always did when she got her way. “I leave next week.”

“So do I.”

“Luna will be so excited. Baby?” she shouted out.

Luna opened the car door? “What?”

“You’re staying with Daddy for the summer.”

Luna blinked. “I am?”

“Yes. He’s taking you to the beach.”

Jesus H. Christ. She was making it sound like a vacation. Luna was probably imagining lazy days on the sand licking ice cream cones and kicking her feet in the foamy waves.

Not being stuck on a set twenty-four-seven while her dad ignored her.

“I love the beach!” Luna jumped with excitement. “Thank you, Daddy.”

He swallowed, because dammit he loved his daughter. And he hated disappointing her in anyway. “Any time, kiddo. We’ll have fun, you and I.”

From the corner of his eye he could see Anya smirking, and he couldn’t help but wonder if she’d done this just to make his life harder.

As soon as Chris opened the door to his sprawling house, he could hear music coming from the kitchen. He kicked his shoes off and threw his keys onto the polished table by the door, then walked down the marble-floored corridor to the sound of Jay Z telling him he had ninety-nine problems.

“I assume you know Anya was here,” Chris said dryly. Neil had a habit of choosing songs to fit the moment.

Neil looked up from his laptop. “Saw her on the surveillance camera.”

“Thanks for coming out to help me.” He couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

“The time to help you was when you first met her. Which, if you recall, I did. I told you she was trouble. You should have listened to me.”

Neil was so much more than a PA. He led Chris’ security team, troubleshoot any problems in his life or business, and on occasion – like now – liked to interfere in Chris’ personal life.

Not that he was wrong. Chris should have avoided Anya from the start.

They'd met when he almost ran her over at the studio lot. Within a week she was mostly living at his house. Within a month she was pregnant – despite taking the pill and him using condoms – and within five years she was the goddamn bane of his existence.

The only good thing that came out of this situation was Luna. And for her, he was eternally grateful.

“She wants me to keep Luna this summer.”

“I heard that, too.” Neil said.

Of course he did. The surveillance cameras had ears as well as eyes.

Neil lifted a brow. “I’ve already called the nanny agency. They’re shortlisting candidates as we speak. And I took another look at the house details to make sure there’s nothing dangerous for kids. I also took a look at the shooting schedule, but there’s nothing we can move there. Not without it costing a lot of money.”

That wasn’t something Chris wanted to contemplate. He’d sunk an obscene amount of money into this. It had been his dream to produce a movie as well as act in it for as long as he could remember. This was his baby. He didn’t want to mess it up.

“This town we’re staying in. Angel Sands. It’s kid friendly, right?”

“It’s a beach town.” Neil gave him a ‘duh’ look. “Of course it is.”

“Let’s make sure we have the best security system anyway,” Chris suggested. “I want Luna to be safe. She won’t be able to come to the set every day, she’d get bored as hell.”

“Already on that, too.” Neil winked. “I got it covered. You concentrate on making the movie, and I’ll do the rest. Luna will have fun, I guarantee it.”

“Thanks, man. I owe you.”

“Yes you do.” Neil grinned. “Now, let’s talk about how smooth Anya’s skin looks. Do you think she’s had work done? I swear there used to be more wrinkles around her eyes.”

“I have no idea.” And he didn’t care. She wasn’t his problem anymore, except when it came to their daughter.

“Did you see that article in *Page Six* about her and that Russian Billionaire?” Neil asked. “Do you think he has anything to do with her sudden need to go away?”

“I don’t read that shit. And I don’t give a shit about any guy, as long as it doesn’t affect Luna.”

“You think she’ll use the old needle in the condom trick on him, too?”

Chris winced. Neil always walked the line between appropriate and completely fucking wrong. “Stop it.”

“Sorry.” Neil wrinkled his nose. “I’m just trying to bond with you over our mutual hatred of Anya Sky.”

“You ever thought it might be easier to bond over something less aggravating?” Chris grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and popped the cap. “Like sports or something?”

“I don’t like sports.”

“You don’t like Anya either,” Chris pointed out, lifting the bottle to his mouth.

“Yeah, but she’s so much more entertaining than watching sports. Plus I have the added pleasure of being able to say I told you so after every conversation we have about her.”

“Remind me why I keep you around again?”

“Because your life would fall apart without me.” Neil looked smug. “And because next time you meet a woman who’s going to take you for a ride you’ll listen to me. Right?”

“Right.” Chris set his bottle down. “Like I’m going to listen to relationship advice from the guy who never gets past a first date. Now I’m heading for the gym, call me if you need me.”

He’d run ten miles and hit the weights, because he needed to do something other than think about how he was going to juggle his first production with the needs of his daughter. Or how pissed he was with his ex for landing him in this situation. She knew how important this production was for him. He’d been talking about it for years, even when they were in their good times.

And it was the one thing that kept him going during the bad. During the times when he behaved worse than he should have, when he partied too hard, drank too much, did all the things that put his name in the wrong places.

This movie was supposed to be his comeback. His redemption. His chance to show everyone that he was more than a handsome face and muscled body. He wanted to make a movie that meant something. That made people feel things.

He wasn’t about to let Anya mess that up for him.

“How do I look?” Chelsea asked, holding the phone out so her sister could see her outfit. She was wearing a white shirt – almost buttoned to the neck – and pale blue jeans, along with a pair of sensible loafers that she hoped told whoever looked at them that she was somebody to rely on.

“You look sensible,” her sister, Ember said, smiling at her on the phone screen. “The white shirt is perfect. Not that you should have to worry about your clothes. You should just walk in there and tell them what bullshit this is. None of this is your fault, you shouldn’t have to pay for what he did.”

Chelsea swallowed. “It doesn’t matter whose fault it is. They won’t give me a reference. And if I don’t have a reference covering the last two years, I can’t get a job.”

“Just tell them he was a lecherous bastard and that it had nothing to do with you. But you look great, sweetie. Now go show them how good you are.”

If only it was that simple. Saying goodbye to her sister, Chelsea pressed the button for the crosswalk and waited for the cars to slow down. When the crossing sign turned green, she made her way over to the building that housed the Marx Nanny Agency, supplier of childcare to the Hollywood Elite. She walked into the lobby, her loafers slapping against the polished floor, and gave her name to the receptionist, who called up to the twentieth floor.

“You can go ahead,” she said, when she’d put the phone down. “Ms. Marx is expecting you.”

Lois Marx was an unstoppable force of a woman. In her early sixties, she’d built the Marx Agency up from nothing. When Chelsea walked through

the door, she was sitting at her desk, her silver gray hair haloed by the L.A. sun streaming through the floor to ceiling window behind her.

From there you could see the sprawl of the city toward the horizon. Cars moved continuously across the crisscross of highways, looking like ants from here. It was exhilarating, but made her miss the softer, beachy vista of her home town. Where life was slower and easier and people didn't assess you according to how much you earned or how you could help their career.

She'd worked for the Marx Agency for the past four years – since she'd graduated from college. Some of her old classmates thought she was crazy to become a nanny with her qualifications. Some of them had gone on to become teachers, or administrators in schools. Others had continued their academic studies. But she'd always wanted to work with children on a one-to-one basis. It gave her the opportunity to shape and help them without the pressures of curriculums, tests, and results.

Plus it paid well. Very well. Being a nanny to the Hollywood elite had helped her to pay off half her student loans so far.

And if she kept going for a few more years, she'd be able to buy her first condo.

That's if she managed to persuade Lois Marx that her problems with the Silber family weren't her fault.

"Chelsea, please take a seat." Lois gave her a soft smile. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." She nodded, making sure to smile. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

"I just spoke to Lauren Silber. I'm afraid she's adamant that they won't give you a reference." Lois shrugged. "That's going to limit your options going forward."

Of course it was. If she didn't have a reference for two years of work people were going to wonder why. And they'd jump to conclusions, ones which could severely impact her career. Chelsea swallowed.

"It wasn't my fault," she said softly.

"I know. But it really doesn't count for much I'm afraid. This is L.A., appearances matter. You're going to have to lay low for a little while. Maybe take up some short term assignments. Rebuild your résumé and stack up some good recommendations."

Chelsea nodded. "I can do that." She'd do whatever it took. She loved her job way too much to give up at the first hurdle. "Do you have anything like that on the books?"

“Not very much.” Lois pressed her lips together. “I’m not going to lie, you’re one of my best. Any other time and you’d have your pick of positions. But Lauren Silber has a lot of friends and they talk, you know? I’ve had people tell me explicitly that they don’t want to interview you for a role.”

Chelsea’s stomach turned. “So what should I do?”

Lois pulled out a piece of paper from her inbox. “I have one job that might work. Especially if we sell you right. Though I have to tell you there’s a lot of competition for this one. And I can’t show favoritism, so I’ll be putting up all my best candidates.”

She immediately wanted that job. A first step to redemption, to clear the dirty mark against her name. “How long is it for?”

“Two months. Actually, this might work. You come from the Southern California coast, right?”

“Yes.” She was intrigued now. “What town is it in?”

“Just outside a little town called Angel Sands. A couple of hours from here.”

Her chest tightened. “I grew up there.” Surely that was a sign. This was meant to be. “I know the area really well. My family’s still there. It’s a great place for kids.”

Lois smiled. “Well that’s encouraging. And I can’t help but think that getting out of L.A. for a few weeks will do your résumé some good. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The interviews are this afternoon, so let’s see how it goes.”

“So soon? When does the job start?”

“Next week.”

Chelsea’s heart beat a little faster. She could do this, she knew she could. She was a good nanny, she loved kids. She’d just had a bad few months, that was all.

“Okay, please put me forward.” She wanted this job. “And thank you for giving me another chance. I really appreciate it.”

The production office in L.A. where the interviews were taking place was surprisingly modest. It was small but pretty, with a polished wooden floor scattered with oversized plants, plus three desks and walls covered with

framed posters of black and white movies that she'd never heard of.

The man looked up as soon as she walked in, and she felt her body relax. Lois hadn't given her many details about the assignment – the family had asked for privacy – so she'd imagined it was some Hollywood hotshot who would have heard all about her fall from grace.

But instead there was a thirty-something guy with sandy hair and a kind smile. “Chelsea Kennedy?” he asked, standing.

“Yes, that's me.”

“Great. I'm Neil Rickards.” He walked around the desk and held his hand out. She shook it firmly. “Please take a seat. Would you like a drink?”

“Water would be great.”

He pressed a button on the desk. “Alice, two waters, please.” Sitting on the edge of the desk, he grabbed a piece of paper that she recognized as her résumé. “So, Chelsea, tell me about yourself.”

So they were going straight into this. She took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Where should I start?”

“You studied Early Childhood Development?”

“Yes, that's right. In Sacramento at California State. I got my degree and started working as a nanny upon graduation.”

“What made you decide to become a nanny?” he asked.

She tipped her head to the side. “It sounds cliché, but I love children. I love working with them. There are some jobs that you do to earn a living, and some that you do because they fulfill you, and for me nannying is the latter. I like what I do and I'm good at it. That makes it a pretty good job for me.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I checked your references.”

She pulled her lip between her teeth, knowing what was coming.

“Could you tell me why your last job refused to give you one?”

Her throat felt scratchy, like somebody had run sandpaper over it. “We had a difference of opinion.”

“What kind of difference?” His smile was gone.

“I'm afraid I can't tell you that. I signed a non-disclosure agreement.”

“That's convenient.”

She kept her gaze steady. “It's normal. As you probably know. I assume you'd want me to sign an NDA if I got the job working for you.”

He blinked. “You won't be working for me.”

Oh. So that was it. Over in less than five minutes.

He continued, “I'm doing the initial interviews, but it's my boss you'd be

working for if you got the job. Taking care of his daughter while he films on location. So I need to ask you, is there any reason I should know about why you wouldn't be a good nanny for him?"

"No." Her voice was sure. "I'm a good nanny. I'd take excellent care of his daughter. Am I correct that the position is during a stay in Southern California?"

"Yes, that's right." He nodded.

"I was born in Angel Sands. I know the area well. It's a great place to spend the summer."

He gave her an appraising look. "That's interesting."

It felt like a lifeline and she grabbed it with full force. "There's a lot of educational opportunities there. I know about the area marine life, and have contacts with a whaleboat company that does tours. There's also a big festival in Angel Sands in the summer, to celebrate the town's commencement. I know a lot of people there, and I can make sure your boss' daughter has an enjoyable and educational summer."

"Mmhm." He raised a brow. "This is all good stuff. But your lack of reference makes things very difficult."

"I have other references. A lot of them. I'd be happy to furnish you with a list if you need it. Plus my academic references, too."

"But not your most recent one." He wasn't letting go of it.

"No, unfortunately I can't do anything about that one." Was it too early to start pleading? To tell him that unless she got a job she was in trouble? "But I can promise you that the difference between me and the family had nothing to do with the child I took care of, nor my abilities as a nanny. And the agency will vouch for me. They wouldn't have sent me for this interview if they didn't believe I was a reliable worker."

His phone buzzed and he lifted it, then quickly swiped his fingers across the screen. "Can you wait here a moment please?"

"Of course."

He pushed himself off the edge of the desk where he'd been sitting and walked across the office, giving her a quick glance before he walked out of the door. Chelsea shifted in her seat and looked around the room, taking in the view of a busy road outside, and the piles of papers on the desk.

She was half inclined to leave, because it was obvious her lack of reference was a problem. Not that she'd expected it to be anything else. If she had kids, she'd probably feel the same way. She'd want somebody with a

pristine record to take care of them.

And that wasn't her.

"None of them are suitable?" Chris asked, walking toward Neil who was waiting for him on the production office steps. "Not one?"

"The first two were actresses and more interested in whether you could give them a step up the career ladder than anything else. The next one can only work weekdays nine to five. And the last one..." Neil sighed. "She seems good on paper but there's a problem with her references."

"What kind of problem?"

"She doesn't have one for her last job."

"So let's call them up and get one." He didn't have time for this. He had a meeting across town in an hour and everybody knew it would take at least an hour and a half to get there. He'd only dropped in to pick up some papers he needed.

"I spoke to the agency. No dice. It's a damn shame because she'd be perfect. Even knows the area – she grew up there."

Chris frowned. "Can you call another agency?"

"I already did before the last interview. There's nobody available on this short of notice. Nobody up to our standards anyway."

"Shit."

"I know." Neil shrugged. "I'll try a local agency instead. Maybe we can get a couple of nannies on a rota." He glanced at Chris. "You heading out again?"

"Yeah, just need a couple of things."

"You want me to get them? Candidate four is still in your office."

"She's here?"

"Until I show her the door, yeah. I got your message mid interview." Neil raised an eyebrow. "I probably should have thrown her out right away, but the woman looked so hopeful when I asked her about herself. I'm just a sucker for a sob story."

Ignoring his dramatics, Chris looked at him. "If she had a reference you'd think she was perfect, right?"

"Yep."

“So why don’t I interview her now, and you can pursue this reference thing. Find out why she isn’t getting one, and whether it’s a problem?”

Neil looked surprised. “Aren’t you supposed to be at a meeting?”

“I’m always supposed to be somewhere,” Chris said, walking up the stairs and pushing the door open. “You can call and tell them I’m stuck on the freeway.

“Great, thanks.”

Chris didn’t have to look to know Neil was rolling his eyes. He hated lateness, and really hated having to apologize on Chris’ behalf.

“And can you grab me a coffee?” Chris asked.

Neil gave him a sour smile. “It’ll be my pleasure.”

Ignoring his snark, Chris opened his office door. At first all he saw was her hair. Chestnut brown waves that caught the sun on her crown, and rippled all the way down her back.

“Miss...” Shit, he didn’t ask Neil for her name.

The woman whipped around, her eyes widening. “Kennedy,” she said softly. “Chelsea Kennedy.” Standing, she walked toward him, holding out her hand. “You must be the boss.”

She had wide hazel eyes that seemed to see right through him, and soft pink lips that curved into a half smile. Her hand was slender as she placed it in his palm, and it took him a moment to remember he was supposed to be shaking it.

“Chelsea,” he murmured. “I’m Chris Vaughn.”

“I know who you are.”

He lifted a brow. “Don’t believe all the bad stuff.” It was only half a joke.

“I won’t if you won’t.” There was a husk to her voice that did something to him.

“Will you take a seat?” he asked, gesturing to the chair she’d been sitting in moments before. He took his own, glad for the barrier of his desk between them.

“Is your assistant coming back?” she asked.

“No, you’ll have to put up with me.”

She smiled and it looked genuine. And so damn pretty. “That’s good. I never got to ask about your daughter. I don’t even know her age.”

“Her name is Luna and she’s six.”

Chelsea’s eyes lit up. “That’s the perfect age. So much fun and so inquisitive, too. Does she live with you full time?”

“No, I share custody with her mother. But for the summer she’ll be joining me in Angel Sands. I’ve got eight weeks of filming scheduled.”

“It’s the perfect place for a child your daughter’s age,” Chelsea told him, her eyes meeting his. “She’ll have a ball. There’s a long beach, a pier, and so many little shops. It’s like going back in time fifty years.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there.”

“You have? Did you go into the shops?”

“Only the coffee shop.”

“Déjà Brew? Isn’t it great? My sister’s friend owns it.”

“Yeah, it was surprisingly good.” He pretty much ran on caffeine, and had drunk two cups while he was there.

“Where will you be filming?”

“You know the new resort?”

“Silver Sands? Yes. It’s fairly new though. Growing up it was like a Scooby Doo ghost village.”

There was something about her enthusiasm that he liked. “We’ll be filming at a cove around the coast from there, along with about a dozen different locations along the beach and cliffs.”

“That’ll get all the locals talking.” She smiled. “You’ll be the most exciting thing to happen to the town in years.”

“The thing is,” he said, leaning in. He could smell her perfume, floral and light. “I’m also producing this movie, so I’ll need to be on set from morning ‘til night. Sometimes through the night. My ex and I had planned for her to have Luna while I’m working this summer, but that fell through. So now I need somebody I can rely on to make sure my daughter is happy and has a good summer.”

“I can do that.”

He didn’t doubt it. “I’m sure you can,” he said. “But without a reference I don’t see how I can employ you.”

The smile melted from her lips. “I understand. I’d feel the same if I was you.” She stood. “Thank you for your time anyway. And I wish you luck in finding a nanny.” Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “And have a wonderful stay in Angel Sands. It really is a beautiful town. Your daughter will love it.”

She looked like she was about to cry, and dammit he was a sucker for tears. *You’re a sucker for pretty women, too*, the little voice in his head told him. He ignored it, the way he ignored Neil when he annoyed him.

She turned and was heading for the door. He stood, his brow wrinkling.
“Wait!”

Her progress halted. She pulled back the hand that had been reaching for the door handle and turned to look at him. Their gazes met and it felt like a punch to his gut. What the hell was wrong with him?

“I’m not saying I’ll offer you the job,” he told her, his voice thick. “But give me a day. I’ll think about it.” And get Neil to run some checks on her. If they came back clean...

She blinked. “Okay.”

“Thank you for your time, Miss Kennedy.”

Her eyes caught his. “It’s been a pleasure.”

Oh baby, she had no idea. She walked out of the door and he looked at the warm wood for a moment, trying to figure out why he’d just given her hope.

Even if she came back clean it was dangerous to have a woman that attractive in his house. But was that any reason to discount her? He’d been judged on his looks enough to know how unfair it was. How hard it was to make people see past the façade. To show that he was worth so much more than a pretty face.

No, he wouldn’t discount her. But he wasn’t doing anything until he had the go-ahead from Neil.

And then? Well the good news was he’d be spending way too much time working to see her. He’d worked with enough attractive women to know how to keep his libido exactly where it belonged. If she was a good nanny and could take care of his kid, that was all that mattered for him.

Home for the past few years had been an apartment in the hillside neighborhood of Los Feliz. She'd moved in here when she got her first job – a non-residential one that required her to be at her employer's house from eight a.m. to eight p.m. – and hadn't bothered to move since, even though it was tiny. She was hardly here anyway. It just served as a base in between jobs or when she had a weekend off.

But now, even though the evening sun was shining through the freshly cleaned windows, it felt more like a prison cell than a welcoming home.

She knew it was her bad mood. She'd come back from her interview and spent the next couple of hours moping. Sitting on the sofa with a cup of English Breakfast tea that had gotten cold before she could drink it, she'd gone through at least four job websites, looking for something – *anything* – that she could do just to keep paying the rent and her bills.

The trouble was, the jobs she was qualified to do required references. And the jobs she could get without references were in high demand, thanks to the number of out-of-work actors and actresses in town who also had to pay the rent.

Ugh. Enough of this doom and gloom. She pushed herself up to standing, and grabbed the watering can she kept beside her window boxes. She'd always loved growing plants. When she was away she paid a neighbor's son to keep them watered, but whenever she was home it was her favorite part of the day. Her dwarf lemon tree had tiny yellow fruit and just seeing them made her feel better. She'd grown this tree from a tiny sapling, feeding it and watering it until it started to bear fruit.

She could rebuild her life, too. If she just found the right way to do it.

An image of *his* piercing blue eyes flashed into her mind. *Chris Vaughn*. It had been a shock to see him in real life. Not because he was famous – she’d met more than her fair share of celebrities over the years. Not just those she’d worked for but their friends and colleagues. They were at dinner parties and beach get-togethers and wherever else she was required to look after the children of her bosses.

No, it wasn’t his fame that shocked her. It was something different. It was the way he seemed to see inside of her for a fraction of a moment. Like he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Yeah, that was stupid.

And it didn’t matter, because she’d messed that interview up by having no reference. The way everything seemed messed up since she’d worked for the Silbers. Her mouth went dry at the memory of that family. Of the way she’d been escorted out of the house with only her suitcase, not even allowed to say goodbye to the children.

Maybe it was for the best that she didn’t get the job working for Chris. Not because she didn’t trust herself to behave with him, but because people would talk all over again. A single dad and a single nanny weren’t a good combination, even if he was working nonstop and surrounded by other staff.

The shrill ring of her phone cut through her thoughts, making her heart leap in her chest.

When she saw her sister’s name on the screen she tried not to feel disappointed. “Hey,” she said, when she swiped the screen. “Two calls in one day, what’s going on?”

“I just wanted to hear how it went with the agency?” Ember said, sounding hopeful.

Chelsea’s chest tightened. Her big sister would be more disappointed than she was. “No dice. They sent me for an interview just in case but the lack of reference did me in.”

“Damn,” Ember said. “Why won’t they just trust that you’re a good person? Or let me give you a reference? It’s so annoying.”

“That’s life,” Chelsea replied, sounding more flippant than she felt. But she didn’t want Ember to feel sorry for her. She’d work this out somehow.

“Yeah, but just for once I’d like to see the good guy win, you know?”

“I know.”

The sun was beginning to set, turning the palm trees outside her window

into dark silhouettes. The long, low cityscape was painted in orange and purple hues. Chelsea pulled her eyes away from the vista and tried to concentrate on what her sister was saying.

“... so he said he’d look after Arthur.”

“What?” Chelsea said. “I didn’t hear that.”

“I’ve talked to Lucas and I’m going to come stay with you for a few days. Just to cheer you up. He and Arthur can have some daddy and son time.”

“No, you can’t do that. Your family needs you. And anyway, I’m fine.” The last thing she needed was to feel guilty about her sister leaving her husband and son behind.

“You’re not fine, I know you’re not. Come on, let me do the big sister thing. We’ll get drunk and rant about guys and go out and paint the town red.”

“As lovely as that sounds, I’m thinking of leaving the city for a little while.” The idea was growing in her mind. Coalescing. The sooner she got out of here the better. This was a big country, she didn’t have to stay here and look after the families of the rich and famous. She could move somewhere smaller, maybe. Where the rent was cheaper and jobs were available and people didn’t judge you just because you’d made a stupid mistake.

“You are? Where?”

“I don’t know.”

Ember’s voice softened. “Come home to us. Lucas and I have space. We can put you up here.”

“You don’t have any space.” Chelsea smiled, because she knew her sister would give up anything for her. “If I came home I’d move in with mom.”

“So you’re thinking about it?”

“Not really. I’m just talking out loud.” All she knew was she had to get away from here. “And anyway, wherever I go I need to find a job first.”

“I’ll help you find one,” her sister offered.

“It’s okay, I can find my own job. But I appreciate the offer.”

“I just want to take care of you. You’ve been through a lot and you’re suffering for somebody else’s choices.”

“And this is why I love you.”

“I love you, too. We all do. Come home and we’ll show you how much.”

“She’s as clean as a whistle, apart from that one reference,” Neil said, walking into the office where Chris was leaning over his laptop, finalizing the shooting schedule.

Chris looked up, blinking because he’d been staring at the screen for too goddamned long

“The nanny?”

“Yeah. I spoke to four of her previous families. Every single one of them raved about her. I got a background check run and there’s nothing there, not even a speeding ticket. I also talked to Liv.”

“Our Liv?” Liv Howard was an entertainment lawyer he’d known for years. She was one of the producers on his movie.

“Yeah, she’s from Angel Sands too, remember?”

Of course he remembered, she was the one to recommend the resort as a possible filming location. She’d even gone down to scout out suitable places to film.

“What did she say?”

“That she knew of the family. Hadn’t heard anything bad about them or Chelsea. I’m telling you, if I hadn’t seen her with my own eyes I’d swear she should be wearing a fucking halo.

Chris bit down a smile. Neil always did like to exaggerate. “And the lack of reference for the last family?”

“The Silbers. I tried to talk to them but they’re away right now. I know somebody who knows them, so I can find out more, but it’s gonna take time.”

“How long?” Chris asked him.

“I’ve no idea. A week maybe? According to the housekeeper, they’re deliberately uncontactable.” He lifted a brow. “Completely inconvenient if you ask me.”

“We don’t have a few days.”

“I know. And I called every agency in town and nobody else comes close to this girl. You have the choice between a Ferrari that might have come from the black market, and a Volkswagen that’s had one careful elderly lady owner.”

Chris frowned. “And Miss Kennedy is the Ferrari?”

“Yup.” Neil nodded, his smile wry. “Looks great on paper but every chance you’ll end up with buyer’s remorse. So you have to ask yourself, do you want the possibly illegal Ferrari or the trusty VW?”

“What do you think?”

Neil leaned against the wall looking deep in thought. “I think we should go for...” He grimaced. “Ah, I don’t know.”

Chris shook his head. He really didn’t have time for this. “Offer her the job.”

Neil blinked at his decisiveness. “Seriously?”

He nodded. “Yeah. But we’ll do it sensibly. My first week of shooting is mostly in the day. You stay around the house with her and make sure she’s doing her job. After that we can confirm with the Silbers. And if what they say is bad...”

“We’ll find a rusty VW Beetle.”

“Can we stop with the car analogies now?” Chris raised a brow. “Just call her and offer her the damn job and be done.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay then.” Neil pulled out his phone, sliding his fingers along the screen. A ringing tone echoed from his speaker.

“Do I have to listen in?” Chris asked.

“She’s your nanny,” Neil said, then he shut up when a throaty voice answered.

“Hello?”

Chris tried to ignore how his body reacted to the sound. Damn, Neil had gotten it so right. She was a Ferrari. Gorgeous to look at, perfectly run. And he was a goddamned Neanderthal because he needed to stop thinking about her like that.

“Miss Kennedy? It’s Neil Rickards.”

“Oh. Hello Mr. Rickards.” She sounded surprised.

“I wanted to let you know the outcome of your interview.”

“That’s okay,” she said, her voice resigned. “I really wasn’t expecting a call. But it’s kind of you to let me know.”

Neil grinned. He was enjoying this. Chris shook his head, just tell the poor woman, dammit.

“Obviously we were concerned about your lack of reference. It put us in a difficult position.”

“I understand.”

Chris had had enough. “Neil,” he barked out.

Neil lifted his head, his eyes wide. “What?”

“Just tell her.”

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” she asked.

“We’d like to offer you the job,” Neil told her, making a face at Chris.

There was silence. Neil looked at Chris again, grinning this time.

“I’m sorry, what?” she finally replied, her voice hushed.

“It’s on a probationary basis, confirming some checks. But in the meantime, we’d like you to start on Monday. I’ll send you the details of the house in Silver Sands and we’ll meet you there.”

“Oh!” she breathed. “Oh my God!” Her voice got louder. “Are you serious right now?” There was another moment of silence, as though she was trying to gather herself. “Of course. That’s wonderful. I’d love to take the job.”

I’d love to take you.

The thought came out of nowhere. And it was so damn inappropriate, Chris wanted to slap himself.

She was Luna’s nanny. And he didn’t trust her as far as he could throw her. The last thing he needed was to be attracted to her.

Damn. Had he just made a terrible decision?

There was nowhere more beautiful than the little town of Angel Sands on a summer's day. Chelsea steered her car off the Pacific Coast highway and onto the small cliff road that wound down toward the bay, the California sun blasting in through her window, warming her skin and making her smile.

She had a job. Even better, it was close to her hometown and her family. Sure, she'd be busy working, but even nannies got time off. And when she did, she couldn't wait to spend time with her mom and her sister, not to mention her nephew. Maybe after the terrible year that she had, things were finally going to turn around for her.

Neil had sent her the details of the house they'd be staying in, along with an employment contract and confirmation of her salary. All three of them had made her smile, because this was turning out to be so much better than what she'd dreamed.

To her right, the Pacific Ocean stretched out as far as the eye could see, the tips of the waves sparkling like diamonds beneath the sun's rays. She followed the road past expensive cliffside houses and the Silver Sands Resort that dominated the bay. Finally she reached her destination, turning into a paved driveway lined with palm trees.

She vaguely remembered this place being built when she was a kid, not that she'd paid much attention then. It was outside of Angel Sands, and so expensive that nobody she knew could ever afford it. Like so many houses on this stretch of Silver Sands, it was aimed at the elite.

Two stories clad with gray marble and white stone, the house was dominated by huge windows that reflected the surrounding nature. Mountains

and rocks, palm trees and shrubs, and her own car as she made her way past what looked like an oversize garage with its own living accommodation toward the house itself.

There were two cars parked outside. A Mercedes and a Chevy Tahoe. She felt stupid parking next to them in her little ten year old Volkswagen. She'd always intended on upgrading but it felt like an unnecessary expense when she was nearly always allocated a family car when she took on a new job, and this one was still reliable when needed.

"Miss Kennedy," somebody called out.

She looked up to see Neil Rickards walking out of the garage.

"Hi." She smiled at him. "What a beautiful day."

His expression softened. "Yes it is. Come inside and I'll take you on a tour."

"Is Luna here yet?" she asked. Neil had told her she would be coming down today. He and Chris had arrived two days earlier. She was excited to meet the little girl she'd be taking care of. Those first meetings were always awkward yet important. She wanted to get to know her, find out what made her tick. How she could make sure she had a great summer.

"She arrived an hour ago. She and Chris are somewhere inside." Neil gestured at the overwhelming home. "Do you have luggage to bring in?"

"Oh yes." She turned to her car and popped the trunk, hefting her suitcase out and grabbing her travel bag. It was summer so she'd been able to pack light, but she'd put in a few extra things like evening dresses and a business suit in case she was required to take Luna to something more fancy.

The rest of her clothes were shorts and swimwear. What else would you take to the beach?

"Let me take that," Neil said, his hand brushing hers to grab the case. He took it easily, walking ahead of her as she swung her bag over her shoulder and closed up the car.

"Have you been to this house before?" he asked as they made it to the gleaming white steps that led up to the front door.

"No," she admitted. "I didn't run in those kind of circles growing up."

He gave her an appraising look. "Nor did I," he murmured. "Okay, so the entry system is on a keypad. You'll have your own code, and that sends an alert to the security company that you and Luna are home.

"Is it monitored twenty-four-seven?" she asked.

"Yes. We take security seriously. They'll monitor it remotely unless we

need them on site for any reason.”

“What kind of reason?” she asked.

He shrugged. “If there’s any danger.”

She nodded. “That’s understandable. But you’ll find this area is very quiet and peaceful. Not too many dangers around here.”

“That’s how we hope to keep it,” he said lightly, tapping a code before pushing the door open. He put her case on the floor and stepped aside to let her through.

The hallway was expansive, the floor clad in the same marble as the exterior of the house. The walls were painted bright white and covered in what looked like expensive artwork. At the end a sweeping staircase led up to the second floor.

“This is the hallway,” Neil murmured, in case she hadn’t worked it out. “Over there is the living room. To your left is the kitchen, maybe we’ll start there first.

“Sure.”

The kitchen was as impressive as she’d expected for a home like this. Once again it was all white, with a huge island in the middle that could seat at least sixteen people around it without looking busy. It opened up to a huge patio area, that covered as much floor space as the interior, with distinct seating areas and an outdoor grill room, leading to a large swimming pool surrounded by a fence.

“Is the gate lockable?” she asked Neil.

A smile played at his lips. “First thing Chris asked, too. Yes it is.”

“Good. And I see there’s a path leading down to the cliff edge.”

“Another fence and lockable gate are going in there today. The crew should be here soon. Luna won’t be able to get out there without one of us. Not that she would, she’s a good kid.”

“Better to be safe though.” Her eyes met Neil’s. He nodded with understanding.

“Yes, definitely.”

“And the steps? They lead down to the ocean?”

He nodded. “They do. They’re wide and easy to navigate with handrails on each side. And there’s a lockable gate at the bottom which stops people from getting in.”

“It’s like a good looking Fort Knox,” she quipped and his smile widened.

“A beautiful Alcatraz,” he replied, winking.

There was no sign of her boss and his daughter as Neil continued on the tour. He showed her the laundry room and the den where she and Luna could hang out, along with her bedroom and Luna's on the second floor. Luna's bedroom was in the center, and hers on the left. She had a view of the mountains rather than the ocean but it was still gorgeous.

"The master suite is there," Neil said, gesturing at the only door on the other side of the second floor. "Three rooms in total. Completely over the top but amazing view of the ocean. Plus he has a balcony to die for."

Neil was relaxing. She liked it. Maybe working with him would be fun.

"Well he's the boss." She shrugged.

He nodded. "That he is."

"Where do you sleep?" she asked him.

Neil's eyes widened. "Oh, not here."

"No?" She tipped her head to the side. "Then where?"

"I rented an apartment a mile or so away. If I had to live with him as well as work with him one of us would probably end up dead."

She wasn't sure whether or not to laugh. It was a joke, right? Because she had to live and work with him. She opened her mouth to ask why he was hard to live with, but shut it again because she didn't like gossip. And though Neil was being nice, his loyalty would always be with his boss.

Or it should be.

"So it's just the three of us and our friendly remote security guards," she said, as he led her back down the stairs.

"Only at night. I'll be here in the day if Chris is. Or sometimes if he isn't. And when I'm not here I'll be at the set with him. And I'm always on call if he needs me." Neil pushed the door to the kitchen open. "Would you like a drink? We have everything stocked. We have a housekeeper come in daily and she can buy in any groceries you want. She'll clean the rooms and keep everything tidy, but you'll be responsible for Luna's laundry and her meals."

"Of course." Chelsea nodded. "And I'd love a coffee if you have one."

"We have a machine," Neil said. "Not a pod one, either. Chris is very particular about his coffee."

Of course he was. Along with most of L.A. he was probably particular about everything he put between his lips.

And then she was thinking about his mouth and... *damn!* Inappropriate much?

"There's an instruction book by the machine but I'll make it this time and

you can watch. How do you like it?” Neil asked.

“White no sugar please.”

“Coming up.”

Neil continued making small talk as he pressed a button to grind the beans, then another to steam the milk. She leaned on the counter, watching as he pressed the button to make a flat white, internally thanking God there was a manual. She needed caffeine in the mornings like she needed oxygen, so she'd have to get used to this beast of a machine.

“The security guard,” she said, when he passed her a mug of steaming coffee. “Will he accompany Luna and me when we leave the house?”

“You won't be leaving the house,” a deep voice came from behind. She turned to see Chris standing there, a little girl next to him. Luna was holding onto his arm, a shy look on her face.

She was breathtakingly beautiful, her dark hair as straight as iron as it hung down to her shoulders. She had the thickest eyelashes Chelsea had ever seen, sweeping down over wide pale blue eyes that were staring right at her. Chelsea smiled at her, and the corners of Luna's lips twitched.

“Hey Luna,” she said, ignoring her father for a moment, though she intended to ask why the hell they needed to be stuck in the house. “I'm Chelsea. It's so great to meet you.”

Luna tightened her grip on her father's wrist. “Hi.”

“Hey, you're missing some teeth. That's cool!” Chelsea walked over to her, squatting down to be at her height.

“I've lost one on the bottom, too,” Luna whispered. The gap gave her a slight lisp. It would be gone when her adult teeth came in.

“Did the tooth fairy come?”

Luna nodded. “She left me a necklace.”

“Oh wow. Maybe you can show it to me some time?”

“It's in my mommy's safe. She says it's too expensive to wear.”

“Never mind. Maybe we can make a necklace out of shells while we're here?” Chelsea said. “We could collect some from the beach.”

Luna smiled, a dimple dancing on her cheek. “You can make necklaces from shells?”

“Yep.” Chelsea nodded. She liked Luna already. She was shy but Chelsea sensed that she wanted to open up. Hopefully over the next few days she'd do exactly that. “I used to do it every summer. Did you know I grew up here? When I was your age, I used to love going to the beach and finding all the

best shells.” She leaned closer to the little girl and whispered, “Don’t tell anybody, but I still love it.”

“Can we make shell necklaces, Daddy?” Luna asked, looking up at her father. “Right now?”

Chelsea followed the little girl’s gaze. Instead of looking at his daughter he was looking right at her, his eyes unreadable. “Not now,” he said. “Why don’t you go find a book to read while I talk to Miss Kennedy?”

“Later maybe?”

“Now.”

Luna sighed. “Okay.” She looked at Chelsea with hope in her eyes. “I’ll see you soon?”

“Yes you will.” Chelsea smiled warmly at her.

As soon as Luna skipped out of the kitchen, Chelsea pushed herself up to standing. She hadn’t realized Chris was so close – enough for her arm to brush his thigh as she stood. Her heart leapt as she stepped back and lifted her gaze to his.

“Is everything okay?” she asked him.

“I just told you that you wouldn’t be leaving the house. Then you raised her hopes about making shell necklaces.”

Chelsea blinked. Who was this guy? The easy-going man she’d met at the interview had disappeared. She didn’t like it. “But we’re here for two months. Surely we’ll be able to go to different places? You can’t keep a kid locked up for that long.”

His expression was implacable. “She’s my daughter. You’ll do what I wish.”

Okay then. Taking a deep breath, she tried to find the right words. “There are a lot of educational opportunities on the beach. And all around the town. She needs to be around other children, too. It’s important at her age.”

“I understand what’s important for my daughter. But so is her security. And while we’re getting to know this place – and you – I’d prefer to keep you in one place.”

Ah. So he didn’t trust her. Understandable but aggravating. It made her wonder why he’d even given her the job in the first place, though. “And when you get to know this place and me?”

“Then we’ll revisit. In the meantime, if you want shells to make a necklace, Neil will get them for you.”

Neil snorted. “I’m not picking up shells. Give me a break.”

“You’ll do what I ask you to do,” Chris said sharply. The fact he was pissed with his longstanding PA too made her feel slightly better. Maybe he was just in a bad mood.

But she still hated that somehow she’d gotten off to a bad start, even if it wasn’t her fault. “I’m sorry if I upset you,” she told him. “I was just trying to make a bond with Luna. It’s important.”

“I know.” His eyes caught hers again. Looking at him was like staring at the sun. He was so beautiful it was almost painful to look at. She wondered if he enjoyed the effect he had on people or if he hated it.

She’d hate it for sure. She’d want people to see her for more than a pretty face.

“I’d really like us to be able to leave the house soon,” Chelsea said. “I know this town well. Luna will be safe here. I guarantee it.”

“We’ll talk about it in a couple of days. I need to get out of here now.” He glanced at Neil. “You ready?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Okay.” He turned without saying goodbye to Chelsea. She glanced at Neil who shrugged. Maybe he was used to his boss see-sawing between charm and assholery. Ugh, maybe she’d have to get used to it, too.

“Luna?” he called out.

“Yes?” The little girl skipped back into the kitchen holding a Junie B. Jones book.

“I’m leaving now. Chelsea will take care of you.”

Luna nodded. “Will you be back soon?”

“I don’t know. Hopefully before bedtime.”

The little girl tried to hide her disappointment, and it touched Chelsea’s heart. “Okay, Daddy.”

He glanced at Chelsea again. “There are cameras in every room.”

She got it. Big Brother was watching. “Even in my bedroom?” She regretted saying it as soon as the words left her mouth. He was silent for a moment. His eyes dipped to her chest then back to her face.

“I’ll make sure that one’s turned off.”

Her cheeks flamed. “Thank you.”

“Take care of her.”

“I will,” she promised. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

But she could tell that he did from his narrow eyes, and the thin line of his mouth. He kissed Luna and left the kitchen, followed closely by Neil who

flashed her a smile. "I'll call you to check in," he promised. "And to let you know when we'll be back."

"That would be good." She nodded, still feeling weirded out. "Thank you."

When she heard the door slam, she turned back to Luna who was still clutching her book. "Can you read that by yourself?" she asked her.

Luna nodded. "Some of it. I have problems with big words."

Chelsea smiled. "Well I can help you with them. Why don't we grab a snack and go read it on the terrace outside? It's a beautiful day. We don't want to be cooped up in here."

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Even on a relatively modest budget, filming on location required a lot of people and equipment. There were multiple trailers for the actors, trucks for the catering, tents and outside seating for extras who would need to wait around a lot in the California heat between takes. And that was before you even got to the equipment and the crew who spent half their time running between trailers and the set itself, making sure everybody and everything was where it was supposed to be.

The first scene didn't have Chris in it at all. He sat in a black fold up chair with his name on it, watching as the woman who played his wife in the movie sat and talked to his on screen brother about the fact she couldn't cope with his PTSD any more.

As a producer, he had very little artistic input once shooting commenced. It was the director's vision that counted once the cameras rolled, along with the actors who discussed their roles and motivation before each scene. Sure, when he was acting he'd have an input, but right now he was just observing.

And marveling that this production was his. That the subsequent movie would be a result of days reading a book that gripped him, of researching the author, of negotiating rights, of finding the perfect director to take the lead in shaping his vision.

With all the intricate work it took to make a movie, it was a minor miracle anything actually reached the big screen. No wonder so many failed at the option stage.

His friend and co-producer, Liv Howard, wandered over, a smile crinkling her face.

“How’s Luna settling in?” she asked him.

He and Liv had met years ago when he needed to get out of a contract he’d signed. She’d negotiated his release and made him promise never to sign something without her checking it again.

When she’d decided she wanted to move into producing, the tables had turned and she’d come to him for advice. He’d told her about this project and things had gone from there.

She and her fiancé, Adrian, had been pivotal in getting the locations set up here. And though most of her work was done before shooting, she was here to troubleshoot legal problems.

And there were always legal problems.

“She’s doing good.” He smiled, because he’d never get tired of talking about his daughter.

“And the nanny Neil called me about? Did she turn out okay?”

“So far so good. It’s early days, but I don’t have any complaints. And Luna likes her.”

“That’s the main thing, right?” Liv winked. “Gotta keep the little ones happy. Did I tell you that Adrian knows her brother-in-law?”

“No.” This was interesting. “Did he talk to him?”

“Only casually. Said the same thing I already knew, she’s squeaky clean. He only has good things to say about her. Whatever happened with her reference it sounds like a mix up.” Liv shrugged. “I know she was a risk but it feels like a safe one.”

“Thanks,” Chris said to her. “I appreciate you checking it out.”

Ten minutes later, Liv had left to take a call and Neil wandered over from the craft table, two Styrofoam cups in his hand. He gave one to Chris and sipped at the other, the two of them looking at the set that included a ramshackle wooden hut where Chris’ character spent the majority of his later life.

“I checked with the security guy then watched the cameras. All’s good. They’ve been reading then they went for a walk around the grounds. She seems to be knowledgeable on all the plants – Luna looked pretty happy.”

“I bet she asked her about growing watermelons,” Chris murmured, taking a sip of the coffee. It was nowhere near as good as the stuff he got in LA.

“Probably.”

“We’re finishing shooting at eight. Can you go there at six and supervise

things for me?”

“Sure,” Neil said. “But it all looks good, you know?”

“Yeah. Let’s make sure it stays that way.”

Neil’s phone rang. He glanced at the screen. “It’s her. You think she knows we’re watching?”

Chris said nothing, and Neil answered, listening for a moment before talking into the mouthpiece. “You’ll have to ask the boss,” he said, offering the phone to Chris.

Chris frowned. What did she want? Only one way to find out.

“Chelsea?”

“Mr. Vaughn.” The way she said it made his stomach tighten. “I’d like to take Luna swimming in the pool.”

“Now?”

“Yes. It’s really warm out here and she needs to cool off. Plus the exercise will do us both good. I’m a qualified swimming instructor and I’m first aid trained. She’s told me she can swim but sometimes likes to use a noodle and I can see there are some in the pool area.”

He shifted in his seat. “Can it not wait until tomorrow?” He knew he was being an asshole. Part of it was the buyer’s remorse Neil had warned him about. Leaving Luna with somebody who had no reference from her last job was stupid, even if Liv’s contacts could vouch for her.

And the other part? The stupid attraction that he was trying his best to ignore. She was beautiful and he had to live with her in his house.

Chelsea let out a breath. “I guess we could wait, but she’s bored. You have a beautiful house but she needs stimulation. There’s only so much exercise you can get from walking around the grounds.”

He sighed. “Okay. I’ll ask Neil to let the guard service know. They monitor the pool among other things.”

“Will you be filming us?” she asked, her voice light, as though she was trying to diffuse the tension.

“Yes.”

“I’ll make sure to wear something suitable then.”

She was teasing. He liked it and he hated it. Look but don’t touch. She’s your kid’s nanny.

“You do that,” he said softly. “And Chelsea?”

“Yes?”

“My name’s Chris. You can stop with the Mr. Vaughn shit.” *Because it*

turns me on and I don't need that right now.

“Okay... Chris.”

That was no better. What was it about this woman? Before she arrived he'd decided to be aloof. Icy, even. It was better that way. She was here to take care of Luna, not provide him with some kind of twisted entertainment. Yet here he was, entertained.

“Goodbye Chelsea. Enjoy your swim.”

“We will. Enjoy your movie.”

He bit down a smile. “I will. See you tonight.” He handed Neil back the phone. His assistant took it, saying nothing, but the expression on his face was easily readable.

He looked knowingly. And it was annoying.

“What?” Chris asked, when the silence continued.

“You want me to make sure the security cameras are turned on at the pool.”

Chris swallowed. “Yeah. But try not to look. Let's give the woman some privacy.”

Neil's lip twitched. “Sure. I'll leave the guard to ogle her sweet little body. Maybe he'll record some for your delectation later.”

“Fuck off, Neil.”

Neil held his hand up. “I'm going. Looks like shooting's about to resume anyway.”

“Do you like salad?” Chelsea asked Luna later that night, as the little girl sat at the kitchen island, watching her prepare dinner. She'd made it simple tonight. Baked ziti and some crusty bread, along with a side salad because every child should get used to eating vegetables, even if sometimes it was a losing battle.

Luna wrinkled her nose. “I hate lettuce.”

“Ah but salad isn't just lettuce. You can make it with anything you want. Fruit, even.”

“Like fruit salad?” Luna asked. “Isn't that what you eat after dinner?”

Chelsea smiled at her. Luna was already relaxed in her company. They had a good day despite not leaving the house and yard. This afternoon in the

pool had been so much fun. Luna loved the water and was already a good swimmer. They'd run through some strokes then they'd played some water games before Luna finally ran out of energy.

"Well it is. But you can put fruit in a main course salad, too. There's something called a Waldorf salad which has grapes and walnuts in it."

"I hate walnuts."

"Me, too," Chelsea said. "When I was a kid I thought they looked like shriveled brains."

"Yuck." Luna put her hand over her mouth and giggled. "You're right, they do."

"Anyway, we don't have to make a Waldorf salad, I was just using that as an example. Why don't we add some watermelon to ours?"

She'd already discovered Luna's love of watermelon at lunchtime. She'd put four slices away and that was after a huge sandwich.

"Could we?" Luna asked. "Is that allowed?"

"Yep. It's in the salad rulebook."

Luna blinked, not getting the joke.

"Want to help me make it?" Chelsea asked her. Luna nodded. Chelsea grabbed some salad ingredients and a bowl, along with a chopping board and a knife. "How about I chop and you add all the pieces to the bowl?"

"Okay!"

"And you're not allowed to eat any while we're making it," Chelsea warned, only half serious. What kid could resist taking a few bites?

"I promise I won't."

"I was kidding. It's okay if you do."

"Mommy says it's rude to eat food that's meant for other people."

It was only the second time Luna had mentioned her mother. The first time had been when they were swimming and she said her mom hated getting her hair wet.

"Well luckily this dinner is for you and me, and I don't mind if you don't."

Luna popped a piece of watermelon into her mouth, indicating that she didn't mind at all.

Right as the timer went off, Chelsea heard the front door open. Taking a deep breath, she took the baked ziti from the oven and put it to the side to cool. She felt tingly, as though the room had suddenly turned electric.

When she'd spoken to her boss on the telephone earlier, asking to use the

pool, she'd expected him to say no. She hadn't even suggested it was a possibility to Luna, not wanting to disappoint her if he'd refused her request.

Then he'd said yes and she'd been so shocked that she'd said something stupid about the security cameras on the pool. Sure, she hadn't meant anything by it. But it had been flirty and that was even more stupid.

And when he'd asked her to call him by his first name, it had sent a tingle right through her. His voice had been soft, caressing.

And now she was being stupid.

There were footsteps in the hallway. She pulled her lip between her teeth and looked at the kitchen door, waiting for him to walk through. When she saw it was Neil – and that he was on his own – disappointment mixed with relief.

She ignored it and smiled at him. “You look nice.”

He was wearing a dark blue shirt, the collar open. His hair was wet and slicked back, as though he'd just taken a shower. His sleeves were rolled, revealing an expensive looking watch against his tan skin.

“Thanks.” He smiled. “I'm heading out to a bar later. Thought I'd pop in and see how things were going here first.” He walked over to the stove and looked at the baked ziti. “Jesus that smells good.”

“You want some?”

Neil's eyes lit up. “Is there enough?”

“Sure. I was going to freeze the leftovers but we're happy to share. Aren't we, Luna?”

Luna nodded. “We made a salad...” She bit her lip. “With watermelon.”

“You did?” Neil grinned at her. “Who'd a thunk it?”

“I didn't know it was allowed.”

Chelsea caught his eye. “Luna has very specific ideas on what a salad could be.”

“Well I'm all for a watermelon salad.”

Neil managed to eat two servings of the ziti, and half of the salad, though Luna insisted that she have all the watermelon from his second serving. The three of them sat around the island, eating and laughing as Neil regaled them with a story of how the vegan and vegetarian options got mixed up at lunchtime, causing mayhem throughout the cast and crew.

“Hey,” he said when they'd stopped laughing. “I forgot, how was your swim?”

“You didn't watch us on the camera?” Chelsea asked him.

Neil shrugged. "Boss said I couldn't."

"I swam two laps," Luna told him. "And I'm going to learn how to do butterfly this summer."

"You are? That's amazing. Give it a few years and you'll be bringing home an Olympic gold."

"What's that?" Luna asked.

"Like a gold medal," he told her, glancing at Chelsea. She smiled at him. "Something you get for winning a race against everybody else."

"I want to win a race against Daddy." Luna popped another piece of watermelon into her mouth. Chelsea reminded herself to look up what happened when a kid ate too much watermelon. She might have to start rationing her.

"I'd like to see you do that too, kiddo." Neil stood and lifted his plate. "That was good food. I can't remember the last time I ate a homemade meal like that."

"Does Chris not have a chef?" Chelsea asked. A lot of her families employed one.

"No. His schedule is too unpredictable. We get food brought in, or eat out somewhere. It's goddamn expensive." He glanced at Luna. "Oops. I mean it's very expensive, and it doesn't taste anywhere as good as this."

"Well I'm glad you liked it. Feel free to stop in any time at Chelsea and Luna's kitchen." Chelsea grinned.

"You know what? I might just do that." He glanced at his watch. "I gotta go in twenty. I'll help you clean up here and then leave you to it."

"When will Daddy be home?" Luna asked.

"Soon. He said he'd be here to put you to bed." Neil tried to take Chelsea's plate but she batted him off.

"I'll clean up. You don't want to get messy when you're heading out."

"Why not? It'll get messy after." He wiggled his brows at her.

"Where are you going, anyway?" she asked, carrying the plates over to the dishwasher.

"Meeting some of the crew in the Silver Sands Resort bar."

"Must be the Tiki Bar." She lifted a brow. "Original, I know. It's fairly new. Wasn't here when I was growing up."

"Ah, the things you missed out on. You should head out with us some time when you have a night off."

"That sounds fun." She met his gaze. There was no spark there. Just a

friendliness that she appreciated. It was nice to have somebody like him around. He was easy going, affable. Wasn't afraid to say what he thought.

"Cool. Let's make it happen." He ruffled Luna's hair. "Thanks for dinner, kiddo."

She beamed. "You're welcome, Uncle Neil."

He winked at Chelsea. "See you tomorrow."

"Sure." She glanced at Luna. "Do you think we might be able to leave the house tomorrow?"

He shrugged. "Let's see what tomorrow brings. You got my number?"

"Yes I do."

"Call me. We'll talk."

It wasn't a no. She'd take that. "Have a good evening."

He smoothed his hand over his sandy hair. "Thanks, you too. You know Luna's bedtime routine, right?"

"A shower or a bath. Bed by eight." She had it memorized.

He nodded. "You got it. Have a good night and thanks for dinner."

She lifted her hand in goodbye and watched as he ambled out of the kitchen and down the hallway. From the way he was dressed he was almost certainly meeting a woman, or at least had one in his sights.

She missed that feeling of anticipation, of dancing around each other. Of dating somebody without being afraid.

At least she'd be too busy for the next two months to worry about that. And the first thing she needed to work on?

Her and Luna's escape plan. Because tomorrow she wanted to get her out of this house.

The house was silhouetted against a canvas of purples and oranges as he drove toward it, the Pacific Ocean darkening in preparation for the coming night. He parked his car in the spot that had become his in only a few days and climbed out, grabbing his bag and slinging it over his shoulder.

The expansive home before him was everything he'd dreamed of having as a kid. Beautifully designed, perfectly located, and so expensive to rent that it regularly stood empty for months between millionaire tenants.

It was also as impersonal as hell.

It was such a stark difference to the house he'd grown up in. Despite having hardly any money, his mom always strove to make their tiny two bedroom one level house look cozy and inviting. She'd buy cushions and throws from thrift stores, arranging them artfully to cover the threadbare sofa and chairs she'd found in the dumpster.

She'd find near empty gallons of old paint that other people had discarded and long before feature walls became fashionable she'd use them to add color to the house. But more than anything she loved her garden. Loved growing flowers of every hue and color so that a walk to the front door was like a journey through a vibrant meadow. Wherever she went she added joy to the world. She was just one of those people.

If she could see this house she'd probably have a fit. But she never lived long enough to see him become successful. She'd died the year he moved to Hollywood, back when he was paying the rent by waiting tables and doing modeling work, going to casting calls in between, along with half of the male population. She hadn't told him she was sick, claimed she didn't want him

coming home and ruining his big chance. So the first he'd heard about her illness was when a nurse called to tell him his mom was in the hospital.

He'd raced back and spent her last few days with her. Just thinking about that time made him furious. She'd deserved a better life than that.

He pressed the entry number into the keypad and heard the click of the lock, then pressed down the handle and walked inside. Like the exterior, everything in this house was perfectly chosen to give an image of a certain lifestyle. Marble floors, expensive furnishing, muted colors.

"Hello?" he called out, but no reply came. Then he heard a noise from the second floor. Checking his watch, he realized it was bath time – Luna and Chelsea were probably in the bathroom attached to his daughter's bedroom. He took the stairs two by two, a smile pulling at his lips as he heard Luna's giggle echo out into the hallway.

He could still remember the first time Luna had laughed out loud. She'd been four months old and he was singing some stupid nursery rhyme to her. Something his mom had always sung to him about little piggies going to the market. At first he'd thought it was a hiccup, but then she'd done it again and he'd realized it was a laugh.

It had made him feel like a god when she laughed again.

"I live in L.A. with my mommy," he could hear Luna saying through the door to her bathroom. "But I live with my daddy, too. Do you live with your mommy?"

"No I don't." Chelsea's voice was warm. "I used to when I was growing up but then I moved away."

"Where does your mommy live?" Luna asked.

"Actually, she lives near here. In Angel Sands. This is where I grew up, before I left for college and then work."

"Does your daddy live here, too?"

There was a pause. He leaned in closer.

"My dad died a few years ago. But he lived here until then."

"What did he die of?"

Chris closed his eyes. Only kids could ask the bluntest of questions.

"He had cancer. It's an illness that a lot of people can survive from, especially with medical help, but he wasn't one of them sadly."

She had a way with words. No wonder kids liked her.

"My daddy's mommy died of cancer," Luna said. "He always looks sad when I ask him about her."

There was a splash and then a low murmur of words he couldn't quite hear. He took a deep breath and ran his hands over his short hair. "Hi! Are you in here?" He pushed the melancholy from his voice, because he hated that Luna noticed his sadness.

"Daddy!" Another splash, then a low, deep laugh.

When he pushed the door open, he could see why Chelsea was laughing. Luna must have made a bigger splash than planned. Because Chelsea's hair was dripping wet, along with the white tank she was wearing. Even her denim shorts had spatters of water all over them, darkening the fabric. She turned to look as he entered, water flinging out of her hair, and he realized the dampness had turned the fabric of her tank transparent.

She looked so damn young and pretty. And she wasn't wearing a bra.

The image seared into his brain, the pale pink of her nipples sending a shockwave through him. Without thinking, he grabbed a towel from the rail beside him and threw it to her. She looked at it, not understanding.

"Your shirt is wet," he told her, his voice thick.

Blinking, she looked down and her eyes widened in horror when she saw what he'd seen. Smashing the towel against her chest, she swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry, I..."

"Why don't I take over from here and you go get changed?" He looked at Luna. "If you promise not to splash that is."

Chelsea stood, still clutching the towel to her chest. "She's pretending to be a mermaid. Apparently her tail has a mind of its own."

He liked how quickly she regained her composure. Almost as much as he'd liked that little glimpse he shouldn't have had. "It's a good thing I'm the sea monster then," he said, and Chelsea smiled. "I eat mermaids for breakfast."

"Chelsea's a mermaid, too," Luna told him. "You'll have to eat her as well."

Of course his gaze chose that moment to lock with hers. And *of course* he was now wondering how she'd taste. Her chest rose and fell, neither of them saying anything, then she started walking toward him, until he realized she was heading for the door.

"I'll put Luna to bed," he told her. "You can have the rest of the night to yourself."

She ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip. "Thank you."

"If you could come debrief me when you get a chance that would be

good. I'd like to hear about how things have gone today."

"Of course." Chelsea nodded. "I'll find you after bedtime."

"Thank you."

He watched as she left. The back of her shorts were relatively dry compared to the rest of her, but the sway of her hips was just as entrancing as he remembered. And those legs, those long, long legs that had been covered up in the interview.

Maybe he should ask her to keep them covered up here, too. Or even better, maybe he could just stop fucking looking.

"Daddy, come play sea monster!"

He turned to Luna and pushed the thoughts of her nanny from his mind. "The monster's coming," he told her, and she giggled at his scary expression. "But he's feeling very hungry right now. It's time to find a mermaid for dinner!"

Luna was playing that timeless game of almost falling asleep before shooting her eyes open and saying she wasn't feeling tired at all. The sleep was winning though, and in a couple more minutes she was out like a light, her freshly dried dark hair fanning out around her, her hands folded beneath her rosy cheek as her eyelids finally stayed closed.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to her brow, then tiptoed out, holding his breath as he closed the door.

She was a good kid, but like most six-year-olds, she suffered from severe fear of missing out. It was like she imagined everybody was going to be partying without her, while she was the only one forced to stay in bed.

Instead, he planned on spending the evening sending emails and updating spreadsheets. He'd stayed on set later than he'd planned, because the director disliked one of the scenes they shot today, and wanted to reshoot tomorrow, which meant rewriting the day's schedule.

When he walked down the sweeping staircase, he could see the wide glass doors were open. Chelsea was standing on the deck, leaning on the rail and looking out at the inky-black ocean. She'd changed – thank God – into a pair of sweatpants and a tank, and her hair was dry, hanging down her back like a rippled curtain.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked, stopping at the cocktail bar next to the open window.

She jumped at the sound of his voice, then turned to look at him. “I’m not sure. What do you have?”

“I’m having whiskey, but you can have anything you’d like. It’s well stocked.” He glanced at the bottles. “Or I can mix you something if you prefer.”

“You make cocktails?” She sounded surprised.

“It’s one of the many jobs I held down in between acting gigs.”

She turned around to look at him, leaning her back on the rail. Moonlight caressed her bare skin. “Like Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*?”

“It was less exotic.” Just as many women though. He remembered that much.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic if you have one.”

“Slimline or full fat?”

She smiled. “Give me all the fat.”

He laughed and poured them both a drink, then carried them out to where she was standing. She must have showered after she’d left Luna’s bathroom, because he could smell the fragrance of her shampoo. Something floral and sweet.

“What should we drink to?” she asked, holding her glass out.

“To new jobs. For you and me.”

She clinked her glass against his. “New beginnings.”

He leaned on the rail next to her. The night was pitch black, illuminated only by the pinprick of lights from houses and the long length of the pier in Angel Sands.

“Did Luna go to sleep okay?” she asked him.

“Yeah. She was pretty beat. It was a good idea to take her swimming. That always wears her out.”

Chelsea bit down a smile. “That’s not why I took her swimming.”

He tipped his head to the side, his own lips curling. “I know. But it’s a good side effect.” He took a sip of his whiskey, feeling the liquid burn his tongue. “How was she today?”

“She was good. Overexcited because everything’s new and there’s a lot to explore. She seems like a very adaptable child.” Chelsea sipped at her drink.

“She’s had to get used to a lot of change. Her mother and I have jobs that move us all over the world. And then there was our separation. I worry that

Luna will pay for it in the long term.” He wasn’t usually so open about his fears. Maybe the whiskey was having an effect already.

“Travel and change can be a wonderful thing for children if they’re done right. It’s about making them feel like a part of the change rather than having it foisted upon them.”

He took another sip. Damn that was good. “You have a degree in child development, right?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“What made you decide to become a nanny with it? I imagine there are a lot more lucrative jobs you could do.”

“I just wanted to work with children. Most other jobs involve way too much time writing reports or putting in funding requests or going to meetings. I don’t have to do any of that as a nanny. I like having all the time with the children I take care of.” Her eyes were soft, almost faraway.

“I guess I’ve gone the other way, becoming a producer.”

There was a flush on her cheeks, he imagined caused by the gin. He wondered how warm her skin would feel if he touched it.

“Do you like producing?” she asked him.

“Yeah, I do.” He ran his finger around the rim of his glass. “It’s funny because growing up all I wanted to do was make movies. But then I became an actor and I realized how fragmented the process was. I want to do more than three minute takes over and over. I want to be part of the whole thing. To have an influence over it.”

“Sounds like you got what you wanted.”

His eyes met hers. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

“So, do you think I can take Luna away from the house tomorrow?” she asked. “It’s hard to keep her entertained without taking her to places. She keeps asking me about the beach and the town and I’d like to be able to take her to those things. Plus there’s a fruit market a couple of towns down which I know she’d love.”

He blinked. “I don’t know. I’d prefer somebody was with you. I understand this is a safe town but everybody knows a movie is being filmed here.”

“Somebody as in a security guard?”

“Yeah.”

“Well can I arrange for one?”

He blew out a mouthful of air. “Probably. Talk to Neil tomorrow, okay?”

He can investigate and give me the details.”

“And a car? I’m happy to use mine but it’s a little older. Would you rather I take one of yours?”

“Talk to Neil about that, too. You can have the Chevy. It has a car seat latched to it. He’ll put you on the insurance.”

“Okay.” She smiled. “Thank you.”

“But I need to know where you are at all times, okay? If you leave, you tell me where you’re going and when you’ll be back. I don’t want any surprises.”

“I wouldn’t go anywhere without keeping you updated,” she promised. She glanced at his mouth, then back at his eyes. “I won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

He nodded. “Let’s take it with baby steps and move from there.”

“Thank you.”

“Any time.” He swallowed the final vestiges of his whiskey. “Now, I need to go and do some work. I have an early start tomorrow so I’ll probably be gone before you and Luna are awake. I’m hoping to finish a little earlier though.”

“I hope it goes well. I’m going to head to my room.” She still had half her drink left. “Watch a movie or something.”

“Enjoy.” He turned and walked back into the house, heading toward the office suite on the other side of the home. He and Neil had their own desks here, not that they intended to use them much. But it was perfect for night time working, when he didn’t want to be on set anymore.

There was another drinks cabinet in the office, and he poured another fingerful of whiskey, carrying it over to his desk. He turned on his laptop then looked up at the big screen on the wall in front of him, remembering what Neil had said when they’d first moved in here.

It was a mini version of the surveillance room in the garage. He pressed a switch on his desk and it flicked on, revealing nine different aspects of the house, from the far exterior, to the living room and kitchen, along with the hall and the room where Luna was fast asleep. He looked at it for a moment, then down at the control pad in front of him. There was a rewind button there. Curiosity got the better of him and he pressed it, watching as the surveillance jumped backward a few minutes. He saw himself walking out toward the deck, stopping to pour some drinks. He rewound it a few minutes earlier and saw Chelsea following the same path he took later, walking out on the deck

and leaning heavily on the rail.

He hit it back a few hours. Chelsea and Luna were in the kitchen making dinner. Luna was eating every other piece of watermelon Chelsea passed her. His daughter looked relaxed, happy, and it made him feel warm.

He'd made the right decision in employing this woman. And an even better decision to ignore the attraction he felt for her.

Chelsea took a dish from the oven, steam rising from it. He pressed a button to speed up the video, and she plated the food up.

Three plates.

He blinked. Who was eating with them? His question was answered the next moment when Neil walked into the frame, saying something to Luna then grinning at Chelsea.

Chris watched as the three of them ate dinner, Neil and Chelsea laughing at something. Every time she moved Neil followed her with his eyes, a smile playing at his lips.

What the hell was he playing at? And how come the three of them ate dinner without asking him? He didn't like it.

Glancing back up at the screen, he watched Neil leave, ruffling Luna's hair before walking out of the kitchen. On another screen he came into view in the hallway, heading for the front door and letting himself out.

He trusted Neil, but he didn't like the way his assistant looked at the nanny. Rubbing his brow with the heel of his hand, Chris let out a gruff sigh. He'd talk to Neil about it tomorrow. Because this wasn't going to happen. Not in his house with his child watching.

But right now, he needed to work, so he could pay their damn salaries.

“What’s up?” Neil asked, answering her call.

“Hey. Nothing to worry about, I just wanted to run something by you.” Chelsea glanced across the kitchen to where Luna was sitting at the table, coloring in a book about mermaids. “Chris said I should talk to you today about taking Luna out, so I figured no time like the present.”

“He did? He hasn’t mentioned it. Mind you I haven’t seen him yet. There’s been some kind of hitch and all the production staff are huddled in the office.” Neil sounded as friendly as usual. “So what is it you need from me?”

“Chris said you could put me on the Chevy’s insurance so I can use it to drive Luna around. He also mentioned getting a guard to come with us.”

“You don’t need a guard if you’re going to be nearby, just make sure you let them know where you’re going. And I already put you on the insurance,” Neil told her. “But I have the Chevy at the moment. When were you thinking of heading out?”

“After lunch. There’s a farmer’s market over in White City and I think Luna would love it. I figured we could do that and be back by dinner.”

“What are you cooking?” Neil asked, sounding interested.

She laughed. “Not sure yet. I thought we’d buy some fresh ingredients and play it by ear.”

“If it’s anything like that baked ziti, call me.”

“I will. Do you think you’ll have the Chevy back in time?”

“I’m not sure, let me check my schedule...” he paused for a moment. “Shit, I have meetings all afternoon. You have a car though, right?”

“I do, but Chris didn’t want me to use it.”

“It’s okay, I’ll clear it with him. There’s a spare car seat in the garage, you think you can get it in?”

“I’m sure I can. And if I can’t, my brother-in-law is the fire chief in town, I’ll ask him to take a look.”

“Great. I’ll let Chris know what’s happening once he’s out of this meeting.”

“Shouldn’t I call him?”

“You could try, but you’ll go straight to voicemail the same way I did. It’s cool, I got it. You go out and have some fun. And remember, if you leave me leftovers I’ll worship at your feet forever.”

She laughed again. “Okay, thanks, Neil.”

“No worries, talk later.”

Sliding her phone into her pocket, Chelsea walked over to where Luna was still diligently coloring in her book. She was one of those kids who hated coloring outside of the lines and her progress was painstaking. It was a sign of maturation, Chelsea had learned that in school. Younger kids didn’t realize there are boundaries and rules, but as they went to preschool and then to kindergarten they began to learn to make that to make the picture look real, they had to follow the lines.

She hated and loved that stage. Hated because rules sometimes took away their exuberance and enthusiasm for learning. But loved it because it was another stepping stone she could help them with on their journey to adulthood.

“That’s looking good,” she said to Luna, who looked up and gave her a gappy smile. “You want to continue for a while, or shall we go for a swim?”

“We can swim in the morning?” Yep, she was definitely all about rules.

“Sure we can. We can swim any time, but today I thought we’d do it in the morning because we’re going out this afternoon.”

Luna’s eyes widened. “We are? Where?”

“To a market I know of. They have fruit and vegetables and lots of other food. I thought we could buy some and make dinner together again.”

Luna put her pencil down. “Can we go now?”

“No, not yet. We’ll go after lunch.”

Hopping off her stool, Luna clapped her hands together. “Okay then, let’s go swim now.”

“Go upstairs and grab your swimsuit and I’ll meet you back here.”

Chelsea already had hers on, underneath her tank and shorts. While Luna ran up the stairs, she quickly typed out a message to her sister, asking if her husband, Lucas, was around to check the car seat installation.

She figured if a fire chief was happy with it, Chris probably would be, too.

She liked that they'd come to some kind of understanding last night. Talking to him had been so easy. And yeah, she was still majorly attracted to him, but who wouldn't be? The man was gorgeous. There was a reason his name alone could carry a movie, and that's because half the female population got a little hot and sweaty whenever he was on scene.

It wasn't as though there was anything more between them than a working relationship anyway. She'd seen photographs of Luna's mom. She knew the kind of knockout beauties he preferred and she definitely wasn't one of those.

Her phone lit up with a reply from her sister, telling her that Lucas would be over just after twelve.

Chelsea smiled. It was all coming together. They'd have a great afternoon and she'd help Luna make some fruit muffins later for her dad. Sure, she wanted to butter him up so he'd let them go on the beach, too, but she also wanted to make him smile. Because the other thing she'd seen last night was the sadness in his eyes.

She recognized it, because she had the same sadness in her eyes, too.

“Have you seen Neil Rickards?” Chris asked one of the runners as he stalked out of the temporary office they'd erected on site. He'd been in there for three hours with the director, Liv Howard, and an untold numbers of production assistants. They had a problem. One of the key supporting actors had been arrested for indecent exposure. Luckily he hadn't filmed a scene yet, but he was due to arrive on set in two days and they had to make a fast decision.

Not that it was a difficult one. The guy was out of the production, no doubt about it. Liv was already working on breaking the contract. The reason they'd been in the room for three hours was to decide who could play the role instead.

They'd watched screen tests, looked at headshots, and enquired into

availability at short notice. And the director had balked at three of the actors who were still available from the original call, saying his vision had changed and they no longer fit it.

In the end, he wanted to send the assistant director to L.A. to do three more screen tests that evening. Which was why Chris needed Neil. Because somebody needed to drive the AD there.

“I think he’s on set somewhere,” the assistant told him. “Want me to call him?”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll do it.” He checked his watch. They’d lost a whole morning of filming, and he hated to think how much that was going to cost them. They needed to get going on the schedule that afternoon, and possibly through the evening. He quickly sent a message to Neil, who replied almost instantaneously.

He was on his way and would be there in two minutes.

In fact, it took him five. He met Chris outside the office, his phone in his hand.

“Is it sorted?” Neil asked him.

“Not really. I need you to get the AD to L.A. today.”

Neil blinked. “When? There are a few things I need to arrange here. Oh, and Chelsea called...”

Chris held his hand up. “Is it life threatening?”

“No, but—”

“Then I don’t need to hear it right now. You need to get the car and bring it around in the next ten minutes. Drive straight to LA and don’t stop. Head for the studio. While you’re driving we’ll be arranging for actors to come in and for the screen test crew to be ready.”

Neil didn’t blink. He was used to quick changes in plans. “Okay, but Chelsea...”

“We’ll talk about Chelsea later. And what you thought you were doing in having dinner with her.” It still rankled him, hours after he’d seen that tape.

“What?” Neil frowned. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I saw the security footage. Saw you ogling her. We don’t sleep with the staff, Neil. I thought you knew that by now.”

Neil looked like he’d just been slapped. “I’m not sleeping with the staff. I haven’t done anything. I had dinner with Chelsea and Luna, that’s it.”

“Fine.” His voice was terse.

“She made baked ziti.” Neil sounded perplexed. “It tasted better than my

mom's. If I was looking at her in any weird way it's because I was making sure I could get invited for dinner again." Neil wrinkled his nose. "You've been off all week, I have no idea what's wrong with you. You're crazy if you think I'm trying to get it on with your nanny."

"Whatever." Chris waved his hand, because he really didn't want to talk about this anymore.

Neil's expression hardened. "No, not whatever. Are you accusing me of something?"

It wasn't often that he and Neil had a difference of opinion. The last time he could remember was when he met Anya. Neil hated her from the start and Chris had told him to mind his own business.

Neil had been right that time.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm just reminding you that you're both my employees. And I have a duty of care."

Neil shook his head, clearly still annoyed. "Is that it, or do you need something else? I'd like to hit the road if you want me in L.A. ASAP."

"That's it." Chris looked carefully at him. There was no guile in Neil's face. No lies. Chris was almost certainly wrong. But he couldn't deal with that right now. Not when they had a crisis on their hands.

"Then I'm off."

"Call me when you get there."

"Wouldn't do anything else. And I'll try not to hit on Martin while I'm driving." He turned on his heel and walked away, leaving his barb hanging in the air. And leaving Chris in no doubt that he was pissed.

The kitchen smelled of warm blueberry muffins. They'd made twelve of them using the basket of blueberries they'd bought at the farmer's market, and now they were resting on a cooling rack, their golden domes covering the fluffy insides.

"Can I eat one?" Luna asked, staring longingly at them.

"Not yet. They're too hot. Give it another twenty minutes."

They'd had so much fun weaving in and out of the stalls, checking out the produce and choosing the best. Luna was amazed that they were allowed to try little morsels of fruits and breads before they bought them.

She'd been so excited when she realized the market was outdoors. It turned out that she'd never been to a farmer's market before. But now she was asking if they could go again tomorrow, and Chelsea had to explain that it only happened once a week.

"But we can go next week, right?"

"If it's okay with your dad, of course."

"I want to try all the food at every stall." Luna's eyes widened. "Did you see there's a chocolate stall? And a cake one?"

"I did." It had been almost impossible to drag Luna away from the chocolate stall. In the end she had to bribe her with the promise of watermelon. They'd bought three of them. One to eat, one to make slushes with, and one to give to Neil, because Luna maintained that he loved watermelon as much as she did.

The front door slammed, and footsteps echoed in the hallway. Luna's face lit up. "Daddy?"

"Hey pumpkin." There was a low note to his voice. He sounded tired. And when he walked into the kitchen he looked it, too.

Handsome as hell, but exhausted.

Chelsea smiled at him. "Hi."

The corner of his lip twitched. "Hi."

"Daddy, look!" Luna said, jumping off her stool. "We made blueberry muffins. Do you want one?"

"Maybe later? I gotta make a few calls." He ran his hand through his short hair.

"I could make you a cup of coffee to go with it?" Chelsea offered.

Their eyes met again. "Yeah, that sounds good."

"Can I make the coffee?" Luna asked, looking excited.

"You can help," Chelsea agreed. "I'll show you how to froth the milk."

"I love frothy milk!" Luna grinned. "Can we make hot chocolate, too? Like they did at the market?"

The smile slipped from Chris' face. "The market?"

Luna nodded, her face glowing. "It was so good, Daddy. We bought blueberries and watermelon and some cheese that we're going to eat after dinner. And Chelsea says we can go back again next week. Did you know you're allowed to eat little pieces from the stalls for free? Chelsea says I'll end up looking like a chocolate bar if I'm not careful."

There was a twitch in his jaw as he turned to look straight at Chelsea.

“You took Luna to the market?”

“Yes. I called Neil...”

“Without talking to me first?”

“He said it was okay.”

“Luna,” Chris said, without taking his narrowed eyes away from Chelsea’s face. “Can you go to your room for a moment?”

“But I want to make you coffee...”

“Go!”

Luna flinched at the anger in his voice. Chelsea shot her a smile, hoping to reassure her.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said softly. “Do as your dad says. We’ll make coffee afterward.”

“Did I do something wrong?” Luna asked, her voice wavering.

“I just need to talk to Miss Kennedy for a moment.” His voice was ominously low.

“Off you go,” Chelsea said, the smile still stuck to her lips. “We won’t be long.”

Luna was blinking back tears as she shot them both a look, before she walked out of the kitchen and into the hallway. Her progress was slow, Chelsea could tell from the rhythm of her footsteps. Chris walked to the doorway and looked out.

“Go to your room,” he told her again.

“I’m going.”

He closed the door firmly, then turned back to look at Chelsea.

“I expressly told you not to go anywhere without checking with me first.” His voice was ominously low.

“I did. Neil said it was okay.”

“Do I look like Neil?” he asked. “Does Luna? Because the last time I checked she’s my daughter, not his. And I’m the one who pays your goddamn wages.”

Chelsea swallowed hard. His anger was palpable. There was a flinty edge to his gaze that made her want to curl up and hide.

“I thought it was okay.” It sounded pathetic. Of course she should have spoken to him. And she didn’t want to get Neil in trouble just to save her own ass. “I apologize. Next time I’ll be more careful.”

“How did you take her?”

“I’m sorry?” Her brows knitted.

“What did you drive her in? Because Neil has the Chevy.”

She took a deep breath. “I took my car.”

“The car I told you not to use? Did the seat even fit properly? Was Luna safe? Did you give the slightest damn about her safety before you went running off into the sunset?”

“Of course I did! I had it checked by my brother-in-law – he’s the fire chief. I wouldn’t do anything to put Luna in danger.”

“Except take her into the middle of an unknown market without any security or her father knowing where she is.” He shook his head. “How the hell could you be so irresponsible? I trusted you, goddamn it. You told me you wouldn’t do anything without clearing it with me.”

Anxiety knotted inside of her. She had no idea what to say to make things better. “I thought it would be okay...”

“Well you fucking thought wrong. I pay you to obey me, not to run off with my daughter at the first chance. I should have listened to my instincts. I never should’ve given you the job. Is this why you got fired last time? For endangering the kids you were supposed to be looking after?”

Tears stung at her eyes. Embarrassed, she blinked them away. “No, it isn’t,” she protested. “I told you, it had nothing to do with the children. Ask anybody who knows me, I always put their safety first. The same way I do with Luna.”

His expression was stony. Frozen. She hated the way he was looking at her. It reminded her of her last job...

“It doesn’t matter though, does it?” she said softly. “Because you think the worst of me.”

It was stupid to think he was different just because they’d had a nice talk last night on the terrace. He’d had a glass of whiskey. Was mellow. Maybe she’d even taken advantage of that.

She couldn’t blame him for putting his daughter’s safety first. Even if it meant making her feel like shit.

He glanced at his watch. “I need to make some calls. We’ll talk about this later.”

She nodded, saying nothing, because there was nothing more to be said. She’d messed up. Sure, she hadn’t meant to, but at the end of the day it didn’t matter. This was her one chance at salvation and she’d ruined it with one little trip to the market.

As he walked out of the room without another word, she slumped on the

kitchen island, trying to not let the tears fall.

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There was a soft knock at the door. He lifted his head from the screen he'd been staring at for the past two hours, blinking his dry eyes. He was already regretting the harsh words he'd said to Chelsea in the kitchen. Though she hadn't blinked at the onslaught, there was still an expression of hurt in her eyes.

He never should have given her the job. But what choice did he have? There was no way it was safe for Luna to be on the set with him.

"Yes?" he called out. Maybe it was her. He should say sorry and get over it.

"Daddy?" Luna said, walking into his office holding a blueberry muffin in her hands. She was wearing a pair of short pink pajamas with a unicorn on them, her hair brushed and braided, her face shining from her bath. "Chelsea said I could give you a muffin before I go to bed."

His heart melted, because damn it, he'd promised to try one earlier. With his rage at Chelsea and then back-to-back meetings he'd completely forgotten.

"Thank you, sweetheart," he said, taking it from her. He put it on his desk then lifted her onto his lap. "How was your bath?"

"It was good. Chelsea gave me some bath chalk. They're fun. She says I can learn to spell and get clean all at the same time."

He swallowed. "That's good."

"She says I'm really great at writing my name. Will you watch me sometime?"

"Sure. You could do it now?" he suggested, grabbing a pen out of his

holder.

“No, I mean in the bath. I want you to watch me there.”

“Of course I will.” He kissed her soft head. She smelled of strawberries and cream. “And thank you for the muffin. I’ve been looking forward to eating it all evening.”

“I like cooking. Chelsea says I’m good at that, too. She says we can make watermelon slushes tomorrow.”

“That sounds delicious.”

She looked up, her eyes shining. “Would you like one, too?”

He swallowed hard, because there was this adoring expression on her face. One he didn’t feel like he deserved after being such an asshole. “Yes please, I’d love that.”

“Yay!” She scrambled to her knees, resting them on his thighs, and kissed his cheek. “Good night, Daddy.”

“Good night, pumpkin.”

She jumped off him and skipped over to his office door. He looked but he couldn’t see Chelsea there. She was probably avoiding him, not that he could blame her.

Twenty minutes later there was another knock at his door. He closed his laptop and twisted his chair so he was facing the door. There was only one person it could be, and he wasn’t sure he was ready for her.

“Come in.”

She pushed the door open, and light flooded in from the hallway. He hadn’t realized how dark it had gotten in here. He’d been working from the illumination of his laptop and a side lamp.

“Are you busy?” she asked. Her hair was up, her face free of makeup. She was wearing a white t-shirt and black yoga pants. Nothing sexy, nothing revealing, yet he felt his body responding to her.

“I have a few minutes.”

She tapped her fingers against the doorway. “I wanted to talk to you about...” She took a deep breath. “I don’t think this is going to work out.”

He frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t trust me. And that’s stopping me from doing all the things that Luna needs from me. Like giving her a fun, stress free summer, which I can’t do if we’re stuck in this house all day. She deserves to be able to go to the farmer’s market or the beach, or wherever else there is in town for her to enjoy and learn, but that’s not something I can give her because you won’t

allow me to.”

“That’s not true. I just said...”

She put her hand up to silence him, and he widened his eyes. He wasn’t used to that.

“I know what you said. But in reality it doesn’t matter why you don’t trust me. Or if it’s going to take time. Because when you’re six years old a day stuck in the house feels like a lifetime, especially when you can see the beach from the house and you’re not allowed to go there. I think you should find a new nanny, one with great references that you can trust to take Luna wherever she needs to go.”

“I don’t want a new nanny.” His voice was low.

“I can’t work here like this,” she told him. “I don’t want Luna to pay the price for you not trusting me. That’s not fair on her. I won’t leave until you find a replacement, but I really think you should start interviewing now. That way she’ll have the time to get to know somebody new.”

“Let’s not make any hasty decisions.”

“It’s not hasty.” She shook her head. “It’s the right thing to do for Luna. I have a two week notice clause in my contract and I’m exercising it now.”

His stomach twisted. “You can go to the beach tomorrow.”

“And you’ll worry all day about it. That’s not how this is supposed to work. I’m supposed to make your life easier, not keep you worrying about your daughter’s safety. Think about it, you’ll know I’m right. So please contact the agency and start the interviews. If I can leave earlier than two weeks, then that would be good.”

She turned away, but not before he got a glimpse of tears in her eyes. And goddamn it, he felt like a beast. Before he could say anything else, she turned and left the room, leaving him open mouthed and feeling empty.

“The screen tests have all been uploaded to the shared drive,” Neil said over the telephone later that evening. Chris had just been in to check on Luna. She’d been asleep and he’d pressed his lips softly against her warm brow before coming straight back down here to finish a report due to his investors.

“I’m going to sleep at my apartment for the night and hit the road first thing tomorrow,” Neil continued. “Rob is going to stay an extra day in case

he needs to do more screen tests. Do you need anything from your place? I can swing round on my way back.”

Neil sounded like his usual cheery self, though a little tired. He didn't seem at all affected by their spat earlier.

“No, but I'm going to need you to contact the Nanny agency in the morning before you leave.”

“Why?”

“Because Chelsea handed in her notice.”

“What?” Neil sounded disbelieving. “Why did she do that? I thought everything was fine.”

“We had an argument about her leaving the house. She took her own car when I'd told her not to.”

“Oh shit.” Neil's voice dropped. “I was supposed to tell you about that. She called me this morning when I was on set and asked about using the Chevy. I told her to use her car with the spare car seat and just let the security service know where she was headed.”

“You agreed to it?”

“Yeah. She told me she'd get her brother-in-law to check the seat out before they left. He's the fire chief, I figured that's as safe as it gets. I tried to tell you, but you were too intent on getting me to L.A..”

She *had* said that. Shit. “I thought she'd done it without asking.”

“Did you ask her?” Neil said.

“No.” He didn't want to admit that he'd ignored her protests. Ignored what she'd said about Neil knowing or anything else she'd said in mitigation. He'd been pissed, and not only at her. At the long day he'd had and the delay with shooting because some goddamn actor had decided to behave like an asshole.

He'd taken it out on her, when all she'd done was try to keep Luna happy.

“Oh fuck.” He shook his head. “I messed up.”

“Wanna feel even worse?” Neil asked.

“Not really,” Chris said dryly.

“I saw Grant Chaplin at the studio. He was one of her references. Asked me how she was doing and told me she was the best nanny he and his wife had ever hired.” Neil sounded almost gleeful.

Chris gritted his teeth. “I need to talk to her.”

“What's up with you, man? One minute you're accusing me of hitting on her, the next you're accusing her of running off with Luna without

permission.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Chris admitted, rubbing his brow with the heel of his hand. “It’s been a long fucking day.”

“Gonna be even longer if you don’t apologize to her. Remember how terrible all the other candidates were? Do you really want one of those looking after Luna?”

No, he didn’t.

“I need to talk to her,” he said. Christ, he hoped she hadn’t already found another position. References or no references, childcare practitioners like her were hard to find.

“Yeah, you do. Crawl and grovel if you have to. And stop being a fucking idiot when you’re around the nanny, even if you find her attractive.”

“I don’t find her attractive.” Chris frowned.

“Sure you don’t.”

He opened his mouth to protest again, but he didn’t have time for this. She was his nanny. That was all. And so far she was turning out to be a damn good one. Now he just needed to make sure she didn’t leave.

Carrying the basket of clean laundry up the stairs, Chelsea placed Luna’s clothes right outside her door, not wanting to disturb her when she knew she was asleep. She’d put them away tomorrow after Luna got up.

She had some of her own clothes in the clean basket, too, and she carried it into her bedroom, sighing heavily as she placed it on top of her bed.

So this was it. She’d messed up again. And this time she couldn’t see a way out of it. She’d hoped this position would be her lucky break, a chance to reset her career. Instead, she’d ruined it before she even had a chance to show how good she could be.

Maybe she should feel angry that he hadn’t given her a chance to explain herself. But she’d agreed to let him know when they left the house, and telling Neil wasn’t good enough. He’d given her a chance to prove herself and she’d failed.

A rap of knuckles on the door made her lift her gaze from the basket. “Come in,” she called, her voice soft. The handle turned and the door pushed open, and Chris was standing in the doorway, light spilling in from the

hallway behind him.

He'd showered and changed into a pair of dark sweats and a dark t-shirt. His short hair was wet, but drying rapidly. He looked at the luggage she'd gotten out of the closet earlier and blinked.

"I thought we agreed at two weeks."

Her throat tightened. "We did. I just like to be prepared."

"Like Mary Poppins."

Was he teasing her? She looked up at him, but his face was implacable.

He walked inside, closing the door behind him. His piercing gaze met hers. "I owe you an apology."

She wasn't expecting that. "You don't have to apologize. I messed up."

"I should have listened to you," he told her. "I saw red and I'm sorry. Neil called and told me that you two had a conversation about this."

She rolled her bottom lip between her teeth. If her job here was over, she could at least leave on a good note. "I'm sorry, too. For putting you through stress you didn't need. I should have spoken with you directly, and I was wrong for not doing that."

"Thank you." He glanced at her suitcase again. "Can you put that thing away now?"

"You'd rather I pack once you have a new nanny?"

Despite his shower, he hadn't shaved yet, and the shadow of beard growth highlighted the sharp lines of his jaw. She could see the dimple on his cheek dancing in and out. Damn the man was beautiful. No wonder he was on the top of so many Hollywood's Hottest Male lists. There was something almost otherworldly about the way he looked, especially in the diffused light of her bedroom.

"I'd rather you didn't pack at all," he said, his tone deep. "I don't want another nanny. I want you."

Her breath caught in her throat. She should feel happy about that, but she couldn't. "I can't stay," she told him.

"Why not?"

He folded his arms across his chest, looking at her as he awaited her answer. The intensity of his stare was making her skin blush.

"I told you already," she said, looking down at the pile of laundry in the basket. "I can't give Luna what she needs with how things are."

"What is it you think she needs?" There was a twitch in his jaw. It sent his dimple dancing all over again.

Inhaling sharply, she tried to ignore the scent of his shampoo filling the air. “Do you remember your childhood summers?” she asked him.

“Yeah.” His brows creased. He clearly didn’t know where she was going with this.

“So do I.” She closed her eyes for a moment, picturing the sunlit summers she’d loved so much. The sun had always shone, the sand had always burned her feet, and the ocean had always beckoned her in. “What were yours like?” she asked.

“I don’t know. We hung around at the lake a lot. Played games. Got messy as hell and then were shouted at by our parents when we got home covered in dust.” He frowned, as though he didn’t know why she was bringing it up.

“It sounds fun.” She finally let her gaze meet his. There was a softness in his eyes that wasn’t there before. “And that’s what I want for Luna. I want her to be able to look back on this summer with so much happiness. She gets to spend time with her dad at an amazing location in a beautiful house. But she should also be able to play with other kids, to explore the local towns. To swim and pick up shells without us having a major debate about it.”

He opened his mouth to answer her, but she lifted her hand. He looked surprised at her obstinance.

“I don’t want her to pay the price because I messed up. I don’t want her to miss out because you don’t trust me to be in charge of her. That’s not fair on Luna, and I think we can both agree she’s the most important one in all this.”

“What if I can come to trust you?” he asked, his eyes on hers.

“I don’t think you can. And that’s perfectly okay. You’re Luna’s dad, and I love how importantly you take your role. I can’t give you the references you need to really believe that I’m the best person to take care of her. So the only alternative is for me to leave.”

He ran his fingers through his short hair. “If you could just tell me what happened at your last job...”

“I can’t.” She exhaled softly. “I signed a non-disclosure agreement, the same way I signed one for you.”

“You can’t even give me a hint?” he asked. “Nothing at all?”

“You know what an NDA is like.” Her eyes met his again. For a moment they said nothing, just stared at each other. She felt electricity crackle against her skin. “All I can tell you is that it had nothing to do with my childcare abilities or the children I was taking care of.”

His eyes scanned her face, as though he was trying to read her expression. He swallowed, his throat bobbing. “Okay.”

She blinked. “Okay?”

“Okay, I believe you.”

“But I could be lying,” she pointed out. Then she wanted to slap herself because why was she sabotaging herself like this?

“You could be, but I don’t believe you are.” He took a step forward, reaching out for her face. Time stood still as his fingers trailed softly along the line of her cheek, then tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Your bun is falling out,” he murmured.

Even though he’d taken his hand away she could still feel the heat from his fingertips on her skin. Her whole body felt electric. Dear God, if she felt like this from a single touch, what would it be like to kiss this man?

“Stay,” he said, his voice as soft as silk. “Give it another shot. Luna’s so happy with you. She can’t stop talking about everything you do together. Give me a chance to trust you, please.”

His words caressed her ears, sparking a hope she hadn’t felt before. He sounded so sincere it made her heart ache.

“I want to...” She really did. She was already in love with Luna. It was impossible not to love the funny, gorgeous little girl asleep in the bedroom next door.

“Then do it. I’ll find a way to trust you.” His voice was deep and low. “Give me a chance and I’ll do the same for you.”

Stupid tears pricked at her eyes, and she had no idea why. This wasn’t sad, it was perfect. He actually appreciated her work. She blinked them away and looked up, nodding slowly as their gazes clashed once more.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Let’s try this again.”

He nodded, unsmiling. “You won’t regret it.”

It was just after eleven the next morning when somebody knocked on the door. Luna was playing with a Lego *Harry Potter* set on the kitchen island, but she jumped down from her stool and followed Chelsea through the hallway, clearly more interested in their visitor than in building the Hogwarts Express.

“Hello?” Chelsea opened the door to a man standing on the doorstep, a tablet in his hand. He was wearing a pair of pressed chino shorts and a green polo shirt with a logo emblazoned across the chest. She scanned her eyes over it.

White City Acura.

“Can I help you?” she asked. Luna ducked under her arm and stared up at the man with interest.

“Miss Kennedy?”

“That’s right,” Chelsea said.

He smiled. “I have your car waiting for you on the driveway. If you’d like to follow me, I’ll take you through the features as requested.”

“I’m sorry?”

His smile didn’t waver. “The Acura TLX you ordered.” He glanced down at his tablet. “You are Miss Chelsea Kennedy?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You have a new car?” Luna asked, her eyes brightening. “Is it a Mercedes? My Daddy loves those.”

The man swallowed a laugh. “No, Miss,” he said to Luna. “But it’s still a great car. Why don’t you bring your mom out and I can show you both?”

“I’m not her mom, I’m her nanny,” Chelsea murmured, still confused. “And I didn’t order a car.”

“I bet Daddy got it for you,” Luna said, clapping her hands. “He bought Mommy a car once. And he’s always buying me things. He loves giving people presents.”

“Is your daddy Mr. Vaughn?” the man asked, running his finger down the screen of his tablet.

“Yep.” Luna beamed.

“Oh okay, it looks like he’s the purchaser. Would you like to follow me, ma’am?” he asked Chelsea again.

“Sure.”

He walked down the steps and she followed behind with Luna, crossing the driveway to where a deep red sports sedan was waiting, the driver’s door open.

“Why don’t you take a seat inside?” he asked Chelsea. “The interior is as beautiful as the exterior. You see that?” He pointed at the dash as she sat down on the leather seat. “Genuine wood and metal. No synthetics. Isn’t it beautiful?”

She nodded, taking in that new car smell. She was still confused. Clearly Chris had bought this for her, but why? Neil already said she could have the Chevy.

“But you know the best thing about this baby?” the man asked, his voice conspiratorial. “It looks like a racing car, but it’s just about the safest car on the road right now.”

“The safest?” she repeated.

“Yep,” he said proudly. “It was fully redesigned this year, and just won an Insurance Institute for Highway Safety award.” He glanced over his shoulder at Luna. “Your daddy has good taste, Miss.”

“I know,” Luna said solemnly.

“Oh, and let me show you the child seat harness we have as standard. If you’ll look over your shoulder at the rear of the car I’ll demonstrate them.” Without waiting for Chelsea’s response, he pulled the back door open and leaned across the seat, pointing at the anchors embedded in the leather backrest. “It makes fitting your child seat as simple as putting on your seatbelt. Along with the forward collision warning and the automated emergency braking, nobody is ever going to get hurt in this car.”

“Can we put my seat in?” Luna asked, excited.

“In a minute,” Chelsea promised. She looked at the man. “Is there anything else I need to check out?” She still wasn’t sure whether to be amused or appalled. Maybe both.

Because her boss had bought her a car in the space of a couple of hours. She could see it now, he must have asked Neil to find the safest car on the road and told him to get one to the house ASAP.

Money talked, and it made things move fast.

“Obviously, we installed the tracking as requested,” he told her.

“The car is trackable?” she asked.

“Of course. And we’ve also provided a new iPhone linked to the car systems to you, free of charge.”

“A phone?”

He nodded at the center console. Sure enough, a phone was attached to a holder there.

“I already have a phone,” she murmured.

“And now you have two.” He beamed.

Okay then.

“Would you like me to show you how to install the child seat?” he asked.

Chelsea climbed out of the car, still bemused. She pointed over at the garage. “It’s just inside there.” She’d taken it out of her car after yesterday’s debacle.

“No problem. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Watching his retreating back, she pulled her own phone out of her jeans pocket. “Luna?”

“Yes?” The little girl was still dancing around the car.

“Do you want to sit in the front seat? Try it out?”

“Can I?” Luna’s eyes were wide.

“Sure.” Chelsea used to love sitting in her dad’s car, pretending to be a driver. The ignition was off and, let’s face it, it was the safest car on the road.

As Luna squealed and climbed inside, Chelsea pulled up Chris’ number, pressing the phone icon to connect. He answered after two rings.

“Hello?”

“You bought me a car? Seriously?” She wanted to laugh. This was so stupid.

“I said I wanted to trust you. I thought this would help.”

“Well it *is* the safest car on the road.”

His voice softened. “Do you like it?”

“It’s very nice.”

“I was hoping you’d love it.”

“Okay then, I love it.” She saw the man emerge from the garage carrying Luna’s seat. “But you really didn’t have to buy me a car. The Chevy would do.”

“I can’t put a tracker on the Chevy. Neil made me promise not to.”

She swallowed a laugh. “So you’re happy to track me but not Neil.”

“Trust building. Remember?”

“Are you going to track me all the time?” she asked, her voice soft. “Or just when I’m with Luna.”

“Only when you’re on the clock. And I’m not going to be constantly following you. It’s just an insurance policy, that’s all.”

She’d driven cars with trackers before. Most expensive cars had them, after all. But it made her feel a little weird inside. “And why did you get me a new phone?”

“Because the tracking app on that is top of the range.”

“You like having things top of the range, don’t you?” she teased.

“I like spending my money on nice things, yes.”

“This is crazy, you know that? You’re going to have to sell this thing in a few months when Luna goes back to her mom.”

“Maybe I’ll keep it.”

“Ma’am? Can I show you the seat install?” the man asked, putting Luna’s seat on the driveway beside the car.

“I need to go,” she told Chris. “I’m getting a demonstration. And after that I’m going to take my new car out on the road and check out how fast this baby goes.”

“No speeding,” he said, his voice surprisingly light. “But yes, take it out. Where are you and Luna planning on going?”

“Do you want me to tell you or do you want to track me?”

“How about we do both?”

“We’ll drive to the bookshop. Luna needs some new books and so do I. And after that, if it’s okay with you we might get some ice cream.”

The idea of freedom exhilarated her. So did his attempt at peace-making. He was trying to make this work – and so was she.

He inhaled slowly. “Okay. But then you’re coming home, right?”

“Right.” Baby steps. She wasn’t planning on pushing him too much yet.

“What time will you be home?”

“I don’t know. Three?”

“Make sure it’s no later.” She couldn’t tell if he was joking or not.

“Okay, Daddy.” The words came out of her mouth before she could stop them. For a moment there was silence. Her cheeks flamed like she’d been laying in the sun for too long.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly. “I meant, okay, Sir.”

“That’s not much better.” His voice was gruff. “Have a good day, I’ll see you tonight.”

I just saw a missed call on my phone. Is everything okay? Chris

It wasn’t anything important. I just wanted you to know the Acura’s top speed estimates are off. By about 30MPH. Chelsea

She smiled as soon as she sent the reply, because there was something inside her that loved teasing him. And now that they’d cleared the air between them she had an inkling he liked it too.

Thank you for sharing. Strange how the tracker told me you kept to 2MPH below the speed limit. It must be faulty. Chris

Maybe we should take it off the car. ;) Chelsea

Is there anything else you wanted, or are you just bored? Chris

Actually there is. Are you still okay with us going down to the beach?

Luna wants to make that shell necklace we’d talked about. Chelsea

You’ll keep your phone with you? Chris

Yes, Sir. Chelsea

Okay, so it was cheeky, but at least she didn’t call him Daddy this time. That was an improvement, right?

Thank you. Have a good day. I’ll see you tonight. Chris.

She closed up the messaging app and blew the hair out of her face, the cool air refreshing her skin. The sun was baking down on them today. She and Luna had managed to mostly keep in the shade or in the air-conditioned car, but it was still crazy warm. That’s why she’d waited until four before suggesting the beach to Luna, and even then she’d slathered her from head to toe in sunscreen and insisted on her wearing a floppy sunhat.

“What about you?” Luna asked. “Where’s your hat?”

Chelsea grimaced. “I left it in L.A.. I’ll buy one first thing tomorrow

though,” she promised. She was annoyed at herself – she always packed well. But this time she’d been in a hurry and somehow one of the essentials was missed.

“You can borrow one of mine?” Luna suggested, beaming.

“That’s so sweet. But I don’t think they’ll fit. My head is too big.”

Luna laughed. “Daddy has some hats. I’ll get you one.”

Before Chelsea could protest, Luna was running to her dad’s bedroom and yanking open the door. The sound of drawers being opened echoed through the hallway and Chelsea winced. She should probably go in there later and check that Luna hadn’t left it a mess, but somehow it felt like a step too far.

An invasion of privacy.

Being a nanny she was used to her own privacy being virtually non-existent. But she’d found that most of her employers guarded their own space carefully, even from the staff. Some of them preferred to eat separately from the staff, others banned the staff from certain rooms. She’d learned to tread lightly and take her cues from them.

Yeah, she wouldn’t go into his room. She’d just warn him that Luna had been in there earlier.

“Here you go. It’s his favorite.” Luna was holding a battered Lakers Cap, the material a faded blue with a white L.A. embroidered above the peak.

“I can’t take that,” Chelsea said. “What if it gets ruined at the beach?”

“He won’t mind. He wouldn’t want you to get sunburned, would he?” Luna asked. She held the cap up, rolling onto her tiptoes in an effort to put it on Chelsea’s head. “You’re so tall,” Luna complained. “Almost as tall as my mommy.”

Chelsea bent down and let Luna slip the cap onto her head. It felt soft and slightly too big, but the peak shaded her eyes perfectly.

Okay, she’d borrow it this once. And explain to him this time before he got the wrong impression. She pulled it on a little firmer and smiled at Luna.

“What do you think?”

“It looks nice,” Luna said, nodding. “Are you a Laker’s fan?”

“I’ve seen them a few times. How about you?”

Luna pulled her lip between her teeth, and leaned in conspiratorially. “I like going because Daddy always buys me Dippin’ Dots,” she whispered. “But I don’t like the way he shouts whenever they lose.”

“My dad was the same with football,” Chelsea told her. “He’d sulk for

days whenever the 49ers lost. My mom used to call him a big baby.”

Luna wrinkled her nose. “I hate being called a baby.”

“He did, too.” Chelsea took her hand. “Are you ready to go to the beach?”

Luna clapped her hands together. “Yes I am!”

The steps to the beach were carved into the cliffside until they reached halfway down, where wooden steps replaced them and led the rest of the way down to the sand. Luna slid her hand into Chelsea’s, using the other to grasp onto the rail, her steps tentative as they made their way to the bottom.

When they reached the final step, Chelsea helped Luna take her shoes off before removing her own, then they slid their feet into the sand. The surface was hot against their bare soles, and they nearly ran to the cooler, wetter sand nearer the ocean.

The tide was out, exposing a layer of shells pushed down against the wet sand. Luna leaned down to pick one up, her eyes wide as she showed it to Chelsea.

“Will this look good on a necklace?” she asked.

“It’ll be perfect.”

“But there’s no hole in it. How will we put it on a chain?” Luna asked.

Chelsea winked. “I have a special method. I’ll show you when we get back. It’s easy, I promise.”

“Daddy doesn’t let me use drills.”

Chelsea tried not to laugh. “Of course he doesn’t. But that’s okay because we don’t need a drill to make a hole. I use a little screw and a hammer. Though we should probably pick up some extra shells just in case we break any.”

“How many do we need?”

“How many do you want on your necklace?” Chelsea asked her.

“A bajillion.”

Chelsea winked. “Let’s go for ten or fifteen today.”

Luna looked at her carefully. “Okay, but we can come back again tomorrow, right?”

“Any time you want, as long as it’s okay with your daddy.”

They spent the next hour finding more shells. Chelsea showed Luna how to check that there was nothing still living inside of them.

“Shells have animals living inside them?” Luna asked, looking shocked.

“Yes. And we want to make sure we’re not stealing somebody’s home. So we only take ones that are empty.”

“Will they mind if we take the empty ones? What if somebody new wants to move in?”

“They grow their own shells,” Chelsea told her. “Or most of them do. There are a few animals that steal others’ shells, like the hermit crab.”

“Do they get arrested for doing that?” Luna frowned. “Because stealing’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“Stealing *is* wrong,” Chelsea agreed. “But they only take empty ones, like we’re doing now. So I think that’s okay.”

It took some persuading to get Luna to leave the beach once they’d picked her fifteen favorite shells. It was only the promise of watermelon that finally sealed the deal. Luna counted the steps as they walked up, her smile faltering when they got to thirty-nine.

“Forty,” Chelsea gently reminded her.

“That’s right. And forty-one, forty-two, forty-three...”

They were a hot sweaty mess by the time they reached the top, and Chelsea opened the gate to the backyard. Her heart leapt as she saw Chris and Neil sitting at a table beneath the pool lanai, next to a pretty brunette. All three of them turned to look at her and Luna, and she was so very aware of how red and sweaty their faces were.

“Daddy!” Luna shouted, running toward him with glee. “We’ve been picking up shells. Did you know they’re like skeletons of dead sea animals? Except sometimes new sea animals use them. They’re called...” she paused, her brow wrinkling. “Something crabs. But they don’t go to jail for stealing.”

Despite her sweaty, sandy clothes, Chris picked her up and kissed her, setting her on his lap as she continued to talk about shells. “Chelsea says we don’t need to use a drill to make the necklace which is good, right? Because I’m not supposed to use a drill, am I?”

Chris’ eyes flickered up to where Chelsea was standing, the net bag full of shells in her hand. An amused smile played at his lips.

“Nice cap.”

She touched her head. How had she forgotten she was wearing it? “I, uh, hope you don’t mind. Luna said you wouldn’t. I forgot to bring my hat.”

“I figured Luna had something to do with it.” He ruffled his daughter’s hair. “My room looks like a hurricane hit it.”

“I couldn’t find your caps.” Luna shrugged and looked over at Neil and the woman with him. “Hi Uncle Neil. Hi Liv. Why are you all dressed up?”

“We have a meeting in L.A. tonight,” Neil told her.

“Hey kiddo,” the woman – Liv – smiled at Luna. They obviously knew each other. “And you must be Chelsea. I’m Liv, I think I remember your sister from school.”

“You’re from Angel Sands?” Chelsea asked.

“Yep. But I’ve lived in L.A. for a long time. Only just moved back.” Liv nodded, her expression friendly. “You’re based in L.A. too right?”

“That’s right.” Chelsea’s smile was genuine. “It’s a small world.”

“Yes it is. Hopefully I’ll get to see you again soon. I have to hitch a ride to L.A. with these two. I have a meeting there tomorrow.”

“Will you be back for bedtime?” Luna asked her dad.

He kissed the crown of her hair. “Not tonight, sweetheart. But I’ll be here for breakfast in the morning.” He looked over at Chelsea. “Is that okay with you?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

Gently, he lifted Luna from his lap. “Go tell Neil and Liv about the crabs,” he told her. “I need to talk to Chelsea for a minute.”

“They’re called...” Luna trailed off as she skipped over to the two of them.

“Hermit crabs,” Chelsea softly reminded her, before looking at Chris. Luna was right, he was dressed up. Dark navy pants with a crisp white shirt, open at the neck to reveal a hint of chest hair. His jacket was draped across the back of the chair, and his sunglasses were folded on the table in front of him. He inclined his head at her and the two of them walked inside the house.

“I’m sorry about your bedroom,” Chelsea said quickly. “I was going to tell you when you got home. I wasn’t sure if I should go in there and tidy up or not.”

That smile was still playing on his lips. He was so damn handsome it hurt to look at him. “What are you afraid of? Do you think I have some kind of secret to hide?”

“Doesn’t everybody have secrets?” she asked him.

“I guess. But you don’t have to worry, I don’t have a dungeon full of dead bodies.”

Her cheeks heated up. “That’s not what I meant.”

He continued as though she hadn’t said anything. “I like to keep my dead bodies in L.A.. So much easier.”

He was teasing her. And damn if she didn’t like it. “I was simply trying to respect your privacy,” she told him, pouting.

His glance dropped to her lips. “Thank you. But next time feel free to go in. Add to your Lakers hat collection if you like.” He lifted a brow. “It suits you.”

“Ugh.” She took the cap off and handed it to him. “Thank you for the loan.”

He slid his fingers around the peak. “Any time.” He glanced at his watch. “Are you sure it’s okay to leave you both for the night? I’ve alerted the security service but I can arrange for somebody to stay in here if you prefer?”

“We’ll be fine,” she promised. “Luna’s worn out anyway. She should go to bed nicely.”

“And what will you do when she’s asleep?” His voice was velvety low.

“I don’t know.” She felt a little breathless. “Go through all your drawers and find the dead bodies maybe. Now that you’ve given me free rein of your bedroom.”

He laughed. “You’re a pain in the ass, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told. And really, I’ll probably call my sister to have a chat and then have an early night. So you won’t be missing out on very much.

“Your sister who lives here?”

She liked the way he remembered that. “Yeah. I feel bad for being so close and never seeing her.”

“It’s your day off soon though, isn’t it?”

“It is.” She nodded. “I’ll probably see her and my mom then.”

“Good.” His eyes caught hers. “Call me if you need anything. Or if you find anything interesting in my closet.”

“If there’s a door to a dungeon I won’t be calling, I’ll be running away.”

“Good thing I’ve got a tracker on your car then.” He swallowed. “I have to go. Have a pleasant evening. I’d say be good, but I have a feeling that’s a futile request.”

He turned and walked away, and for a moment she stood there watching him. This teasing between them was disconcerting yet warming at the same time.

“You called him what?” Ember asked, swallowing a laugh.

“Don’t make me say it again. In fact, I’m planning on erasing that word

from my vocabulary.” Chelsea groaned. “I’m such an idiot.”

“Daddy.” Her sister chuckled this time. “What did he say when you called him that?”

Chelsea leaned back on her bed. It was just past ten and Luna had been fast asleep for two hours. She’d been fussy tonight, as though she hated her dad being gone. But after the third reading of the same book she’d finally drifted off.

“I apologized then made it worse by calling him sir.” She grimaced at the memory.

“Maybe he didn’t hear you,” Ember said hopefully.

“He heard me.” Chelsea could still hear the weighty silence. “He just chose to ignore it.”

“That’s a good thing, right? Especially after what happened last time.”

Chelsea inhaled sharply. Ember’s words were like a bucket of cold water being thrown over her. Her sister was right, it *was* a good thing he hadn’t said anything. Even better that he hadn’t fired her. After her last job, she needed to be extra careful and instead she’d started flirting with her employer.

Every nanny knew better than that. Even if their employer was the hottest guy in Hollywood. There were lines you didn’t cross and this was one of them. Not just because it would get messy, but because you didn’t use the bathroom where you ate. Didn’t matter if you worked in a bank or in the military or in a beautiful cliffside house, it still made sense to keep a barrier between you and the person you worked for.

“Yeah, it’s a good thing,” Chelsea agreed. “Did I tell you I took Luna to the beach today? She loved it.”

“Of course she did.” Ember took the change of conversation in stride. “Wait, it’s not the first time she’s ever been to the beach, is it?”

“No.” Chelsea smiled. “But she really enjoyed picking up shells. We made them into a necklace tonight, I had to practically pry it off her when she went to bed. She wanted to wear it all night.”

“That’s cute. I love how you make sure your children find joy in the little things.” Ember’s voice was warm. “Sounds like you two are getting along.”

“We are. She’s a great kid. I worry about her getting lonely though. She seems older than her age sometimes, like she’s trying to keep everybody happy and hold in her emotions.” Chelsea sighed. “I don’t know. Maybe she just needs to play with some kids her own age. It’s not good for her to constantly be around adults.”

“Do you know any kids her age? The cast and crew must have some children with them, right?”

Chelsea sat up. “Yeah, you’re right. I’ll ask her dad when he’s back from L.A..”

“In the meantime, why don’t you bring her to the beach on Sunday? There’s a group of us who meet up with our children. There’s a girl a couple of years older than Luna there. Her name’s Isla.”

A flash of excitement bust in Chelsea’s chest. “That would be great. I’ll speak to Chris...” Her voice trailed off. “Oh. Sunday is my day off.”

“You could come anyway,” Ember suggested. “It would be so good to see you. It’s kind of torture having you so close and not being able to spend much time with you.”

Pulling her lip between her teeth, Chelsea thought about the weekend. She really did want to introduce Luna to some kids. And Chris was finally beginning to trust her, which meant she could probably persuade him to let Luna have some more freedom. She didn’t want to wait for another week – that was way too long for a six year old child.

“I’ll see if I can change my day off,” Chelsea said. This could definitely work. “I’ll talk to my boss.”

“Just remember not to call him daddy.”

Chelsea groaned. “You’re never going to let me live that one down, are you?”

“Hey, don’t sweat it. If a guy bought me a car I’d call him daddy, too.” Ember was laughing again. “In fact, I’m gonna suggest it to Lucas.”

“I’m ending this call now.”

“Don’t worry, we can continue the discussion on Sunday.”

“Maybe Chris will say I can’t come,” Chelsea said.

“If anybody can persuade him it’s you. I’ll see you at the beach.”

It was one of those Hollywood parties where you knew everybody and nobody. So many famous faces, and yet not one of them looked particularly pleased to see you. Chris took a sip from his glass – soda water, thank you – and looked around the pool area where everybody had congregated.

Neil had wandered off with some friends, and the host had long since disappeared into what he called the ‘powder room’, though everybody knew no cosmetics were involved. So here he was, alone once more, watching as people made inane conversation with only half an eye on the person in front of them, because really they wanted to talk to somebody more important, more useful to their careers.

Liv hadn’t even bothered coming. She hated Hollywood parties with a passion. And since she had meetings tomorrow she excused herself. He couldn’t blame her for that.

The only reason he was here was because the host – a rich banker - had invested a lot of money into the movie. He wanted to show off his investment, introduce the producer and star of ‘his movie’ to his guests. He’d done that and now Chris’ job here was done. He’d stay for one more drink then vanish into the night, because he and Neil needed to be on the road first thing in the morning.

“Christopher Vaughn,” a low voice purred. He turned to see a beautiful blonde standing next to him. She was wearing a red, skintight dress that ended mid-thigh, her golden waves tumbling over her shoulders. “What are you doing here?” she asked him. “I heard you were on location.”

“Rhian.” He nodded at her. She was one of Anya’s best friends. Not that it had stopped her from hitting on him a few times, even when he and Anya were together. He trusted her about as far as he could throw her. Preferably into the sparkling pool. “How are you?”

“Jobless.” She lifted an eyebrow. “So if you hear of any good productions coming up let me know. I’m still annoyed you didn’t consider me for your current one.”

“There were no suitable roles,” he said smoothly. “It’s very unglamorous.”

She fluffed her hair. “Oh well, maybe next time?”

“Sure.”

She looked around and then back at him. “Where’s your daughter?”

It was typical she couldn’t remember Luna’s name. “At home with the nanny.”

“You have a nanny?” she asked. “How quaint. Does she talk like Mary Poppins?”

Another thing he remembered about Rhian Morgan. She had no idea about kids. She viewed Luna the same way she’d view a pet lizard. Interesting for about five minutes but otherwise annoying and pointless.

“No, not really.” He shook his head. Hopefully Rhian would move on soon and he could get home. He glanced at his watch. It wasn’t even ten yet.

“Hey Chris!”

He was relieved to see a friendly face walking toward them. Grant Chaplin was one of Hollywood’s good guys. Affable as Tom Hanks, as savvy as George Clooney and as faithful as Jimmy Stewart. He was still married to his college sweetheart, despite a metaphoric rise to fame during his twenties. Now he was almost fifty and still a goddamned handsome guy.

“Grant.” Chris’s smile was genuine. He’d met the older actor a few times, though they’d never starred in a movie together. “How are you?” he leaned forward to shake his hand. Rhian’s face lit up, reminding him to be polite. “This is Rhian Morgan. Rhian, Grant Chaplin.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Rhian said, sliding her hand into Grant’s. Chris was all but forgotten. “I’m a huge fan.”

“Thank you.” Grant was unruffled as he turned back to Chris. “I hear you have my old nanny working for you. How’s she doing for you?”

“It’s early days but she’s working out well.”

“Sarah almost cried when we had to let her go. She only worked for us

for a year, but man she was good. The kids are just too old now, they spend most of their time on the goddamned Xbox.”

Chris smiled and nodded, aware that Rhian was still listening avidly.

“It was a good thing you did, taking her on when nobody else would. Did your PA tell you I spoke to him? Gave her a great reference. Just a shame the Silbers screwed her over.”

From the corner of his eye Chris could see Rhian tipping her head to the side, a half smile playing on her lips. “She worked for the Silbers?” she asked.

Grant frowned, his eyes catching Chris’.

“What did you say your name was again?” Grant asked.

“Rhian Morgan.” She beamed.

“Well, Rhian. Why don’t you come with me and I’ll introduce you to a few people.”

Her eyes lit up. “That would be wonderful.”

Grant took her arm and turned her around, mouthing a ‘sorry’ to Chris before pulling her away.

Chris drained his drink and put it on one of the glass tables scattered around the pool area, then made his way back into the house. He’d find Neil and they’d go back to his L.A. house, and tomorrow he’d be out of here.

Doing what he loved best. Making something that would last forever. And hopefully Rhian would either meet somebody much more interesting or she’d get trashed and forget all about that conversation.

Because one thing he hated was people talking about him. Which really was crazy, because his agent loved it.

A piercing scream cut through Chelsea’s dream, making her sit up in bed, her eyes fighting against the sudden waking. For a moment she froze, then another scream came, and she ran her ass off toward Luna’s bedroom.

It only took a few seconds, but in those few moments every fearful scenario rushed through her mind. Were there intruders? Had Luna fallen out of bed and broken something? When she pushed her way through the bedroom door and saw the little girl alone in her bed a wave of relief washed through her.

But then Luna started screaming again, her body thrashing around on the mattress. Chelsea ran to the bed and dropped down until her knees reached the floor, swallowing hard.

“Luna?” she said softly.

Luna didn’t reply. Just started crying out again. A moment later she sat up, her eyes still tightly closed.

“Sweetie?”

Still nothing. That’s when she realized Luna was having a night terror.

Chelsea had learned about them during her child development studies. The kind of nightmares a child didn’t wake up from. Instead, they continued to live them. Their bodies would go into fight or flight mode even while they were in deep sleep, their breathing rapid, their body movements jerky, their voices loud and afraid.

Luna’s eyes opened, and for a moment Chelsea thought she was awake. But her stare was glassy, unseeing, and a second later her eyelids came down again, like a curtain on a stage show. There was nothing she could do but wait for Luna to awaken, and she hated that.

It took three long minutes before the episode was over. Luna moaned, turning to her side, and Chelsea brushed the hair back from her clammy brow. Slowly Luna’s eyes opened, and she blinked, seeing Chelsea so close.

“Hey honey,” Chelsea said softly. “You okay?”

Luna blinked the sleep from her eyes. “Where’s Daddy?”

“He’s coming home in the morning, remember?”

Her bottom lip trembled. “I want Daddy.”

Chelsea’s heart clenched. “Of course you do. And he wants to be here, too. Can I give you a hug for him?”

Luna sniffed and nodded, and Chelsea gathered the little girl into her arms. She could tell Luna was confused. Her body was still shaking from the remnants of the dream. Luckily, within minutes her breathing had calmed and her body slackened against Chelsea as sleep reclaimed her. Laying her carefully back onto the bed, Chelsea watched her closed eyes and rosebud lips, her chest rising and falling rhythmically as her whole body calmed.

Exhaling heavily, Chelsea scrambled back to sit by the door, unwilling to completely leave her yet. She knew that night terrors tended to be forgotten almost immediately by the child, but still, she wanted to be here if it happened again.

A glance at her watch told her it was almost midnight. Should she tell

Chris what had happened or leave it until morning? Normally she'd leave it, but she was still on a knife's edge with him. Trying to prove herself trustworthy. Would he trust her if she didn't contact him right away?

Checking that Luna was still sleeping, Chelsea tiptoed back to her bedroom and grabbed the phone Chris had given her. Then she walked back to the hallway, standing just outside Luna's bedroom, the door ajar enough for her to keep an eye on the sleeping child.

She hit the call button next to Chris' name. Here went nothing.

"Chelsea? Is everything okay?" His voice was clipped. She couldn't tell if he was annoyed for her calling at this time or worried about the reason for her call.

"There's nothing to worry about," she said, her voice calm for both of them. "But I thought you should know that Luna had a night terror tonight. I wasn't sure whether to save it for once you got back or not."

He let out a long breath. "I thought we were over those."

"She's had them before?"

"Yeah. When Anya and I first split up. Most nights for a few months. The doctor said she'd grow out of them and I thought she had."

Chelsea glanced into Luna's bedroom again. All was still calm. "Maybe it's a one-off," she said softly. "Because you're away or because she's in a new place. Could be anything."

"Hopefully." Concern still etched his voice. "Are you okay? They're pretty brutal to witness."

Her throat tightened. "I'm okay."

"It's okay not to be okay." She could hear his breathing through the phone. "Apparently I had them as a kid, too. My mom said they were the worst thing."

"I heard they could run in families."

"Yeah, the doctor said that. I'm sorry, I should have warned you."

She shook her head even though he wasn't there to see. "If she hasn't had one for a long time why would you? It's okay, I was taught about them in school, though I've never witnessed one." She pulled her lip between her teeth. "Would you like me to take her to the doctor tomorrow?"

"Is there a good one in town?"

"There's a great pediatrician. And she'll refer us if needed."

"Okay, make the appointment. And let me know when and where, I'll meet you there."

“You don’t have to. She’ll probably advise us to wait it out. There’s not really much more we can do.”

“Yeah, I know. I still want to be there.”

“Okay.”

He cleared his throat. “I should let you get to bed.”

“I might just sit outside Luna’s room for a while.”

“If I was there I’d sit with you.”

Her chest felt like something was squeezing it. “I wish you were.”

“I’ll stay on the line with you for a while, in case it happens again.” His voice was low.

For a long moment there was silence between them. She shifted, feeling awkward.

“How was your party?” she asked, just to break the pause.

“Dull. I got out of there as soon as possible. I needed a whiskey.”

“You weren’t drinking at the party?”

He gave a little laugh. “No. I like to stay stone cold sober and alert. Those things are traps.”

“In what way?”

“In the way that everybody talks about you after. And I don’t like to be talked about.”

“I don’t either.” She sat down on the carpet outside Luna’s room, resting her head on the wall. “It sucks, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does.”

“When did you have night terrors?” she asked him.

“After my dad left the first time.”

“He left more than once?” She frowned.

“A few times. The last was the worst but by then I was twelve. He cleaned everything out. My mom’s bank account, her rainy day savings under the bed. Even took the TV. The only thing he left was some old videos we couldn’t watch until mom had saved enough money to get a new TV and video player.”

“I’m sorry.” She pulled her lip between her teeth. “People can be assholes.”

“My dad certainly could.” He let out another breath. “You know the worst thing?”

“What?”

“He had an amazing taste in movies. I kind of hate that.” He shook his

head as though annoyed.

“What videos did he leave?” she asked, intrigued by this side of him.

“Old ones from the seventies mostly. *The Godfather* parts one and two, *All the President’s Men*, *Serpico*. But the ones I liked the most were the Spielberg ones. *Duel*, *Jaws*, man those are great movies.”

“Is that what made you want to make it in Hollywood?”

He gave a little chuckle. “I guess. We were hardly getting by, my mom and I, yet those movies got us through. She worked most nights but on Fridays she’d be home and we’d make burgers and pretend we were at the movie theater.”

“We used to do that, too. Bring all our bedding and pillows down and make a pallet in front of the TV.”

“What’s your favorite movie?” he asked her.

Her breath caught. “I don’t know that I can answer that. You might judge me.”

“Depends on the movie,” he teased.

A smile played at her lips. “*Pretty Woman*.”

“Okay, now I’m judging.”

“Stop it,” she told him, warmth rushing through her. “It’s a great movie. And Julia Roberts is heaven. I had the biggest girl crush on her growing up.”

“Wasn’t that movie made before you were even born?” he asked.

“Yeah, but it’s a classic. And my mom’s favorite movie, too.”

“Still disappointed.”

“Okay then, let’s turn this around. Who’s your favorite child development psychologist?”

He laughed loudly. “Piaget.”

Her mouth dropped open. “You’ve heard of him?” She’d studied Piaget’s models of development in her first year at college.

“Not just a pretty face, am I?” he asked.

Her stomach contracted as she thought about his face. The hard lines of his jaw, the piercing blue of his eyes. She’d never met a man so physically beautiful. And now he was making it worse by being so perfect on the inside, too.

Life sucked.

“I think Luna is okay now,” she said, glancing into the bedroom one last time.

“Yeah. We should get some sleep.” He sounded almost reluctant. “I’ll see

you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And thank you,” he told her. “For being there for Luna.”

“It’s my job.”

“I know. But thank you anyway.”

“Any time. Good night, Mr. Vaughn.” She wasn’t sure why she was back to using his last name again. But she did like the way it made his breath draw sharply in.

“Sweet dreams, Chelsea.”

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“Why don’t you draw me a picture?” Doctor Abernathy suggested, helping Luna to sit at the little child-sized table and chairs in her office. Paper and crayons were scattered across the surface, along with some printed pictures for younger children to color. “I want to have a quick chat with your daddy and Miss Kennedy over there, okay?”

“Sure.” Luna seemed completely unbothered by her whole visit to the doctor’s office. She’d barely blinked an eyelid when Chelsea had explained about her night terrors. She clearly couldn’t remember them, and more than anything was curious as to what she’d been doing and how she’d sounded.

It was a good thing, but a strange feeling that Chelsea had experienced them more than Luna.

“So, I think you’re right,” Doctor Abernathy said, taking a chair opposite to where Chelsea and Chris were sitting. He’d met them at the doctor’s office and they’d been called right in, so they hadn’t had time to talk. “Luna’s night terrors are probably a reaction to all the changes she’s undergone recently. It’s a lot for a little girl to take in. She’s moved houses, has a new primary parent in you, Mr. Vaughn, and a new primary caregiver in Miss Kennedy.”

“So what should we do when they happen?” Chris asked, his brows knitting.

“Night terrors tend to occur when a child moves from non-REM sleep to REM sleep. Their central nervous system is triggered by some kind of fear during that transition. So it isn’t a nightmare, it’s just a huge reaction to a fear, which in Luna’s case is probably having everything changing and new.”

Chris ran his hands through his short hair. “I can’t move her back to L.A.

right now. And her mom's away." He glanced over at Chelsea, his eyes catching hers. "I don't see how I can start to make her feel at home."

Doctor Abernathy smiled gently. "You're already doing it. It's going to take time, but Luna will get used to being here. She just needs to feel like part of the change, that's all. Part of the new surroundings she's in. Tell me, does she play with other children here?"

"She hasn't met any." Chris grimaced. "I hadn't really thought about that."

Chelsea glanced at him. "Actually, I was going to talk to you about that," she said softly, her eyes still on Chris. "My sister suggested I bring Luna to the beach on Sunday. A big group of her friends with children meet up there. There's another girl a little older than Luna who could make a good playmate."

"That's a great idea." Doctor Abernathy beamed. "At this stage in Luna's development, friendships are important."

"Sunday's your day off," Chris said to Chelsea.

"I know. But maybe I could swap. Or only take the afternoon off." He was still looking at her intently. "Unless you had something planned with her. Or you could even come with us."

"I don't think that's a good idea." He shook his head. "But yeah, you should take her if you're okay with that."

She knew how much it took for him to agree to it, and it made her heart clench. The love he had for his daughter was so clear on his face. And his fears for her were so evident, too. She wanted to take his hand and squeeze it, but that was beyond inappropriate. And Doctor Abernathy was already listening to their interaction with interest.

"Okay then. I'd like you both to monitor her for two weeks and see how things go. If there are no improvements, or the night terrors get worse or increase in frequency, call to make an appointment. We can talk about more tests or alternative treatments."

"Does that sound good to you?" Chris asked Chelsea.

"Of course." She nodded. "You should go to work." He'd arrived straight here from L.A. for the early appointment. "I've got this."

"I know. Thank you." He gave her the briefest of smiles, but she could see from the clouds in his eyes that he was still deep in thought. "I'll see you tonight."

"Yes you will."

She watched as he went over to Luna, hugging her tight and whispering something in her ear. She smiled and hugged him back, giggling when he tickled her.

“He seems like a good father,” Doctor Abernathy murmured.

“Yes.” Chelsea turned her attention to the pediatrician. “He is.”

Luna slept for two hours that afternoon, which was completely unlike her. Chelsea wasn't sure if it was exhaustion from the night terrors she couldn't remember, or the excitement of visiting the doctor's office, followed by a trip to the coffee shop for a soda and cake while they sat on the beach terrace. Whatever it was, she'd been out for the count and then woken up with so much energy she wasn't sure what to do with it.

So they'd spent the remainder of the afternoon in the pool. They'd started off practicing her strokes. She was surprisingly strong for a six year old, and could swim two lengths of the fifteen meter pool without stopping. After she'd gotten bored of lessons, they'd played around with the noodles and balls for a while, then pretended they were mermaids again, chasing sharks and whales. Finally she'd had enough of the water and they'd climbed out to dry off in the early evening sun, their skin warm and toasty from the still-strong rays.

“Hey!” Neil walked out onto the pool terrace. “Everything okay?”

Luna lifted her head from where she was laying on a sunbed. “Hi Uncle Neil,” she called out. “I'm tired.”

He laughed, walking over to where they were both laying. “You look it. You been in the pool all d—” His words were cut short as his foot hit a wet piece of floor and he skidded, flailing his arms. He started to fall, reaching out for the table next to him, his head connecting with the edge with a loud thump.

“Shit.” Chelsea jumped up as he collapsed on the floor. “Are you okay?”

“You said shit,” Luna said in a singsong voice.

“I meant sugar,” Chelsea said quickly, bending down and reaching for Neil's arm. There was blood dripping from his brow where it had caught the edge of the table, mixing with the pool of water on the terrace and turning it a murky pink. “Neil, you're bleeding.”

He frowned, reaching up to touch his head. He blinked when he saw the blood on his fingers. "Just give me a minute to sit up."

With Chelsea's help, he managed to get onto one of the chairs next to the table. She leaned in to inspect his cut. Luckily it wasn't deep. She was pretty sure it didn't need stitches, only cleaning up and a bandage.

Luna was leaning over them both, looking at Neil's injury with the kind of gory interest only a child could show. At least she wasn't squeamish, Chelsea supposed. It could be worse.

"Stay here and I'll grab the first aid kit," she told him.

"Wasn't planning on going anywhere."

The pool first aid kit was by the door to the living area. She grabbed it and took it back to where Neil was still sitting. Luna was asking him questions and he was trying to answer her patiently, but Chelsea could tell his head was hurting.

"Okay," she said. "Luna, why don't you sit there?" She pointed at a chair across the table from Neil. "You can watch while I clean him up."

"Sure." Luna grinned. "Are there Disney Band-Aids in there? I love Disney Band-Aids."

"If you put a Disney Band-Aid on me you're toast," Neil muttered.

Chelsea bit down a smile and opened the kit, grabbing an alcohol free wipe and opening the packet. "This is probably going to sting," she told him.

"Maybe you should kiss it better afterward," Luna said helpfully. Neil snorted.

Holding his head steady with one hand, she started to dab at the cut with the other, aware she was wearing only a bikini and there was no way to do this other than to shove her chest at him.

"How was your party last night?" she asked, deciding that distraction was the best technique.

"Good," he said, closing his eyes. At least he was a gentleman. "A lot of people either getting wasted or networking. Not much in between."

"Did you meet any pretty ladies?" Luna asked him. It was Chelsea's turn to laugh.

"None as pretty as you," he told Luna. She beamed, though Neil couldn't see it. He still had his eyes shut.

"What's going on?" Chris asked, walking out of the living room onto the deck. He opened the gate to the pool area, his brows furrowed as he took them all in. Chelsea was straddling Neil's legs, bent at the waist so she could

get good access to his head. Chris' gaze dipped to her cleavage then back to her face, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

"Uncle Neil hurt his head," Luna said, skipping over to where Chris was standing. "Chelsea's cleaning him up."

"Right."

Luna threw her arms around his waist. "He's going to have a Disney Band-Aid."

"I'm not," Neil said, opening his eyes. He blinked when he saw how close Chelsea's chest was to his face. She quickly stepped back, aware of everybody's scrutiny of her body.

But she was more aware of Chris than anybody else. And the way he was looking at Neil. As though he wanted to hit him or something.

"Are you done?" Chris asked her, his voice clipped.

"I just need to put a bandage on it."

"Go on then." Luna ran back to watch Chelsea pull out the pack of non-branded bandages, while Chris crossed his arms and stayed silent. It was like the atmosphere had spun on a dime, going from easy and light-hearted to heavy and loaded.

She pulled a long, thin band aid from the pack and gently slid off the sticker covers. Leaning forward again – she had no choice – she gently placed it on the cleaned graze.

Neil didn't close his eyes this time. And she was so damn aware of her breasts so close to his face. He looked up at her and winked and she had to bite down a smile.

"Are you done?" Chris asked again.

"Yes." Chelsea nodded, then looked back at Neil. "Are you sure you're feeling okay? No symptoms of concussion?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart." Neil gave her a slow smile.

Chris blinked. "Luna, go grab Chelsea's cover up." His brow wrinkled as he stared at them both. "In fact, I'll get it. It'll be faster."

As he walked away, Neil leaned in closer to her. "He's so damn jealous he doesn't know what to do with himself."

"Jealous?" Chelsea repeated, confused.

"You don't see it, do you?"

"See what?" She was glad Luna had followed Chris inside.

"How he looks at you. Every time I'm near you he's about to combust. He's already warned me off you."

Her cheeks flamed. “He has? Why?”

Neil stood, his fingers brushing his brow. “He has this idea that I’m attracted to you. Or that I’m going to do something about it.” The grin was still playing on his lips. “And you are attractive, Chelsea, but you’ll be pleased to hear that I’m dating somebody else.”

She let out a lungful of air. “Well that’s a relief.”

“Right?” He raised a brow. “Doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun though.”

“I’m not... I don’t...”

He started to laugh. “Not *that* kind of fun. I meant we could screw with Chris’ head. I’m pretty good at flirting.”

This was stupid. There was no way Chris was jealous. Annoyed at his staff for having fun, maybe, but that was all.

“I don’t think so. I’m in enough trouble already.” She shrugged. “I don’t want to piss him off anymore.”

“Well anytime you do, I’m your man.” He glanced over at the living room. Chris and Luna were walking back through the glazed doors, Chris carrying an oversized bathrobe.

He really did want to cover her up.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” she said, knowing for sure she wouldn’t. She was already treading on eggshells here. She didn’t need to break any more.

“Bear what in mind?” Chris asked.

“I told her she should retrain as a nurse.” Neil gave her a wicked glance. “She’d look great in a uniform.”

She rolled her eyes at him. He really was pushing things now. “Okay,” she said. “Who wants dinner? I’m cooking spaghetti.”

He couldn't sleep. Part of it was worry about Luna. He was keeping an ear open for her night terrors, all too aware that once they started it would take a while for them to stop. But more than that there was this weird buzzing in his body. Like an electric current he couldn't switch off. He was annoyed and pissed – mostly with himself – but with Neil, too.

His assistant had stayed for dinner, and taken every opportunity he could to make Chelsea laugh. Neil had flirted with her, touched her arm way too many times, and when he'd finally left – about goddamn time – he'd brushed the hair from her face and given her the softest kiss on her cheek, before she'd rolled her eyes and batted him away.

Chris had liked that eye roll too much.

He'd tried to keep his good humor up as he put Luna to bed, reading her three chapters from her Junie B. Jones book. If you asked him, he couldn't even tell you what had happened in the story. He'd said the words but his head had been in another place altogether.

Mostly thinking about Chelsea and how she'd looked in that damn bikini, her wet hair tumbling down her back. It hadn't even been that revealing. She obviously preferred sporty styles, the top a black bandeau with a zip at the front, pulled halfway down to reveal what he knew were fucking magnificent breasts. Even the bottoms were modest, covering her up to her hips, but it didn't stop the memory of her long, colt like legs, tanned and slim, being etched into his skull.

Logically, he knew there were more attractive women than her. But tell that to his body. It was like she was taunting him with her luscious curves

and thick dark hair. When he'd seen Neil staring at her cleavage he'd actually considered hitting him.

His own assistant.

His friend.

He was mostly a calm kind of guy. He'd seen enough of his own father's temper not to want to be a man like him. But there was something about Chelsea Kennedy that brought out the basest feelings in him. The kind that made him want to pick her up and carry her away so nobody else could look at her.

The fucking beast inside him. The one he hadn't even known was there. Or maybe he knew and always kept him contained because he never wanted to be like his father. Never wanted to be a man who did things purely because he was selfish. He wanted to be a better person. A stronger one.

But dammit, his control was hanging by a string.

"Daddy!"

Luna's scream made him sit up in a flash. Within a second he was out of bed, running across the hallway to her room, his heart slamming against his ribcage. The cooler air of the night surrounded his bare chest as he pushed her door open and went in, watching her tiny body thrashing beneath the covers.

"Baby."

There was no flicker in her eyes. No hint of recognition, but he said it anyway. He checked for hazards, but Chelsea had already lined the side of the bed with pillows, making sure the sharp edge of Luna's bedside table was covered and unable to cause any injury.

She was a fucking miracle that woman. He was lucky to have her. And he wasn't going to mess this up.

"Noooo!" Another cry and it hit him like a Mack truck. He leaned over his daughter, wishing he could take this away, hating that he couldn't. It was like a kind of purgatory watching her stuck in fear, being unable to stop it.

This was his fault. He was the one who'd changed her life. Who'd brought her here and changed her life in a heartbeat. Who'd insisted on keeping her safe in the house when all she wanted was to be free.

He'd caused this and he fucking hated himself. Maybe he was more like his father than he realized.

When the thrashing stopped, he let out a long, painful breath, reaching forward to brush the hair from his daughter's eyes. Her face was hot and

clammy, and he looked around for something to cool her with, only to find Chelsea standing next to him, holding out a wet facecloth.

Christ, she anticipated everything. He took it gratefully and wiped Luna's brow. She muttered something and turned onto her side, curling her body up as she slept.

"Were you here the whole time?" he asked, his voice gritty.

"I was in the doorway. I would have come in but..." She gave him a half smile. "You had it covered."

"Thank you for the cloth."

"I wanted to do something." The smile wavered. "You should get to bed. I'll stay with her for a while."

"I can't sleep," he told her.

"Neither can I," she admitted. "I'll just sit in the hall for a while. You go to bed when you're ready. I've got this."

He watched as she walked out of Luna's bedroom. She was wearing a gray tank and soft cotton pajama pants, her smooth arms exposed as she reached for the door and walked into the hallway.

From the corner of his eye he could see her sit down on the hall floor, her dark hair tumbling down her back as she leaned against the wall.

His mouth was dry as he tried to decide if she was sweet salvation or a sweet sin as she sat there, her eyes still on him.

Maybe a little of both.

It was impossible to tear her eyes away from him as he leaned over his daughter's bed, his back muscles rippling beneath his taut skin. She hadn't expected him to be shirtless, which was stupid because most guys she knew slept either in pants or in nothing.

Thank God he'd chosen pants.

Watching him and Luna as she'd tossed and turned in her terrors had been a painful kind of torture. She'd wanted to help but knew that it was her daddy that Luna needed the most. So Chelsea had just hovered in the doorway, feeling like some kind of peeping tom watching as he tended to his child.

It was like she was transfixed. Unable to move. The air was heavy with expectation, though she had no idea of what. Just that she couldn't leave even

if she wanted to.

And she didn't want to.

After ten minutes, he stroked Luna's hair again and stood, his pajama pants low on his hips. She could see the shadows between his defined shoulder blades, the long line of his spine as it ran from his neck to the dip in his back. The swell of his behind as his pants hung low.

He was breathtakingly beautiful.

Slowly he turned, his expression unreadable. Though his eyes looked hollow, there was still pain there. He was blaming himself for this. For Luna's fear and her terrors.

It made her heart ache.

He turned and walked toward her. She was mesmerized by him. By the sharp line of his jaw and the hard set of his mouth. It was a struggle to stand, but somehow she managed, her body leaning against the wall because her legs didn't have the strength to hold her up.

He inhaled sharply, his chest rising as he caught her staring.

She swallowed hard, remembering who he was. Her boss. "Shall I take over from here?" she asked him. "You need your rest."

It was like he hadn't heard her. He ran his hand over his cropped head and let out a deep breath. "Why does it have to be so hard?"

"It's not always like this," she whispered. "And it won't always be. She'll be okay. She has you and you're a great dad."

A disbelieving look washed over his face. "Say it again and I might believe you."

She looked him right in the eye. He was so beautiful it almost hurt to keep her gaze on his. "You're a good dad," she said again.

He reached out to cup her jaw. His fingers were warm and soft, sending a shiver down her spine. "Why do you have to be so perfect?" he asked her. "So fucking beautiful."

Her heart clenched. *He liked her?* She squeezed her eyes shut because it shouldn't matter. They were on dangerous ground.

He ran the tip of his thumb across her lip. She didn't pull away, just looked up at him and wondered how far this would go.

How far he'd let it go.

She wanted him, she knew that. But she also knew it was wrong. He was her boss, Luna's father.

If she had any strength she'd walk away.

“Chris...”

“I know,” he whispered. “You should stay away from me.” His voice was low and gritty.

“Should I?” She blinked. He was only saying what she thought but his words stung anyway. “Where should I go?”

“Anywhere.” His brows pinched together.

“To Neil?” she asked. “Should I go to him?” She was taunting him and she didn’t know why.

A flash of anger crossed his face. He stepped toward her, his dimple ticking in and out of his cheek. She should feel afraid, but all she felt was turned on. Needy and aching and wanting to see what he would do next.

He was inches away when he put his hands on the wall, caging her in with his bare arms. Heat suffused her, sending electric shivers down her spine. Her breath caught in her throat.

“The door...”

He glanced over his shoulder at Luna’s open door, then walked to close it before turning back to her. She hadn’t moved an inch, hadn’t been able to. Her back was flat against the wall, her palms pressed to the cool surface, her chest high and proud as he stalked toward her.

“You and Neil, it’s not happening.”

His vehemence heated her body.

“No,” she breathed. “It isn’t.”

“Go to bed, Chelsea,” he rasped, only half sounding like he meant it.

“Okay.” She nodded but didn’t move. She couldn’t if she wanted to. It was like her body had stopped listening to her, freezing her to the spot.

“Fuck.” He lowered his head until his brow met hers. Again he braced his arms on the wall, caging her in. Her heart hammered, shooting adrenaline through her body until every part of her felt raw and exposed.

He touched her arm, pulling his head back from hers. It was only the slightest, softest touch, but it was enough to set her on fire. Her skin ached for him, her body trembled.

His brow dipped as he scanned her face. “We can’t.”

She knew that. But she couldn’t say the words. They’d be an end when she needed a beginning.

He leaned in closer still, until his hard chest pushed against her softness. And his other hardness, thick and needy, against the apex of her stomach.

He traced the tip of his finger along her bare arm, leaving a trail of aching

fire. Then his hand was cupping her jaw, lifting her head until their gazes clashed. She'd never been more aware of her femininity. Of the contrast between his hard lines and her own soft curves. Of the call of the wild from his body to hers.

"I can't resist you. I've tried..." His mouth was a breath away from hers.

"I know." Her breath caught in her throat. "I'm sorry. I should go."

His fingers curled around her wrist. "No, stay," he whispered, tracing the line of her jaw, her throat, her collarbone. "Just for tonight, stay with me. Tomorrow we'll forget all about it. Just give me one night."

Her body was singing at his touch. She'd never wanted anything as much as she wanted him right then.

"Nobody can know," she whispered.

His eyes darkened at her acquiescence. "I wasn't planning on telling anybody," he whispered. "Just let me love you. For tonight."

Somewhere deep inside the still-rational part of her was telling her to go. To get to bed, to sleep this off. To forget all about the aching need.

She ignored it. "Okay," she whispered. "Just for tonight."

He slid his hands to the nape of her neck, tangling his fingers into her hair. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips against hers. As soft as a butterfly's wings, they created a hurricane of need inside her, turning her inside out and upside down.

Forgetting about everything but the connection between them.

She kissed him back, trying to communicate with her lips that this aching need inside of her had to get out. His kisses turned harder, heavier, and she could feel from the thickness pressing against her stomach that he needed this as much as she did.

She rolled her body against his and he growled against her mouth, the sound sending a shiver down her spine. He slid his hands down her back, his fingers pushing up her tank until the tips connected with her skin, making her sigh.

They were short breaths and long gasps. The lost calling to the lost. She remembered a whale trip she'd been on as a kid. Hearing the whale song – an almost otherworldly sound that made her ache even though she couldn't translate what they were trying to say. All she knew was that their song touched the very heart of her.

The way Chris' breaths made her ache with desire.

He ran his hand down her sleep shorts, his palm connecting with her bare

thigh. He curled his fingers around it, hitching her leg until it was curled around his hips. She had to cling to his shoulders to steady herself, and it was only a small lift until she was fully wrapped around him, his hands holding her behind, pushing her back against the wall as he continued to plunder her mouth.

Every part of her felt raw and alive. Her nipples were so sensitive where they brushed against his bare chest, only the thin fabric of her top between them. He slid his lips from her mouth, kissing her jaw, before making his way down her throat, causing her body to tingle with electricity as she arched herself against him.

Wordlessly, he turned, carrying her across the hallway to the door leading to his bedroom. "Open it," he murmured, his hands too busy holding her to push the handle.

He kissed the dip at the base of her neck as she pushed at the handle, feeling warmth pooling at the neediest part of her, her thigh muscles aching from gripping him so hard. Then he was carrying her across the floor, laying her on his oversize California Queen bed, the white covers lifting then falling as her body made contact with the mattress.

"When we have breakfast tomorrow we'll pretend this never happened." His eyes caught hers. For a moment she wondered what he'd do if she disagreed. Would he take her anyway? His gaze was dark, his jaw tense. He looked like a man on the edge.

She wanted him to tumble over.

"What never happened?" she asked. The barest hint of a smile pulled at his lips. And dear God if she hadn't been falling for him before, she was plummeting now. He had a smile she could die for. Or live for. She wasn't sure.

All she knew was that she wanted to see it again and again.

He was on top of her, his body caging hers. For a moment he stared down at her, thin breaths escaping his lips. He was so intense it would have scared her if she didn't feel it, too. This animalistic need to take and be taken. To feel the weight of this man on top of her. To feel him inside of her and around her until she didn't know where he ended and she began.

"Mr. Vaughn..." She had no idea why she called him that. But it sent a flash of desire through his eyes that she liked very much. "I want you to do very dirty things to me."

"Christ." He closed his eyes for a moment. "You have no goddamned

idea.”

“Show me,” she breathed.

He sat up, pulling her with him, grabbing at the hem of her top and pulling it over her head. Cool air circled her body, making her already-hard nipples tighten even more. His gaze dipped to her chest and he swallowed hard.

“You’re beautiful.”

No, she wasn’t. Not compared to the women he acted with every day. But there was still truth in his voice. A veracity that made her throat feel tight.

“Kiss me.”

That smile again. Devastation in the form of a mouth. He brushed a lock of hair from her face, his fingers trailing over her cheeks. Then he pushed his thumb inside her soft lips.

She fluttered her tongue against it, and he groaned. “You’re killing me.” Pulling it out, he dipped his head, pulling her nipple between his lips. His tongue circled as he sucked and it was her turn to groan, a steady pulse of need thrumming between her thighs.

“Chris...”

“What happened to Mr. Vaughn?”

“I’ll call you whatever you want. Just don’t stop.”

He chuckled against her breast, before moving to the other one, kissing and sucking until her back was arched against the mattress.

He slid his hand, palm down, along her ribcage, her stomach, to her hips. Then he cupped her through her sleep shorts, groaning when he felt the dampness of the fabric.

His touch was enough to make her soar. She rolled her hips, needing the friction, pleasure pooling in her belly. She’d never been this close to orgasm just from having her breasts and body touched. But he knew how to play her, each scrape of his lips sending heat through her body, every press of his palm against her core sending her soaring even more.

He pulled off her shorts, throwing them behind him as he leaned down, hitching her legs over his shoulders and pulling her so close she could feel his hot breath on her thighs. He kissed the crease where her leg met her body, running his tongue along it, then slowly reached up with his fingers to part her.

She shuddered. She was so close. And when he slid his tongue along her she let out a cry.

“You taste so damn good,” he said, his voice gritty. “Like a sweet addiction.”

She opened her mouth to reply but no words came out. Just a garbled moan as he flicked his tongue against her again, sliding two fingers inside of her and curling the tips against her.

He was overwhelming her with every movement of his tongue. Making her his with every touch of his fingers.

“Chris, I...”

“I know, beautiful. Just let go. You’re so damn tight I need you to relax, okay?”

Instead of licking her, he closed his mouth around her, sucking her in. Pleasure sparked and curled inside of her, pushing her to an edge she had no way of coming back from. Her breath caught in her throat as he groaned against her, the vibrations sending her flying over the cliff.

The intensity of her orgasm was so strong it made her lose control of her body. She convulsed and cried, trying to bend at the waist while he pressed down on her stomach with his free hand. She tried to squirm away, but he followed, his mouth softer now, but still coaxing the pleasure. She looked down at him and their gazes connected, his eyes so piercing she felt like he could read her mind.

She was still coming down from her high when he pulled off his pajama pants, his thick hardness slapping against his stomach. She reached down and curled her fingers around him, feeling the heat of his skin as she moved her palm along his length.

He put his hand over hers. “I’m on the edge,” he grunted, slowing her movements. “I want to come inside you.”

She wanted that, too. Wanted him to fill the emptiness she was feeling. Wanted to feel the hardness of his body against hers as they gave and took in equal measure.

Her gaze met his. “Yes.”

He reached over her, pulling his bedside drawer open and pulled out a condom, ripping the wrapper and sliding it deftly onto his hardness. He leaned down and kissed her again, and she could taste herself on him. His tongue swirled around hers and she felt that need all over again. The need for this man who had so many hidden depths she wasn’t sure anybody could discover them all.

She cupped his face with her hands, feeling the roughness of his beard

growth against her palms. “Fuck me,” she whispered.

That half smile again. The man knew how to devastate. He positioned himself against her, and she swallowed, because he was right, she was tight.

And he... was oversized.

He rolled his hips and she felt herself opening around him, the thickness of him making her gasp. “You feel so good,” he murmured, reaching down to circle her clit with his thumb. Her body relaxed, welcoming him in, and a moment later he was filling her to the hilt. He squeezed his eyes shut, his teeth gritting as he inhaled through his nose.

“So damn tight. So good,” he muttered, capturing her lips with his. His fingers tangled in her hair as he thrust against her, every movement of his body setting her nerve endings on fire. She couldn’t be ready again this quickly. She couldn’t.

Yet her body was telling her she was a liar, with her blood rushing through her, her toes curling in desire as he took her to the brink of orgasm once more.

His kisses were long and deep, his thrusts hard and fast, but his eyes, they were soft and open, and that made her heart clench tight. He wrapped a hand around her waist, sliding his lips to her ear.

“You need to come for me.”

“I can’t...” It was a lie before the words even left her mouth. Because he was twisting his hips against her in a way that made her eyes pop. Dear God, what was this man doing to her? Every muscle in her body tensed as he dipped his head to her breast, his teeth grazing her nipple. And that was all it took to send her soaring.

Falling

Shattering.

Coming apart in his arms. Then he was joining her, letting out a low oath as he surged inside, his breath short, his gaze sharp as it captured hers.

“Chelsea.” It sounded like a plea and a promise. “Christ, how am I supposed to forget this?”

His words were a gasp in her ear. Then he lifted his head, cradling her face once more, his kisses softer now, yet no less emotional.

Her chest felt tight as the rest of her loosened.

He was everything she thought he’d be. And now she had to forget this ever happened.

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The display on her clock said eight-thirty. Chelsea sat up fast, her eyes wide as she realized the time. What the hell happened? She groaned, because she knew *exactly* what happened. She'd forgotten to set her alarm when she crawled back into bed during the middle of the night.

Her thigh muscles protested as she scrambled across the bed and launched herself onto the floor, grabbing her robe to cover the short pajamas she'd managed to salvage from Chris' floor.

A blush stole over her as she remembered the happenings of early that morning. They'd made love a second time before she'd finally dragged herself out of his bed and made her way back to her own. It was like he couldn't get enough of her. Even when they were recovering he was touching her, tracing the freckles on her arm, placing his hand flat on her stomach as their breathing slowly went back to normal.

Tying the belt around her robe, she checked in Luna's room. Her bed was empty and freshly made. Then she heard voices coming from the kitchen and took a deep breath.

Time to face the music.

"I'm so sorry," she said, breathless. Luna and Chris were sitting at the kitchen island, along with Neil who gave her an amused grin when he saw she was still in her pajamas. "My alarm didn't go off."

"It's okay," Luna said, grinning. "Daddy made me breakfast."

Chelsea looked at Chris, trying to hide her embarrassment. "You should have woken me."

"I thought you might need the rest," he said, his expression easy. "We

were up late with Luna last night.”

“I keep screaming,” Luna told Neil. “I have night tremors.”

“Terrors,” Chris corrected and Neil grunted out a laugh.

“I can take over here,” Chelsea said, looking from one man to the other. “If you want to head to the set.” She grabbed Luna’s empty bowl and glass and took them to the dishwasher. Almost immediately they were taken out of her hands.

“Relax,” Chris murmured. “I’ve got this. Go take a shower.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. Their eyes clashed and she swallowed hard. He wasn’t giving anything away, but she felt like all her emotions were leeching out of her skin. His gaze dipped to her mouth then back up almost immediately.

“I’ve got this,” he said again.

“Okay,” she breathed, stepping back from him. “I’ll be back in ten.”

“Take your time,” Neil called out. “Your hair looks like a bird’s nest.”

She rolled her eyes at him and he laughed.

“You okay?” she asked Luna, ruffling her hair.

“Yep. All good.”

She walked back out of the kitchen, aware of all three sets of eyes boring into her. Two of them had no idea why she was so jittery. And the other?

He was probably cursing her right now.

She’d promised him that there’d be no weirdness this morning. That it would be like last night never happened. And then his fingers had brushed hers and it felt like he was setting her on fire all over again.

This had to stop. And she was the one who had to stop it.

Her phone beeped as soon as she walked into the bedroom. She snatched it up, frowning when she saw it was a message from *him*.

You’re a terrible actress. But a beautiful woman. Even when you have birds sleeping in your hair.

She stared at his words, wondering if she should reply. Was it a test? She’d promised him they wouldn’t talk about last night. That she’d forget it ever happened. And though the latter promise was impossible to keep – who could

forget a night like that – she'd at least keep the former.

Putting the phone down, she walked to her bathroom, turning on the shower before stripping off her robe and pajamas. Stepping into the steam, she closed her eyes and let the water drench her. She hadn't showered last night, and wondered if he'd still smelled himself on her as he took the dishes from her hands.

Was it wrong that she hoped he had? Almost definitely. If she knew one thing, it was that hopes were like those little dandelion seeds that danced in the wind. Ephemeral and impossible to capture.

Grabbing her shampoo she poured a healthy dollop into her palm. It was time to wash that man right out of her hair.

“You're in a good mood today,” Neil remarked as they drove along the cliff toward the set.

“Am I?” Chris asked, ignoring his assistant's penetrating gaze.

“Yep. So what gives? You were pissed as hell yesterday with Luna's night terrors and all the problems on set.”

“Maybe I just need a little perspective,” Chris murmured, pulling into the makeshift parking lot at the back of the set. “Or a good night's sleep.”

Not that he'd had one. Or not until after three a.m., anyway. He'd been too greedy, wanting more and more of her. He'd taken her twice before she'd finally crept back to her bed and left him alone in his.

And then this morning he'd wanted her all over again when she'd run into the kitchen disheveled and blushing, her body warm as he'd taken the dishes from her hands.

And fuck if she hadn't still smelled of sex. Hot, amazing sex.

Sex he wanted more of.

“Well, whatever it is, you should bottle it.” Neil opened the passenger door and climbed out. “I like this side of you.”

“Don't worry, I'll be barking out orders in about ten minutes.” Chris lifted a brow.

“Shame. Might have to find a pretty brunette to soften all your edges.”

Neil walked away, leaving Chris frowning. Did Neil suspect something was happening between him and Chelsea?

Correction, something had *happened*. Done and dusted. They'd agreed on one night and that's what they'd gotten.

Yeah, so why did you send her that message? Because that definitely wasn't workplace appropriate.

Nah, there was no way Neil could know. And no way was he going to find out. It was over. And unlike Chelsea, Chris was a good actor.

One who couldn't stop grinning like his team had just won the damn Superbowl.

"Can I get you a coffee, Mr. Vaughn?" one of the runners asked as he walked toward his trailer.

"Yes, please. Americano with a splash of milk."

"Of course. Anything to eat, sir?"

He flashed a smile at the runner. The kid was so eager to please. "No thank you. I just had breakfast."

His phone began to ring as soon as he reached the base of his trailer. He pulled it out of his pocket, and the smile that had been playing on his lips all morning melted away when he saw the caller's name.

Anya Sky.

His ex had only messaged a couple of times since she'd left the country, once to tell him that his child support money hadn't come through – which was a crock of shit because it had gone through on the same day as every other month, which he'd patiently explained to her. And the second time had been a photograph of her in a string bikini laying languorously on a sunbed with the caption, 'Wish You Were Here'.

He'd ignored that one.

She hadn't once asked how Luna was doing or tried to actually talk to their daughter. And though part of him had been glad that he hadn't had to deal with her, the other was angry on his daughter's behalf.

"Anya," he said curtly, lifting the phone to his ear after accepting the call. He needed to tell her about Luna's night terrors anyway. Might as well get it over with.

"Darling," she drew the word out, like she enjoyed the taste of it on her tongue. "How are you?"

"About to walk onto set," he said dryly. "What can I help you with?"

She let out a little huff. "I'm calling about our daughter. Unless you don't have time to talk about her."

He ignored the urge to remind her that she was the one who left Luna at

the last minute. Years of dealing with his ex had taught him to take the high road. Firstly, because he didn't want to scratch his eyes out afterward, but also because it infuriated her when he didn't rise to her bait.

"I always have time to talk about Luna," he said mildly.

"Well that's good." She sounded testy now. "Because I've been hearing rumors about the nanny you've employed and I need to make sure they aren't true."

His mouth turned dry at the mention of Chelsea. "What kind of rumors?"

The memory of last night wrapped around his mind. Anya couldn't have found out about that.

"Did you know she was fired by the Silbers?" Anya asked.

"I checked her references and they were all glowing." He walked into his trailer and leaned against the door. It had been cleaned, the dirty coffee cups and used dishes washed and put back in their cupboards.

"Did you talk to the Silbers?"

"They were unavailable. But Neil did some sleuthing and all is well." His tone was short. He wanted to leave her in no doubt that this was a conversation he didn't intend to prolong.

"So you don't know why she left them?" She gave a short laugh. "This is so like you. I can't believe you don't take our daughter's safety seriously."

Fuck this. "I take it extremely seriously. And Miss Kennedy is an excellent nanny. Who was available on short notice, thank God, because you left me in a goddamned bind. Luna is happy and healthy and thriving thanks to the new nanny, so perhaps you can keep your shitty gossip to yourself."

"Maybe you should ask her why she left," Anya said, ignoring his words.

There was no way he was going to tell her that he had. And that she hadn't been able to break her NDA. "Do you want anything else, Anya? Because I have a movie to make."

"I want you to fire the nanny."

It was his turn to laugh. Not that there was any humor behind it. "Are you planning on coming back to take care of our daughter?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I won't be firing anybody. You left it to me to take care of Luna and I'm doing exactly that."

"What if I find out why she left the Silbers?" Anya asked. "If it's bad will you fire her then?"

"It won't be bad. I'm assured of that." He let out a frustrated breath.

“Why don’t you call Luna tonight, see how happy she is? Maybe that’ll put your worries to rest.”

“Maybe I will,” Anya said, though they both knew she had no intention of doing so. She just liked to shit stir, the way other people liked to breathe. It reminded her she was alive. “You know I only have Luna’s best interests at heart.”

“Of course.” He rolled his eyes. “I should go, unless there’s anything else?”

“Not for now.” Her voice lowered. “I miss you.”

“Anya...”

“Nobody makes me feel like you do. Nobody.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Luna goes to bed at eight. Call before then. I’ll send you the number to use.”

“Can’t I use this number?”

“I probably won’t be there.”

She was silent for a moment. “That’s a shame. Maybe I’ll call you later, too.”

“Goodbye, Anya.” He gritted his teeth.

“Goodbye, darling.”

The connection ended and he let out a frustrated groan. His ex always made him feel like he wanted to hit something. Not because he felt anything for her, but because she made life so much more difficult than it needed to be.

Sliding his phone back into his pocket, he rolled his shoulders and grabbed the script that had been left for him by one of the assistants.

It was time to forget about anything except making this movie.

“Hey!” Ember jumped up from her seat on the blanket as soon as she saw Chelsea and Luna walking across the beach. “You found us.”

Chelsea grinned at her sister. The beach was crowded even though it wasn’t quite ten o’clock in the morning. It was a glorious day already, no clouds in the sky.

“Hi,” she said, giving Ember a quick hug. “This is Luna.” She pointed at the little girl clinging to her hand. “Luna, this is my sister, Ember.”

“Hey sweetie,” Ember said, giving Luna a wink. “We’ve heard so much about you.”

Luna had been so excited to come here. She’d insisted on wearing her very favorite Disney Princess swimsuit – pink, with Ariel and Lilo surfing across the fabric – along with a Minnie Mouse coverup that Chelsea had bought from the local shop for her. They’d braided her hair so it was off her face, and her skin was still glowing from the amount of sunscreen she’d been slathered with.

“Hi,” Luna said shyly, leaning against Chelsea.

“Why don’t you two come share my blanket?” Ember suggested. “This is Arthur,” she said, pointing at her son, who was playing on the sand next to the blanket. He was scooping it in his hands then letting it fall like a digger. He turned around and grinned when he saw Chelsea, pushing himself up and launching at her. Luna giggled when he barged into her.

“Is your name Luna?” an older girl joined them. She had bright red hair and pale skin. “I’m Isla.”

Luna nodded. “Hi.”

“Want to come build a sandcastle?” Isla asked, pointing at a half made construction about five yards from the blanket. “All the other kids are too little, but you look like you’d be good at it.”

Luna glowed. “I love making sandcastles.”

“Great,” Isla said, smiling at her. “Once we’ve made it, we’ll need to fill the moat. And decorate it with shells.”

“I’m really good at picking up shells,” Luna said, glancing at Chelsea. “Aren’t I?”

“Yes you are, sweetie,” Chelsea said, ruffling her hair. “I’ll be right here. And I’ll help when you need to get some water.”

“Great.” The two girls ran back to the half-built castle, Isla talking rapidly to Luna and pointing at some buckets. Before long, Luna was filling them up with a small plastic shovel.

“I’m Meghan.” Chelsea turned to see a beautiful woman standing next to her. With her flaming hair, she could only be Isla’s mom. “Sorry, I should have introduced myself before Isla stole Luna away. She’s been so excited to meet her.”

“Luna’s been excited, too,” Chelsea told her, leaning forward to shake Meghan’s hand. “It’s so nice for her to meet a girl similar to her age.”

They all sat down on Ember’s blanket, and Arthur climbed onto Chelsea’s lap, playing with her hair. She had such a soft spot for her nephew. With his dark hair and easy smile he was going to break a few hearts one day.

“So I hear you work for Chris Vaughn,” Meghan said. “That must be interesting.”

Ember’s friend Ally called from the blanket next to hers. “Are you guys talking about Chelsea’s new boss? I need to hear this, he’s flipping gorgeous.”

“Ignore her,” Ember said, rolling her eyes good naturedly. “She’s just bored because Nate had to go away on business.”

Before long, all of Ember’s friends were gathered on her blanket. Chelsea had known most of them for years – Ally and Brooke had gone to school with Ember, and the others she’d met at Ember’s wedding or at Arthur’s christening. They all had children ranging in ages, running or crawling around, asking for ice cream or soda or crying because they were getting too tired.

“Do you know much about the movie they’re making?” Brooke asked her. “The whole town is desperate to know more.”

“Only that it’s based on *One Man’s Journey*,” Chelsea said, referring to the memoir that had been at the top of the book charts for months. “I haven’t even been to the set.”

“I don’t know how you can work for a man that dreamy,” Ally said, her eyes wide. “I’d end up throwing myself at him.”

“You work with your husband,” Ember pointed out. Arthur jumped out of Chelsea’s lap and started playing in the sand again, oblivious to the conversation.

“And she threw herself at him,” their friend, Brooke pointed out, laughing. “Remember when she broke her ankle and he insisted on her moving in with him?”

“It was only a matter of time before they ended up kissing the faces off each other.” Ember grinned. “You could smell the UST from a mile away.”

“Exactly.” Ally didn’t look embarrassed at all. “Living with a handsome man is like... I don’t know, asking a chocoholic to live in a candy store.”

“It’s a good thing Chelsea has more self-restraint than you then,” Ember said, shooting Chelsea a smile.

Chelsea nodded, trying really hard to keep her face expressionless. The last thing she needed was her sister finding out about her night with Chris. She’d worry about her. Or be angry with her. Either way, she didn’t need to know.

It was their secret. She intended to keep it that way.

Her phone beeped, and she grabbed it from her beach bag, grateful for the distraction, but her heart began beating a little faster when she saw it was a message from Chris.

Did you get to the beach safely? - Chris

She smiled and tapped a reply right back to him.

Yep. I didn’t even speed. Luna has met her new friend and they’re making sandcastles. - Chelsea

She looked over at Meghan, who was laughing at something Ally had just said. “Is it okay if I take a photo of the girls’ sandcastle?” she asked her. “I want to send it to Luna’s dad.”

“Sure.” Meghan smiled. “No problem.”

Chelsea held up her phone and called over to Luna and Isla, who both looked up when she told them to smile. They posed like troopers, and she sent the photo to Chris.

I think she might be an architect when she grows up. - Chelsea

Or a beach bum. - Chris

A smile pulled at her lips. She liked it when he was playful. ***I can think of worse things to become. - Chelsea***

I can think of better things. - Chris

She ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip. What did that mean? Glancing over at the girls, she smiled when she saw Luna sticking shells to the wall surrounding the castle they’d made.

Okay, she’d bite.

Like what? - Chelsea

It was a minute before his reply came through. She started to panic that she’d gone too far. Then it came.

;) - Chris

A winky emoji. Was that it? What did it mean? Then another message came.

Have fun at the beach. I'll see you later. - Chris

Yes, he would.

“Did your boss like the photo?” Meghan asked, when Chelsea closed the message thread and put her phone back in her bag.

“He did.” She smiled at the woman. She was really lovely and friendly. “Thanks for that. He’s kind of protective of Luna. It’s a big deal for us to come here without any security.”

“Oh I get that.” Meghan nodded. “Did you know that Isla’s dad is Dylan Nash?”

“The drummer?” Chelsea asked. His band, Everyday Feels Like Sunday, was huge. “Ember said her dad was a doctor.”

Meghan laughed. “Oh no. Her stepdad – my fiancé – is a doctor. But her biological father is Dylan. It’s a long story, but they only recently reconnected and he got really worried about her safety, too. But he’s chilled out a lot, and he knows how safe this place is. Hopefully Luna’s dad will do the same.

“If you want me to talk to him and tell him how safe the town is, I’d be happy to. Or I could ask Dylan to call him,” Meghan offered.

“Oh no, that’s okay,” Chelsea said quickly. “But thank you for the offer. I might just tell him that Isla’s dad is famous too, though,” she said, smiling when Meghan nodded. “That might put him at ease.”

“Go ahead. It’s not a secret,” Meghan agreed. “When you’re that famous everything can be a hazard. It’s a hard line to tread between being protective and stopping them from having fun. In a way it’s easier for Isla because when she’s here with me and Rich she’s just an ordinary kid. It’s only when she’s

in L.A. that life turns upside down for her.”

“L.A. has that effect on people,” Chelsea said. “It’s an amazing place, but sometimes it doesn’t feel like it’s part of this world.”

Meghan’s eyes were warm. “It’s nice to meet somebody else who gets it. And it’s nice for Isla to have a new friend, too. She has her school friends, but it’s nice to make beach friends, isn’t it?”

They both looked over at the castle, where Isla and Luna were giggling like crazy about something.

“Yeah, it is,” Chelsea agreed. This was such a good idea. She owed Ember for introducing them to Isla and Meghan. The doctor said that Luna needed to be able to spread her wings, and she was doing just that.

It was a pleasure to watch.

“Do you think Isla might be able to come over to play sometime next week?” she asked Meghan. “I’d have to clear it with Chris first, but we have a pool and the beach is at the bottom of the steps. Luna would love it if she could have a friend over.”

“Of course. Let me give you my number.” Meghan grabbed her phone and the two of them swapped details. “Maybe once they’re used to each other we can do a sleepover or something? Only if your boss says yes, of course.”

She’d love that. Anything to give Luna a summer where she felt like a normal kid. And as long as they got her night terrors under control first.

“It sounds like a plan.” Chelsea nodded, as the girls picked up some buckets and walked over to the blanket.

“We need to fill up the moat,” Luna said, beaming as she pointed at the castle.

“Sure.” Chelsea stood. “I’ll come help you.”

“Do you want me to come, too?” Meghan asked her.

“No.” She winked. “I’ve got this.” She grabbed a bucket for herself and took the girls down to the water, where they started paddling in the waves, filling up their pails and squealing as the cool water broke over their skin.

“Are you having a good time?” she asked Luna.

“The best.” Luna grinned as another wave splashed over her legs.

Warmth rushed through Chelsea, despite the coolness of the ocean. That was all she needed to hear.

“How’s it going?” Lois Marx asked, her deep voice echoing from the phone speaker as Chelsea folded laundry. Luna had been in bed for an hour, and in another two they’d be on high alert for night terrors, so she wanted to get her chores done before she needed to be upstairs.

“It’s going well. Luna is gorgeous, and she’s warming up to me.” Chelsea smiled. “And it’s nice to be back in my home town for a while and catch up with old friends.”

“Maybe this was what you needed. A break from L.A. God knows I could do with one,” Lois said. “And how is Mr. Vaughn?”

She stopped folding. “He’s good. Slowly warming to me, I think.” Understatement of the year. “It took a little while for him to trust me, but we’re getting there.”

“That’s good. Now I don’t want you to worry, but I had a strange phone call today and I thought you should know about it.”

Chelsea blinked, her hands resting on the edge of the dryer. “Who called?”

“I’m not really sure. At first they said they were a lawyer, but they didn’t sound like a lawyer at all. I suspect it was either the press or a private investigator. Whoever they were, they were asking about you.”

Her mouth felt dry. “What did they ask?”

“They wanted to know about your time with the Silbers. I told them we didn’t answer questions about clients. That we maintain confidentiality at all times. Then I hung up on them, but I thought you should know anyway. In case somebody calls you or Mr. Vaughn.”

Her eyes stung. “Damn.”

“It’s okay, I’m sure it’s nothing. Just keep your ear to the ground. I’ve alerted our lawyers in case.”

She knew Lois was on her side. She always had been. But there was such an unfairness in her past always trailing her.

This felt like an invasion of her safe space. Of her beloved Angel Sands.

And of this family that she was starting to fall for. She inhaled raggedly and picked up the next t-shirt to fold. One of Luna’s with a sparkly rainbow on it. “If it’s a journalist do you think they’ll print something?”

“They can’t. Neither you nor the Silbers would confirm anything. And no respectable journalist would print something without confirmation from multiple sources.”

“What about disrespectful journalists?”

Lois laughed. “Even they have some standards. Otherwise there’d be all sorts of tall tales out there. Let’s face it, half of Hollywood has secrets. And yours aren’t that interesting, honey. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything, because there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I hate causing you this trouble.”

“You’re one of the best, Chelsea. You’ve never let me down, never caused any problems until the Silbers, and let’s face it, they’re the ones who caused the problems. Just keep doing what you’re doing and it will be fine. And if it’s not, that’s why I have the best lawyers on retainer.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“We’ll talk soon. I’m just heading out to dinner.”

Chelsea glanced at her watch. Lois always had been a workaholic. You didn’t succeed in business by eating dinner at five. “Have a nice evening,” she told her boss.

“You too, honey.”

Lois ended the call and Chelsea’s phone screen faded to black. Sighing, she folded the rest of the laundry, placing it in the basket to carry upstairs later. The hallway was quiet when she put the basket at the foot of the stairs, illuminated by the elegant side light that switched on automatically each evening. The living room door was open, revealing the most beautiful sunset through the glass doors on the other side. The sky was painted with pinks and oranges, purples and grays.

And then she saw Chris on the sofa, leaning over and flicking through something on his laptop which was on the coffee table in front of him. As though he could feel the heat of her stare he looked up, a slow smile pulling at his lips when he saw her standing there.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” She took a deep breath. “Can I talk to you about something?”

His smile flickered.

“It’s okay. Not about that.” They’d successfully avoided any talk of that night, and she wanted to keep it that way. “About the Silbers.”

He closed the lid of his laptop. “You want a drink?”

“That would be very, very welcome.”

He smiled again, and dear God it felt like the temperature of her body rose up by twenty degrees. “Name your poison.”

“Surprise me.”

He lifted a brow. “Okay. Sit down and I’ll rustle something up.”

There was something almost meditative about watching Chris Vaughn fill a cocktail shaker full of ice before measuring out different spirits, his dimple dancing in and out of his cheek as he screwed the lid on and began to shake. The cocktail bar was next to the glass doors, and the setting sun was painting his skin in a palette of vibrant colors, making his thick biceps look like a work of art.

“There you go,” he said when he’d poured his creation into a glass and carried it over to her. He’d spiked a maraschino cherry on a cocktail stick and laid it on the side.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“Taste it first. Then I’ll tell you.”

Taking a sip, she closed her eyes as the sweet liquid flowed over her tongue.

“Now eat the cherry.”

She looked up at him, her heart beating faster when she saw the dark interest in his eyes. Without pulling her gaze from his she slid the small fruit between her lips, softly biting down on it.

“It’s called the Last Word,” he said softly, still watching her mouth. “They invented it during prohibition. Gin, chartreuse, cherry liqueur, and lime juice. It was really popular back when I was working behind the bar.”

“Do cocktails come in fashions?” she asked. “I thought people just liked what they liked.”

“No, people like what magazines and social media want them to like. You just have to have the right person photographed drinking the damn thing.”

And now she was thinking about journalists again. And the story she had to tell him before her house of cards came tumbling down.

“So, I spoke to my boss at the agency today,” she said carefully. He sat back on the sofa, opposite the easy chair she’d taken. “Somebody’s been asking questions about my time with the Silbers. I just wanted to warn you because you’ve been so good to me and if something gets out it could cause problems for you.”

He picked up his own glass – whiskey and ice – and swallowed down a mouthful. “Do you know who it was?”

She shook her head. “Lois thinks it’s either a journalist or an investigator.”

“Male or female?”

Chelsea frowned. “I don’t know. Why do you ask?”

“Because my ex-wife is a bitch and wants to know all about you.”

Her pulse raced. “Why?”

“It’s what she does. Messes up lives.” A mirthless smile pulled at the corner of his lip. “Particularly mine. Anyway, it probably wasn’t her. Pretending to be somebody else isn’t her style.”

“I thought she was an actress.”

He raised a brow. “So does she.”

Chelsea burst out laughing. A moment later he was grinning too, this one genuine. The man knew how to light up a room. How to light up a person.

Her. He lit her up. Just by existing.

“What the hell happened with the Silbers?” he asked. “I don’t know what’s so bad that you can’t tell me.”

“It doesn’t have to be bad. It just has to be covered by a legally binding contract.” She gave him a rueful glance. “But maybe I can conjecture. Hypothetically.”

Interested, he leaned forward, resting his arms on his thighs. “Hypothetically,” he said, nodding. “Yeah, we could do that.”

She swallowed, because only a few people in the world knew about it. Even Ember didn’t have all the details. But she owed this to him. He’d given her his trust, she needed to give him the truth.

“Let’s say a woman goes and works for a family,” she said softly. “The dad’s a producer. No, let’s call him a director. And the mom used to work in movies but now spends all her time looking after her husband. The kids are an afterthought.”

His eyes were locked on her. His expression didn’t give away a thing.

“And maybe that was okay. The nanny loved the kids. She took care of them and looked after them and all was going well. Until the mom’s seventeen year old son from her first marriage got expelled from his latest prep school and they had no choice but to bring him home, even though he clearly hated her new husband and his half siblings.”

Her chest felt tight, like she was back there in that dysfunctional house. She’d really tried to make things right. To take care of the kids while their parents fought, to protect them from their older brother when he was in a violent mood. To be professional in the face of so much palpable pain in the family.

“You okay?” he asked softly.

She took another deep breath, letting it cleanse her. “Yeah. Or I will be

when I finish telling you.”

“I’m listening.”

She nodded, feeling her eyes sting. “And then imagine if one night this nanny woke up to find the son in her room. Looking down at her. Touching...” She started to shake. “Himself.”

“What the fuck?”

“And when she screamed, his parents came running. And everything went to shit because they started accusing her of encouraging this. They went through his phone and found all these photos of the nanny that he’d taken when she hadn’t noticed. And although she was completely innocent, they still fired her, and refused to give her a reference.”

“You could have gone to the police. That has to be some kind of offence.”

“I know,” she said softly. “But he’s seventeen, and I couldn’t do it. I agreed not to press charges if they put him into intensive therapy. He spent the first few weeks at a clinic in Chicago, then he was released for twice weekly therapy. If I thought for a second that anybody else was in danger, I’d go to the cops in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t understand why they won’t give you a reference.”

She took another sip of her cocktail. She needed it. “Cognitive dissonance, I think. If they blame me, it means it isn’t their fault. I begged, but they wouldn’t budge. And here we are.”

“This is all horrible. Are you okay if I tell Neil? And possibly Liv?” he asked. “I think it’s best if they’re aware of the situation. Especially if the Silbers try to contact us, or if someone else is looking into you. Liv’s a lawyer, she’ll know how to handle things.”

She paled and nodded, putting her glass down, her hands shaking so much it rattled against the coaster. When she looked back at him, his expression was soft. He exhaled then beckoned to her.

“Come here.”

“Chris...” That wasn’t a good idea.

“Come here and let me hold you. That’s all I’m asking.” It was a plea. Her body ached for him.

“We shouldn’t,” she whispered, but she stood anyway, her leg brushing the table as she walked toward the sofa. He reached for her, pulling her onto him, so her legs were straddling his. Running his hand down her back, he held her close, until her face was resting against his chest and his own head

was dipped, his lips against her hair.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he whispered. “None of it.”

She breathed in, her body shaking. All the pent up emotions were leaching out of her, making her eyes sting with tears and her body ache. Hot tears ran down her cheeks, and he wiped them away with his thumbs, murmuring against her hair that she was so strong, so perfect.

So beautiful.

She lifted her head and the intensity of his stare knocked the breath from her lungs. Wiping her cheeks with the back of her hands she attempted a smile. “I’m sor—”

“Don’t apologize.” His voice was gritty. “Don’t you fucking apologize for anything. You’re a good person. The best. You don’t deserve this.”

“If anybody could see me now they’d kill to take my place. Sitting on Chris Vaughn’s lap,” she joked, trying to dispel the atmosphere between them.

“And would you let them take your place?” His eyes scanned her face.

“Not in a heartbeat.”

He pushed her hair from her face where it stuck to her skin with tears. Then he traced the line of her jaw, up to her lips. Her body started to tingle, pulses of electricity shooting through her.

“We shouldn’t…”

“I know. But we will.” He leaned in, his nose brushing against hers. She could smell the tang of whiskey on him. “I haven’t stopped thinking about you since that night. How it felt to be inside you. How it felt when you came around me.”

Her thighs started to throb. “I haven’t either.”

“And I know we’re not supposed to talk about it,” he continued, sliding his hands around her neck, his thumb brushing the soft skin of her throat. “But I’ve never felt anything so damn good. So right. Every time I see you, I swear I can taste you on my lips.”

He dipped his head, pressing his mouth to her jaw. She let out a moan and tipped her head back, her chest pressing against his. Her nipples were hard, and she was so damn wet it wasn’t funny.

Just from a few sweet words and the touch of this man.

When their lips connected she had to curl her hands into fists to stop herself from crying out. It was like he’d already brought her to the edge, from nothing more than holding her, from caring.

From whispering in her ear that he was on her side.

His tongue slid against the crease of her mouth and she opened it, welcoming him in, his deep, slow kisses sending shoots of pleasure through her body. Without conscious thought, she was rolling her hips against him, her toes curling as the hard ridge of him connected with her in all the right places.

Heat pooled low in her belly as he pushed his hand inside her t-shirt, cupping her breast over the fabric of her bra, his thumb finding her nipple, making it oh-so-hard and needy.

“What are you doing to me?” he murmured against her throat. “Christ, I want you so bad it’s killing me.”

“We can’t... not here...” she gasped, though her body was still grinding against his.

“I know.” He cupped her face, kissing her softly. “But this isn’t wrong,” he murmured, his gaze capturing hers. “We’re both single. Nobody gets hurt. So why does it feel wrong?”

“Because I work for you. And Luna is here. She’s been through enough.”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “Yeah, she has.” He was still frowning. “Talk about bad timing.” He opened them again, his expression almost tender as he brushed her hair over her shoulder. “You should probably get off my lap before I change my mind.”

A hint of a smile ghosted her lips. “Or before I change mine.”

“I’m hoping your restraint is stronger than mine,” he admitted, shifting beneath her, trying to adjust himself.

“You know what they say about hope.”

“What?” he asked, tipping his head to the side.

“That the road to hell is paved with it.”

He started to laugh.

“What?” she asked, liking the sound of his amusement.

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions, not hope.”

She blinked. “It is?”

“Yeah, you got the wrong saying.”

“So if I intend not to kiss you, then that’s not okay, but if I hope I can stop myself, it’s all good?”

“I have no idea what you just said. But yeah, maybe hope isn’t a good idea. I’ll just have to be strong.” He gently lifted her from his lap, leaning forward as her feet met the carpet. “If I can just forget how good you felt

when I was inside you, it would be a bonus.”

“It was good, wasn’t it?” She let out a long breath.

He nodded. “As I said, I can’t get it out of my goddamned mind.”

“I’ll go to bed. If we’re in separate rooms it should dampen our libidos.”

“It’s worth a try,” he agreed.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his cheek. “Good night, Mr. Vaughn.”

He swallowed. “Good night, Chelsea.”

She turned and walked away. It was the right decision, but tell her heart that, because right now her chest felt like a ten ton weight was pressing down on it. She’d reached the door to the hallway before she heard his voice again.

“Still killing me, Kennedy.”

She turned to look at him. He was still on the sofa, leaning forward so his elbows rested on his thighs, one hand raked in his hair.

“Yeah, well you’re killing me, too.”

Neil blew out a mouthful of air. “That fucking sucks for her.”

“Yeah it does. And it’ll suck even more if it gets out into the public domain,” Chris agreed. It was just after seven in the morning. He’d called Neil last night and asked him to meet at the house first thing so they could discuss Chelsea’s problem with the Silbers. She’d phrased it in hypothetical words, but he knew they were the truth and that if the truth came out it could ruin her.

After she’d left the living room the previous night and headed to bed, he’d drunk two more glasses of whiskey. And yes, he should have either been working or gotten to bed earlier, but her confession had played on his mind.

The unfairness of it galled him. He was a sucker for justice and she had none at all. He knew what that felt like, or at least he had as a kid, watching his mom work her fingers to the bone to try to keep a roof over their heads through no fault of her own. He’d joined her, working from the age of thirteen at different jobs. Finding a coin on the ground as he walked home from school had felt better than getting his first lead role in a movie.

Sure his life was golden now. But there was still that memory of the kid he’d been as he watched his dad drive away in the family station wagon, never to come back again.

It pissed him off that there was no sense of natural justice in this world. Chelsea preferred to suffer than expose a broken kid – and he admired her for that – but it didn’t mean he didn’t want to protect her, too.

“I’ll talk to Liv this morning,” Neil said. “See if she has any ideas of what can be done.”

“Ask her if there’s any way to force the Silbers to give Chelsea a reference,” Chris told him. “I’m so pissed with them it’s unbelievable.”

“How was Chelsea after she told you about it?” Neil asked, lifting his coffee to his lips. They’d chosen to talk on the deck. The sun was already rising in the sky, warming the air around them as they sat at the wrought iron table and looked out at the Pacific Ocean. There was a calmness to the atmosphere that contrasted with the maelstrom of his mind.

“Upset.” He didn’t tell Neil how he’d comforted her. Or how the emotions he’d felt as she walked out of the living room had felt almost painful. He’d never liked goodbyes and that had felt exactly like one, even though she was still living under the same roof.

“Do you really think Anya called the agency?” Neil asked. Chris had told him of his suspicions.

“Yeah, I do.” He hadn’t wanted to worry Chelsea so he’d rejected that idea to her. “But hopefully she’ll get bored with it. She doesn’t exactly have a long attention span.”

“That’s true.” Neil ran his finger along his jaw. “Hey, a few of us are going out tonight. How about I invite her along? It might take her mind off things.”

Chris’ stomach twisted. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Aren’t you home tonight? You can take care of Luna, right? You don’t need Chelsea here.” Neil wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Yeah, but she’s fragile. I don’t like the idea of her going out in that state.”

Neil eyed him carefully. “Is there something more here I don’t know about?”

Chris frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You know I’d look after her. She’s my friend, too. And who doesn’t feel better after a night out with friends?” Neil shrugged. “Has she even been out since she started working for you?”

“She met her sister at the beach.”

“And Luna was there, right?”

Chris nodded. Neil was right, getting away from all this for a few hours would almost certainly help her feel better. But he still didn’t like the idea of her not being here. Of not talking to her in the living room.

Of not kissing her like she held his last breath.

“Yeah, she should go out,” he agreed. Maybe a night without her would

break this addiction he was feeling. And he could spend some quality time with Luna.

“Who should go out?” Chelsea walked onto the deck and into the sunlight, the rays illuminating her tan skin. She looked so beautiful today it made him want to sweep her off her feet and into his lap. Her hair was down, shining in the yellow rays, and she was wearing a pair of denim shorts cut off at her thighs along with a white t-shirt she’d knotted at her waist.

All that skin. Tanned and smooth, reminding him of what he couldn’t have.

“I was just asking Chris if you were needed here tonight. A few of us are going to the Tiki Bar at the Silver Sands Resort. Wondered if you’d like to join us.”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and looked at Chris, as though wondering if she should go or not.

He nodded, because dammit Neil was right. She should get out and spend time with people her own age.

“Um yeah, sure. What time are you thinking?” She twisted her fingers together, looking at Neil this time.

“About eight? Lisa and I will pick you up. I promised Chris I’d look after you. Scare all the boogie men away.”

A smile danced on her lips. “Lisa?”

“A friend of mine.” Neil winked.

“Lisa, the props manager?” Chris asked him.

“Lisa Hardy, yeah,” Neil told him. “What about her?”

“Nothing.” Chris grinned because that felt like a relief. “She’s a good person.”

“Yes she is.” Neil looked at Chelsea. “You doing okay, sweets?”

“Yeah,” Chelsea breathed, her eyes darting to Chris. “I didn’t hear Luna last night. Did you?”

He slowly shook his head. “No. I checked on her a few times, but no terrors.”

Her lips curled. “That’s good, right?”

“I’ll take it.” He nodded. “Let’s see how she does tonight.” *Without you*, he wanted to add, but he swallowed the words. Because she deserved a little freedom and Luna was his daughter. He was responsible for her, night terrors and all.

Chelsea looked so pleased it made his heart clench. “I was about to start

breakfast,” she said, a little breathless. “I wondered if you two would like some?”

“Are we talking pancakes?” Neil asked, his eyes lighting up.

“And bacon, yeah.” Chelsea grinned. “And watermelon, of course.”

“Of course. In that case, I’m in.” He glanced at Chris. “If we have time.”

“We have time,” Chris agreed. “Let’s go inside.”

He arrived back home at five on the dot that evening. They’d had a smooth day of shooting, and it turned out that half the production staff were planning to go to the Tiki Bar that night for somebody’s birthday, so it seemed as good a time as any to wrap things up early.

The only time he’d heard from Chelsea that day was a reminder text at lunchtime that Luna’s new friend, Isla was coming over to play that afternoon. He’d replied that it was still fine with him and that was that.

He could hear the laughter as soon as he reached the steps to the house, echoing around the walls from the pool area, and it made him smile because his kid was having a good time.

And maybe Chelsea was, too.

Dropping his bag on the hallway floor, he didn’t bother to kick off his shoes, heading straight into the living room then through the open doors onto the deck area. Luna and her friend were floating with a pool noodle around each of their waists, slowly kicking their way toward Chelsea who had her back to them.

The surface of the pool was filled with toys. Balls and dolls rose and dipped next to the steps, along with some foam water guns that had been at the house when they’d arrived.

“What’s going on?” Chris asked.

“Shush!” Luna put a finger to her lips, but couldn’t stop the grin that broke out at seeing him. “We’re playing Mr. Shark.”

“And Chelsea’s the Shark?”

He saw her shoulders shake, though she didn’t turn around to look at him.

“Yeah. And we have to sneak up on her without her catching us.”

“How’s that going for you?” he asked Luna.

“Badly!” Chelsea shouted out, then let out a mock snarl before she

launched herself out of the water, splashing back in and swimming toward Luna and her friend who both squealed loudly and tried to swim away.

When Chelsea captured them both, they started to giggle, and he couldn't help but grin at them all. This is exactly how he'd pictured life would be when Anya said she was pregnant with Luna. A good house, a nice pool, fun times.

It felt easy. Right.

"Want me to take over so you can get ready for tonight?" he asked Chelsea.

"Um, yeah, sure. Though it won't take me long to get ready. Isla's mom is picking her up at six."

"That's fine. You deserve a break. Just give me five minutes to get changed."

When he came back out in his swim shorts, the girls had picked up two water guns – the foam stick kind with plastic handles that you dipped underwater as you pulled the handles back to fill them. They were shooting at Chelsea, who pretended to be hit and let out a long cry, before collapsing underwater, her hair the last piece of her to sink beneath the surface.

"Daddy!" Luna called out, dropping the water gun and climbing out of the pool.

"Don't run," he reminded her, and she slowed down her gait, but still managed to throw herself at him, her little body wet and cool as she circled his waist with her arms.

"You having a good time?" he asked, hugging her back.

"Yes I am. Isla!" she called out. "This is my dad."

"Hi." Isla waved at him and he smiled back.

"Hi. So what are we playing now?"

From the corner of his eye he saw Chelsea break the surface, her hair a dark curtain plastered to her head. She shook it and droplets flew everywhere, a few of them hitting Isla who laughed.

"Can we play sharks again?" Luna asked, looking excited.

"Sure. Let's get Chelsea out of here and we can play." He sat down on the side of the pool, letting his legs drop into the water. Luna jumped in next to him, sending out a splash of water that soaked his chest.

He leaned back and let the sun warm him for a moment, then looked back at the pool. Chelsea was looking right at him, her lips parted, her eyes dark.

Like she wanted him. And damn if that didn't please him.

“You can get out if you want,” he told her. “I’ve got this.”

“Noooo!” Luna shook her head. “Stay and play with us.” She pouted, looking exactly like her mom for one disconcerting moment. “Please, Chelsea. Daddy can be the shark, you can be on our side.”

“Yes!” Isla agreed. “We can definitely beat him. Girl power!”

Chelsea’s eyes met his and he shrugged. He was okay with it if she was.

“Okay,” she said not taking her gaze from his. “But just so you know, I take Mr. Shark very seriously. I always play to win.”

“Sounds like a challenge,” he said.

“Yay! Let’s do it.” Luna hooked her arms around his neck. “Be a scary shark like Chelsea,” she whispered. “We like being scared.”

“I will,” he said solemnly. “It’ll be like watching *Jaws* for the first time.”

“Can I watch *Jaws*?” Luna asked.

“Hell no.” He shook his head vigorously. From the corner of his eye he could see Chelsea laughing. “Come on, let’s play this game.”

It took a minute for Luna to be happy that he was standing in the right place, and another for him to promise that he definitely wouldn’t, under any circumstances, turn around until he was allowed.

“You can’t cheat, Daddy,” she told him. “Because cheating’s wrong.”

“Yes it is,” he agreed. “I’ll play by the rules.”

He was so aware of Chelsea watching them, a smile playing on her lips as Luna instructed him of the intricate details. She was standing in waist high water, her skin glistening from the pool water, her hair slicked back to reveal her beautiful bone structure and amused eyes.

Every now and then they caught his, and it took an act of will to pull them away.

It was better when he was facing away from them, his eyes affixed on the ocean, his ears tuned to the sound of the pool water lapping against the sides and the low voices and giggles of the two girls as they colluded to try to kill the shark.

“What’s the time, Mr. Shark?” Luna called out.

He turned. All three of them were standing by the steps at the far end. Luna and Isla had noodles around their waists so when they reached the deeper water they’d be able to float.

“It’s two o’clock.”

“You have to turn around now.”

“I think he knows, sweetie,” Chelsea whispered. His lips twitched but he

turned around, pretty sure that this time they wouldn't push things. Two steps was a long way away from reaching him.

"What's the time, Mr. Shark?" It was Isla who called out this time.

"Five o'clock." Might as well speed things up a bit. It would take around twenty steps and swims to reach him. Maybe twenty-five with their little legs.

There was more giggling and low talking, but they were still far enough away for him not to launch his attack yet.

This time it was Chelsea who called out. He replied with seven and listened carefully. He was pretty sure he'd be able to capture his daughter and her friend even if they were only halfway across the pool. Chelsea, on the other hand, he was pretty certain would get away. She was a strong swimmer and her body was slippery with water and lotion.

He'd have to aim for her first, then capture the girls.

The next time he told them it was one o'clock, and Luna let out an impatient groan. "One is pointless," she told him. "We don't get anywhere."

"Then ask me again," he said patiently.

"What's the time, Mr.—"

"Dinner time," he roared, launching himself into the water. The girls squealed and a burst of spray rose up as they tried to turn in their noodles and swim away.

Chelsea dove gracefully back under the surface, twisting her body so she was facing away from him. He closed the distance between them in strong, sure strokes, managing to touch Luna and Isla on the way and telling them they were shark bait.

Chelsea was almost to the steps when he circled his hand around her ankle. The abrupt halt to her progress made her turn her head, her brows knitting as he yanked her toward him. The water was shallow here, so he put his feet on the ground, pulling her closer still until his hands were on her waist. Her skin was cool and soft, and as slick as he'd imagined. She'd turned to face him, and he could see the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she attempted to catch her breath.

"Got you," he murmured.

"Can we play again?" Isla asked.

He was still holding Chelsea. He had to remind himself to let go, but the memory of her in his hands seared itself into his brain.

"Why don't we get some ice pops?" Chelsea said. She hadn't moved. He could feel her gaze on him like he could feel the water lap against his legs.

“I love ice pops.” Luna clapped her hands together. “Can we play after that?”

“If it’s okay with your dad,” Chelsea said. “But I need to get out and get ready, remember?”

Luna put her hands on her hips and sighed deeply, looking so like an adult it made him want to laugh. “I suppose so. But we need to play again another day. I like it when there are two adults here.”

The girls toweled themselves dry and lay on the sunbeds that hadn’t yet been covered with shadows. Chelsea wrapped a towel around her hips and slid her feet into her flip flops, walking into the house to grab them some popsicles. Her hair lay in wet ropes down her smooth back, her hips swinging as she stepped through the open glass doors.

“I wish Chelsea was my mommy,” Luna said to Isla.

“You already have a mommy,” Chris reminded her.

“I know,” she said patiently, as though he was an idiot. “But, Daddy, she could be my second mommy.”

“I have two mommies,” Isla piped up helpfully. “My real mommy and my daddy’s wife. My real mommy is the one who pushed me out of her tummy. My other mommy’s name is Natalie. She always lets me stay up late when I visit.” She lowered her voice. “She and daddy kiss a lot.”

Okay then.

“Maybe you could marry Chelsea,” Luna said, her face serious. “Then she could be my other mommy.”

He grabbed a towel and rubbed it over his hair, trying to decide the best way to answer that. “Chelsea’s your nanny,” he said softly. “Not your mommy. She loves you, but she looks after you because I pay her to do it. And at the end of the summer, when you go back to live with your real mommy, we won’t need to pay Chelsea anymore.”

Luna blinked, as though she didn’t quite understand. “But she’ll still live here, won’t she?”

“No, honey. She’ll be looking after some other children.”

“But she loves me. You said so. Why would she want other children?”

Fuck.

“I’ll still be living in L.A.,” Chelsea said, walking onto the deck. How long had she been listening. She sat down on a chair next to Luna’s sunbed and peeled off the popsicle wrappers, passing one to each girl. “And we can keep in touch if that’s okay with your mommy and daddy. We could write

letters or Facetime sometimes. And I'll always be thinking about you." She smiled softly, and it hit him in the gut. "You'll have a special place in my heart."

"But I want to live with you," Luna said, holding her ice pop at arm's length. "I don't want to Facetime. People say they'll call and they don't. Mommy doesn't call."

His stomach clenched.

"Mommy called me the other day to check on you," he said. "I told you about that, remember? She said how much she loves you."

"She said she'd call me every day." Luna's lip wobbled.

"My daddy doesn't call every day," Isla said, rubbing Luna's arm. "It's okay though, because I'm too busy to talk every day. If your mom called while we were playing Mr. Shark it would be annoying, wouldn't it?"

"I guess..."

"Sweetie, I promise I won't forget to call. And I always keep my promises," Chelsea said, leaning forward to ruffle her hair. "And your dad has my number, so you can call me with his phone any time."

"You really promise?" Luna's breath was stuttering.

"Yes, I do."

"Okay." Luna nodded, then took a lick of her ice pop. "What game should we play next?" she asked Isla, turning her back slightly on the two of them. The conversation was over and he couldn't say he was sorry. Chelsea had handled it so much better than he ever could.

She looked up at him, her brows furrowed as their eyes met. He gave her the gentlest of smiles and the wrinkles in her brow smoothed out. Luna and Isla were in deep conversation about the merits of different pool games, so he inclined his head at the door to the house and Chelsea nodded then followed him.

"Thank you for making that easy."

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, the plump pink skin drawing his gaze. "I hope it was okay that I offered to keep in touch."

"Of course." It was more than okay. It felt like a fucking lifeline, and that was stupid, because it wasn't him she'd offered to keep in touch with. And yet she'd have to if she wanted to talk to Luna.

Great move, man. Use your kid as your wingman. That's not going to mess her up at all.

Above the pink and white towel wrapped around her slim hips her skin

was a warm golden brown. And though her swim top was modest, he could still see the swell of her breasts beneath the fabric. If everything was different he'd pull her toward him right now just to feel the press of her skin against his. He'd run his hands through her thick, wet hair and tip her head enough for him to kiss her.

He was as bad as the Silber kid, getting a crush on his goddamned nanny. He swallowed hard and pushed all the thoughts of her soft body away.

"You looking forward to going out tonight?" he asked her.

Her brow lifted at the change in conversation. "It should be fun, I guess. Neil's a good guy."

"Yeah, he is. If you get bored call me and I'll pick you up."

"You'll be taking care of Luna," she reminded him. "If I get bored I'll grab a cab."

"Is that safe?"

She bit down a smile. "There's only one company in Angel Sands and I grew up with most of the drivers. It doesn't get much safer than that."

He'd forgotten about that. She'd grown up here. Probably dated some of the guys who worked at the cab company or the Tiki Bar or anywhere else she went while she was here. And the thought of it made him feel irrationally jealous. He'd been worrying about Neil's friends when the bigger threat was the guys she already knew.

And he hated that. He didn't want them to know how she gave a little half smile when she was amused. Or how her hair smelled like a rose garden when it was freshly washed. Didn't want to think about somebody else seeing her first thing in the morning when her face still had creases from sleep and her eyes were heavy lidded, but she could still whip up a mean pancake and a steaming pot of coffee before he'd even pulled out a kitchen stool.

She wouldn't be doing that for another man because they paid her. She'd be doing it because she wanted to. The thought sent a shot of anger through him.

She wasn't his. She never would be. But the thought of her having somebody else... yeah, that about killed him.

"I'll probably still be up tonight when you get home. In case you want a nightcap."

She looked at him for a moment, as though trying to work him out. "I'll probably be all cocktailed out."

"Then I'll make you coffee."

“Don’t you have an early start tomorrow?” she asked. He’d given her his shooting schedule for the week, and she was right, tomorrow was a six o’clock start.

“Yeah, but I have work to do. I’ll be awake.”

“Then I’ll try not to be too late.” She wiped the wet hair from her face.

He should be pleased at that. And part of him was, but there was another part of his brain – the rational part – that reminded him that she was young, she was single, and she should stay out as long as she wanted.

Because she wasn’t his.

But he couldn’t bring himself to say that. Couldn’t bring himself to do anything but feel pleased that she would be coming home alone to him. He was a selfish asshole, he knew that. He wanted her but he couldn’t have her, at least not the way he wanted to.

But he didn’t want her to fall for anybody else, either.

Christ this was a mess.

“Daddy!” Luna had finished her ice pop. “Can we play again now?”

His eyes didn’t move from Chelsea’s. “Sure,” he said, then lowered his voice again. “Have a good time. But not too good.”

Her eyes grazed his face again, and a hint of a smile played on her lips. “I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Are you having a good time?” Lisa asked, joining Chelsea at the bar. She and Neil had been goofing around on the dance floor, moving their hips to some old sixties song, along with some of the gang they’d met here.

“It’s fun.” Chelsea smiled at her. “Thank you for letting me come along.”

“I’m glad you did. Neil’s worried about you. He said if he didn’t spring you from the house soon you’d end up with Stockholm Syndrome.”

Chelsea laughed along with her. Lisa didn’t know how close she was to the truth. Not that Chris was her captor – but she was still falling for him.

And that was a bad idea.

“Can I have another margarita?” Lisa asked the barman.

He nodded and glanced at Chelsea. “And you, ma’am?”

“Do you know how to make a Last Word?” she asked him.

His brows pinched together. “I don’t, but I can Google it.”

She shook her head. “It’s okay. I’ll just have a margarita, too.” It was stupid anyway. She only wanted him to make her one so she could tease Chris that it was better than his. And the whole point of coming out tonight was to stop thinking about him. She was supposed to be concentrating on having fun, not strategizing how to rile him up enough to want to kiss her again.

All she could think about were his lips on hers.

“How long have you been dating Neil?” she asked Lisa, determined to push her boss and his talented mouth out of her mind.

“Only a couple of months. We hit it off during pre-production meetings. He has the goofiest sense of humor and it kind of matches mine.” The first-

flush-of-love expression on Lisa's face made Chelsea feel wistful. "It's still early days, but I'm really hoping it's not just a location romance, you know?"

"A location romance?"

Lisa smiled. "Like a vacation romance but on set. It happens a lot. Half of the scandals in Hollywood come from location romances. There's this intensity to being away and filming. You work crazy long hours, spend all your time with the same people. If there's chemistry there, it's like it's distilled by a million parts. And then you go home and back to your normal life and things go to shit."

"Eek." Chelsea grimaced. "You sound like you're talking from experience."

"Put it this way. I'll never date an actor again."

The barman slid two cocktail glasses toward them, and Lisa held her phone up to pay.

"I'll get these," Chelsea protested.

"No, you got the last round. This one's on me." When she'd paid, Lisa took a long sip of her margarita. "How about you? Are you dating anybody?"

"No," Chelsea said, sipping her own drink. "I'm having what they call a dry spell."

Lisa laughed. "It must be hard with your job. I assume you work a lot of nights."

"Yeah." Chelsea took another mouthful of her cocktail. "And weekends, too. I guess it's like working in the movie industry in that outsiders don't really understand the long hours and get annoyed when you're not around."

"That sounds hard. In a way it sounds worse than working in the industry. At least I can date my co-workers." Lisa laughed.

Chelsea smiled. "Tell me why you'll never date an actor again."

"It would take all night. Let's just say anybody who refuses to give way to his girlfriend when she wants to use the mirror to put her makeup on isn't a real man." Lisa leaned on the counter and shook her head. "But there are plenty of guys in the industry who aren't actors." She looked over her shoulder. "Karl over there is a camera man," she said, pointing at a guy on the corner of the dance floor. "He's single. I could introduce you if you like?"

Chelsea shook her head quickly. "It's okay. It would be weird dating somebody who works for Chris."

"Why?" Lisa asked. "I mean, it's not as though Karl's actually Chris' employee. Not forever, anyway. He's a freelancer like the rest of us. Chris

wouldn't mind."

"I just like to keep my life separate from work." And yes, she was a liar and a hypocrite, but she wasn't really interested. "I don't want to annoy my boss."

"Chris is a good guy," Lisa said lightly. "I mean, he has a lot of baggage, but that's to be expected."

"Baggage?" Chelsea's brows lifted. "Do you mean Luna?"

"Oh God no." Lisa replied. "She isn't baggage. He's a single dad, that's normal nowadays. I meant more what he went through with his ex-wife. Neil said it was a bad time. That Chris went off the rails a bit. But everything seems okay now."

"They had a bad break up," Chelsea said. "I heard that."

"Yeah, but it was the getting together that was worse. Neil still thinks she had this all planned out. She pretty much threw herself in front of his car as he was leaving the studio lot. There's no more forced meet cute than that."

She shouldn't be talking about Chris like this. Not just because this evening was supposed to be free of thinking about him. But because he's her boss and this was gossiping.

But the need to know more outweighed her good judgement.

"Did the car hit her?" Chelsea asked.

"No, but he came close. Slammed on the brakes and went out to rescue her, and let's face it, what guy doesn't love a damsel in distress? She milked it for all it was worth then milked him according to Neil." Lisa's eyes widened. "Shit, he told me it was a secret. You can't tell him I said anything."

"I won't," Chelsea reassured her. "I promise." Another song came on – a slower one – and the dance floor began to fill up. "I guess some people will do anything for fame or money, right?"

"Exactly." Lisa nodded sagely. "Hollywood is full of that. But you must have seen it, too. You've worked for enough families in the business to know how this stuff works."

"I only see them at home," Chelsea reminded her. "And in some cases I barely saw the parents at all."

"What will you do after this job?" Lisa asked her. Neil joined them, sliding an arm around her waist.

"She'll need a break after this job," Neil said, lifting a brow. "Chris is an intense motherfucker."

“He’s not that bad,” Lisa said. “Is he?”

“He just sent me a text telling me we need to be on set at the asscrack of dawn.” Neil rolled his eyes. “And reminding me that you’ll need to be up early, too,” he told Chelsea.

“We can go,” Lisa said, finishing her drink. “I’m ready to hit the sack anyway.”

The corner of Neil’s lip quirked. “You’re coming back to mine, right?”

She tipped her head to the side coyly. “I’ll think about it.”

He turned his gaze back to Chelsea. “He insists that I take you home first.”

“Ah, ignore him,” Lisa said to her. “You stay out if you want to. It’s your night off.”

The thing is, she didn’t want to. She wanted to go home. To his home. To see if he was really waiting up for her. She’d had a good evening. Neil and his friends had been nice, and it had been good to have some girly time with Lisa. It reminded her that she needed to do this more, spend time with her sister and her friends.

But right now she’d filled that need. Which was good, because she had other needs that couldn’t be filled.

“I’m ready to go, too,” she said, finishing her own drink. “Thank you for a good night.”

“We’ll have to do it again soon,” Neil told her and Lisa agreed.

“Sounds good to me.”

The house was dark when she let herself in, a feeling of disappointment washing over her as she realized he must have gone to bed after all.

And then she had to have a serious word with herself, because he was entitled to sleep whenever he liked. He wasn’t her boyfriend, he wasn’t even her friend.

He was her boss.

Slipping her shoes off, she padded across the hallway, trying to be as silent as she could as she made her way toward the stairs. The door to the living room was ajar and through it she could see a sliver of light coming in from the glass doors off the deck. A bolt of hope shot through her, more

potent than any cocktail she'd drunk.

He was laying on a sunbed, the back propped up, a bottle of beer in his hands, wearing only a black t-shirt and jeans, no shoes or socks, and for some reason that touched her.

"Hey," she said softly.

He lifted his head to look at her, a slow smile forming on his mouth. "Hey. I didn't hear you come in."

"I thought you might be in bed. I didn't want to wake anybody up."

He sat up and turned, his feet touching the deck. "It's a beautiful night. I thought I'd come out and look at the stars." He touched the monitor they'd been using since Luna had started her night terrors. "She's fast asleep, I checked a couple of times."

"That's good." She sat on the bed next to his, facing him so their knees were almost touching. "What stars can you see?"

"I have no idea. I don't know any of their names." He looked amused at her question. "I just wanted to look at them." He tipped his head to the side. "Do you know their names?"

"Not really. My dad used to try to point them out to me, but they never looked like he said they would. I think those ones in a zigzag form are Cassiopeia."

"What did Cassiopeia do?" he asked.

"She sacrificed her daughter to appease the Gods."

He winced. "Jesus Christ. What a great mother."

"There aren't a lot of great parents in Greek mythology."

A half smile pulled at his lips. "How do you know so much about Greek mythology?"

"I don't really. I got a little interested in it after I read some books when I was a kid. And my dad told me some stories and they stuck with me."

"What books did you read?" he asked. She loved how animated he got when he wanted to know something.

"*Percy Jackson*."

He started to laugh. "I thought you were going to tell me about reading Homer or something."

She folded her arms over her chest. "I'll have you know that *Percy Jackson* is one of the best series I've read. When Luna is older I'll give a set of the books to her."

His eyes warmed at that. "I would have put you down as a Harry Potter

kid.”

“I loved those, too. I spent most of my childhood with my head in a book.”

“Did you like the books or the movies better?” he asked her.

“The books, of course.”

His mouth dropped open. “That’s fighting talk around here.”

“It’s the truth. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a movie that’s better than the book.”

He leaned forward, and his knee brushed hers. “Then you haven’t been watching the right movies.”

“Name one,” she challenged. His brow lifted as though challenge accepted.

“*The Godfather.*”

“Have you read the book?” she asked him.

His lips twitched. “No. But everybody says it.”

“Have you read *any* books?” She was teasing him, but she liked the way his eyes narrowed. Every time his gaze caught hers she felt electricity shoot through her body.

“Enough to know the movie is always better.”

“Is that what you did as a kid? Watched movies?”

“Pretty much.” He shrugged. “The same way you read books, I guess. Back in those days it was either catch whatever was on broadcast channels, or rewatch the same five videos over and over again. I guess my taste grew from there.”

She tried to picture a young Chris sitting in front of one of those old box TVs, his eyes glued to the screen the same way hers used to be glued to a page. The thought of it touched her. They’d both been looking for something in those stories. An escape, maybe. Or somewhere to belong.

Something different from what they had.

“Were you a lonely kid?” she asked him, frowning.

“Sometimes, I guess.” He swallowed hard.

“And now? Are you still lonely?” The cocktails were making her feel brave.

His eyes met hers. “Sometimes,” he said again.

“Me, too.”

He leaned closer, threading his fingers through hers, his brow touching her own as he stared into her eyes. Her chest ached with the thought of him

being lonely. Of her being alone, too. She could feel the emotions wafting from him, like they were calling to her.

And she wanted to answer them the only way she knew how.

“Come lay with me.” His voice was low.

“Here?”

“Yeah. We can look at the stars together.” He pulled on her hand and she stood and stepped toward his sunbed, letting him pull her down with him until they were laying together, his legs encasing her hips, her back pressed to his chest. His fingers were warm as they brushed her hair over her shoulder, exposing her neck so he could dip his head to kiss it.

His lips were warm and tantalizing. She felt a pulse of pleasure rush to her core. His arms wrapped around her waist as he kissed his way to the base of her throat, then leaned his chin on her shoulder.

“What is it about you?” he murmured.

“Maybe it’s just that I’m here.”

“No, it isn’t that. Otherwise I’d be spooning with Neil most of the day.”

She chuckled but stopped because he was kissing his way along her shoulder.

“You always smell good,” he said against her skin. “Even when you’re not here your fragrance still lingers. You could walk into a room and I’d know it was you without even looking your way.” He slid his hand beneath her top, his palm pressing against her stomach and she felt her body begin to throb. How could he make her feel this way just with a few kisses and the slightest of touches? All she knew was that he made her body sing.

She turned her head to look at him. The smell of the ocean mixed with the scent of his cologne was intoxicating. But it was his eyes that captivated her. So blue she could probably set sail in them. Soft and aching and looking at her for answers.

But she didn’t have them. Only questions neither of them could solve.

His eyes dipped to her mouth then back up again. Sliding his free hand beneath her chin, he angled her head with his fingers so she was looking right at him over her shoulder, her back still resting on his chest. She felt a warm throb of pleasure pulsing a steady rhythm between her legs.

“We can’t...” He sounded torn.

“I know.” She nodded.

“But I can’t stop.”

“I know that, too,” she said, her chest aching. “Just kiss me. Please.”

He closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. For a moment she expected him to push her away. Be the grown up in this situation. But instead he opened them again and she could see a steely resolve there. He wasn't going to reject her.

Because he wanted her, too. It was in the way he stared at her, the way his fingers drew circles on her bare stomach. In the thick ridge of excitement she felt pressing against her lower back.

Their kiss was slow. Languorous. She twisted in his arms until they were facing each other, her arms wrapped around his neck as he slowly plundered her mouth. Reaching behind him, he flipped the lever until the sunbed was flat, then pulled her on top of him, his mouth never leaving hers, his fingers tangling in her hair as he slid his tongue achingly against hers.

Desire pooled inside her, as he slid his hands down her sides, this time following the curve of her behind to the top of her skirt, before he pushed them inside, dragging his fingers against her thighs, making her ache for him.

“Let me touch you,” he said, kissing her again.

She couldn't say no to him. She didn't want to.

“As long as I can touch you, too.”

She came back to him. And yes, he knew she was paid to do that, and she had nowhere else to go, but she'd come back for him, that much was evident by the way she was sighing against his lips.

All his life he'd dealt with people leaving. His dad, his mom, his ex-wife, even though that had been his decision, not hers.

But this beautiful woman coming back to him? That felt like something miraculous.

As soon as he'd looked up from the lounge and saw her standing there, her body silhouetted by the moonlight, looking like his own personal angel as she stared down at him, he'd known.

Just one curl of her lips and he was falling. One touch of her face and he was under the surface.

One kiss and he was drowning.

He hadn't known he was lonely until she'd asked him. Hadn't known that she was the only one who could fill that void. But now she was laying with him, her body slight against his heavier mass. The way her soft curves pressed into him only made him harder.

And now she'd said yes. It was goddamned music to his ears.

He slid his hand inside her skirt, feeling the soft fabric against his knuckles as he slowly grazed his fingers along the curve of her ass, seeking for the edge of her panties but not finding it.

Was she bare beneath there? He moved his hand further, until he felt the string of her thong cutting between her cheeks. And damn if that didn't make him harder still, so he was on the knife's edge between pain and pleasure.

Sliding his finger down the line of the thong, he reached the core of her body, cursing softly as he felt the dampness between her legs.

“You’re wet for me.” Over the fabric of her thong he found her clit, moving his finger against it until she gasped against his mouth. God, she was responsive. He kissed her again, taking his time, tasting her, teasing her, sliding his tongue against hers.

Moving his hand between their bodies to give him better access, he circled her again, loving the way she cried out, then he slid his hand beneath her panties, closing his eyes as he felt her slickness, wishing it wasn’t his fingers he was pushing inside of her.

She was as tight as he remembered as he started to move against her, his thumb circling her as his fingers pleased her sex. She moved her own hand between them and he had to swallow a groan as she pressed her palm against the hard length of him, relieving his ache the only way she knew how.

Their bodies undulated in time to a rhythm that only they could hear. Their kisses warm and aching, their touches sending them soaring like they were stars in the sky. He felt her tighten around him, and knew she was close. He moved faster, kissed her harder, wanting to make her see the stars behind her eyelids.

“Come for me,” he murmured against her lips.

“I’m so close...”

“I know. You’re so beautiful. You feel so good,” he told her, curling his fingers until she cried out with pleasure. “I need this, sweetheart. I need to feel you come. Give it to me.”

He was so swollen. So needy. In another world he’d strip her naked, slide inside of her until they both reached sweet oblivion. But he’d take what he could, and right now he wanted her pleasure.

Needed it, like he needed oxygen.

Pushing his other hand beneath her top, he cupped her breast, sliding his thumb across the peak of her nipple. Her body froze against his, then she fell, crying out against his lips, contracting so tightly around his fingers it was almost painful. He circled his thumb slowly against her, prolonging the sweet peak of her ecstasy, kissing her so he could swallow her moans.

Her breaths were still harsh as she slid her hand beneath the waistband of his jeans, then inside his shorts to find the steel hardness of his cock. But when she tried to circle him there wasn’t enough give to his pants. Cursing, she pulled her hand out and unfastened his button, then slid the zipper down,

before taking him in her palm once more, this time her hold tight and so fucking good.

He lifted his hand from her and slid it between his lips, tasting the sweet nectar of her on his tongue. She watched open mouthed as he licked her from his fingers, her hand still moving against him with exactly the right amount of pressure.

It wasn't going to take long. He'd already been on edge before she'd even touched him. The taste of her lingered on his tongue, making him want more of her. She was so damn addictive he wanted all of her. Wanted to make her his.

Her thumb brushed over his tip, making his body twitch. She scooted down, wrapping her lips around him, the sweet velvety warmth of her mouth making him almost come right away.

“Not fair,” he grunted. “I only got to touch you.”

But then she looked up at him through her thick lashes, and all thoughts of fairness rushed out of his mind.

If he thought her hands were perfect, her mouth was some kind of goddamned heaven.

His breath was ragged, his hands gripping the edge of the lounge like he was holding on for dear life. But the focus of his attention was on her. Not only her lips, though they were enough. But her eyes, her face, her fucking soul.

He wanted it all.

Then he felt it. The pooling of his pleasure as she brought him to the very edge of his world. Thoughts spiraled through his mind but he couldn't capture any of them except her name. He said it out loud, growling it, pressing his hand against the back of her head.

“I'm going to... you need to...”

But she didn't pull away as he bucked his hips and came like a rocket into her mouth. She just sucked and licked and fucking soothed him as the pleasure suffused him, her hands resting on his denim clad thighs, her mouth swallowing everything he had to give.

When he was empty, he pulled her up, kissing her so hard that neither of them could breathe. He could taste himself on her lips, on her tongue, and it made his chest ache.

“Next time we do this, you'll be naked,” he told her. “And I'm going to make you beg for mercy.”

“Next time?” she said, a smile playing at her lips.

She would be so easy to fall for. Mostly because he trusted her to catch him. And damn if that didn’t make him want to do it.

Even if he couldn’t.

“Next time,” he promised. Because there *would* be another time. He’d make sure of it.

She was fast becoming his favorite addiction. And he didn’t want to give it up.

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“Are you okay? You seem like you’re a million miles away today,” Ember asked.

“I’m just a little tired.” Chelsea stretched her legs out, resting the heels of her sandals on the deck of the coffee shop. It was just after eleven in the morning and the sun was already shining brightly. She and Ember had arranged to meet at Déjà Brew with Luna and Arthur. Chelsea because she was exhausted and needing to get out of the house, and Ember because she and her husband, Lucas, had apparently had a huge argument and she needed somebody to talk to.

“Is Luna still having night terrors?” Ember asked sympathetically. Her voice was low, but Luna wouldn’t be able to hear anyway. She and Arthur were playing on the sand in front of the deck. It made Chelsea feel warm to see just how patient Luna was with the little boy. He was trying to make a sandcastle, but was too impatient to fill the whole bucket up, so every time he turned it over the sand spilled everywhere.

Luna consoled him with a pat on the back then held the bucket while he filled it again, and though Chelsea couldn’t quite hear what she was saying to him, Arthur was nodding and concentrating so hard it looked like he was frowning.

“She hasn’t had night terrors for a few days now,” Chelsea told her. “I just couldn’t sleep for some reason.”

Actually, she knew the reason. But she wasn’t going to tell her sister. She couldn’t face her judgment. Not now. These nights with Chris were special to her.

But they were also risky. And stupid. And opened them both up to issues further down the line. Not least with the agency. If they found out she and Chris had what Lois Marx would deem an ‘inappropriate relationship’, they would take her off the books for good.

And they’d have every right to. Lois had stood by her after the Silbers and she was so grateful for that. If she could just ignore this pull between her and her boss everything would be okay.

The only problem was, she was already missing him. When he held her in his arms she felt safer than she’d ever felt before. He knew her. Knew what she’d been through.

She knew him, too. Every time they were together he exposed a little more of his past to her, she fell for him further. She was walking on a tightrope and one misstep could lead to her tumbling over the edge.

“Enough about me.” Chelsea waved her hand as though to bat off her big sister’s concern. “What’s happening with you and Lucas?”

Ember grimaced and took a sip of her coffee. “Arthur, listen to Luna,” she called out, when he tried to grab the bucket from her. “She’s really good at making castles.” Then she lowered her voice and looked back at Chelsea. “He’s angry because he thinks I only want him for his body.”

Chelsea almost spat out her coffee. “What? Surely that’s every guy’s dream.”

Ember shrugged. “I haven’t told anybody else, but we’re trying for another baby. We’ve been trying for a while, actually, but it hasn’t happened. I went to the doctor who suggested we try natural family planning methods. Basically the opposite of what you’d do if you were trying to avoid getting pregnant.”

“What, like monitoring your rhythms and stuff?” Chelsea asked. The thought of it sent a shiver down her spine. She always made sure she was protected from pregnancy. She loved children so much, but she wasn’t ready for her own yet.

“Yeah. I have to take my temperature every day, and this is kind of gross, but I also have to monitor the consistency of my...” She took a deep breath. “Mucus.”

Chelsea went to laugh, but Ember looked deadly serious. “Like your...” she gestured at her lap.

“Yeah. It changes through the month apparently. When you’re fertile it’s kind of stretchy.”

“This is way too much information for me.” Chelsea grimaced. Yes, she was excited that she might have another niece or nephew soon, but she didn’t need to know the intimate ins and outs of Ember’s cycle. “And anyway, why’s Lucas annoyed about that. It sounds like you’re using your body more than his.”

“Um...” Ember pressed her lips together. “I might have called him at two o’clock yesterday and demanded that he come home right away and do his manly deeds.”

“He was working?” Chelsea asked, trying not to laugh. Poor Lucas, she could just imagine him taking that call in the firehouse.

“Yeah. In a meeting. He refused to come home and I threw a fit.” Ember shook her head. “I know I’m a pain in the ass, but I really want another baby. I don’t want Arthur to be an only child.” She reached across the table and grabbed Chelsea’s hand. “I want him to have somebody always on his side, like you and me. Somebody he can talk to openly and honestly.”

A wave of guilt washed over Chelsea, but she batted it away. “He will. It just takes time sometimes.” She squeezed Ember’s hand back. “So what happened then?”

“He came home.” Ember lifted a brow. “But he was furious. He pretty much stripped me naked, pushed me on the bed, and um... yeah.”

“Sounds kind of hot.”

Ember sighed. “Honestly, it was. He’s such a caring guy. We barely ever have angry sex. And sometimes that’s what you need. Anyway, then he went back to work, and when he came home later he told me he felt used.” She shook her head. “No, objectified was the word. He feels objectified.”

“I guess he kind of was,” Chelsea said. “But it’s for a good cause, right? I mean he wants a baby, too.”

“Yeah, he does. But now I feel bad and I don’t know what to do. I don’t want him to feel used. I don’t want any baby we have to be made in anger. I want us to be a team like we always are.”

“Have you told him that?” Chelsea asked her.

“We haven’t had much time to talk about anything else.”

“Maybe you should,” Chelsea suggested gently. “You two are always so great at talking things through. Why don’t you call mom and ask her to babysit Arthur? You could go out and have a good time. Talk it through. Remember exactly why you want this man to be the father of your babies.”

“She already babysat for me yesterday,” Ember said. “For the angry sex.”

Chelsea's mouth dropped open. "Did she know that?"

"No." Ember shook her head quickly. "I told her we were looking at curtains for the living room."

Chelsea started to laugh, but when she saw Ember's expression she stopped. "Is everything else okay between you guys?" she asked.

"Yeah. It really is. He's such a great husband. And the best father, too. Everybody at work loves him, and he loves being the Chief. It's just that having sex for a specific reason, other than the fact that we love each other, it makes things hard."

"I bet." Chelsea wiggled her eyebrows. Ember bit down a smile. "Look," Chelsea said, "I'm not an expert on relationships, but I know you and I know Lucas and you two are couple goals. You got your shit sorted. You two just work. And yeah, there'll be bumps along the road, there always are. But if you keep talking and keep loving each other, you'll work it out."

"How did you get so wise?" Ember asked her. "And so grown up?"

"I had a good role model in my big sister." Chelsea winked at her.

"I wish you had somebody, too." Ember sounded wistful. "You deserve that kind of happiness."

"I'm okay as I am." Chelsea shifted in her seat. "I'm too busy for relationships."

This was the problem with secrets. They tied you up in knots. Thick, guilty knots that twisted and turned in your gut.

"Maybe when you finish this job you could spend a few weeks here with us," Ember suggested. "Before you go back to L.A. There are a lot of single guys at Lucas' station."

"Hot firefighters. Now we're talking." Chelsea forced a smile on her face. "But let's get through the next few weeks first."

"Okay." Ember drained her coffee. "Should we go join the budding architects?" she suggested, angling her head toward Luna and Arthur. There was still only one sandcastle, surrounded by at least six piles of sand.

"Sure." Chelsea nodded. "Let's go."

"Want to grab some ice cream before we head to the food market?" Chelsea asked Luna after Arthur and Ember had left. In the end they'd managed to

make some passable sandcastles, before Arthur had a tantrum and kicked them all over, and Ember had to lift him up in her arms and told him it was naptime. She'd kissed Chelsea and muttered, "Remind me again why I want another one of these?" before stomping off as he screamed and kicked in her arms.

It must have been a rhetorical question, because she didn't wait for an answer.

Luna's face lit up. "Yes, please. Can I have the marshmallow flavor?"

"If you promise to brush your teeth extra well tonight," Chelsea said, as the little girl grabbed her hand, swinging their arms together as they walked along the concrete path. It was busy today – the bright sunshine had brought out all the locals along with the tourists and sunseekers who always lined up on the beach. Every table in the Heavenly Ice Cream Parlor was full, so Chelsea suggested they get their ice cream to go and eat them on their way back to the car.

"Hey!" Meghan smiled from behind the counter as they walked into the parlor. "How are you doing?" She tipped her head at the door behind her. "Isla is in the back if you want to go say hi," she suggested to Luna.

"Go ahead." Chelsea nodded. "But we can't stay long. We need to hit the market before they sell out of the good stuff."

"I still get my ice cream, right?" Luna asked, hesitating.

Chelsea smiled. The kid had priorities. "Yep, I'll order it and you can come out when it's ready."

Meghan opened the door at the end of the counter, ushering Luna through. When she walked through the door of the backroom there were squeals and excited chatter.

"Isla hasn't stopped talking about Luna all week. She had such a good time at your house. She's kind of jealous that you have a private pool where we have to share ours with the rest of the apartment building."

"I think Luna would like the opposite," Chelsea said, smiling. It was so nice to have a friend with a daughter to chat with. "She gets lonely, so it was lovely to have Isla come play."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you something, while the girls aren't here." Meghan checked with her staff that they were okay to serve, then walked with Chelsea to a quieter corner. "It's Isla's weekend with her dad and he's talking about taking her to Disneyland. She's desperate for Luna to come with. They'd have to stay with him, but he's got security all locked down.

They'd be safe and comfortable and I'm pretty sure they'd have a good time."

Chelsea blinked. "I don't think Chris will go for it." It was one thing making him comfortable enough for her to take Luna out in Angel Sands. Another for his daughter to spend the weekend with some famous drummer he'd never met.

"Yeah, I thought the same. But Isla keeps begging." Meghan wrinkled her nose. "How about we arrange a playdate here once she's back from his place instead? That'll stop her begging."

"That sounds good. I'll try and warm him up to the idea of a playdate at your house. He's doing better but he's still kind of protective, you know?"

"I think that's sweet," Meghan said. "The man has it all, doesn't he? The fame, the looks..." She sighed. "And the perfect father thing."

Chelsea smiled. "That's why he's America's favorite actor."

"Right?" Meghan nodded. "Okay, let me get your order. What would you like?"

"Luna would like two scoops of marshmallow ice cream in a bowl to go. And I'll have a lemon ice in a waffle cone."

"Coming up." Meghan winked. "And good luck with the sugar rush from that marshmallow ice cream."

"Thanks. I think I might need it."

"So, as you know I'm an entertainment lawyer, not a family lawyer. Or a business lawyer for that matter. But I do understand contracts and I can tell you this one is solid." Liv grimaced. "I hate to say it," she added, shifting in her seat uncomfortably. "But as your lawyer and your friend – not to mention one of the producers of the movie – the last thing you need is any more scandal. Your best option is to end her contract and give her some severance pay."

"I'm not doing that." He shook his head. "I made a promise that her past didn't matter."

Liv looked at him carefully. He could tell she was trying to find the right words. "But it does, Chris. You only just got the money together for this production thanks to your past. If something goes wrong, your reputation..."

she trailed off again. “And hers, too. There’ll be more scrutiny on her because she’s working for you. If it comes out that she was fired by her last job, that’s going to look bad. You already said her career is on the line here. Let her go quietly, give her a good reference, and make her somebody else’s problem.”

“If it comes out can’t she just break the NDA she signed and tell the truth about what happened?”

Liv let out a long breath. “She could, but it would leave her liable to be sued by the Silbers. And you said yourself that she wouldn’t talk about it anyway. She felt too much responsibility toward the young man in question. She’s in a bad situation, and I get that it’s not of her making, but working for you could potentially make things worse all around.”

“But she could win a lawsuit, right? If the details were already out in the public?”

She shrugged. “She could. But by then she’d probably be bankrupt from paying her lawyers. And whatever happened she’d never get a job again. I hate to say it, but if Anya’s digging around then you’re better off cutting your losses. We both know what a bloodhound your ex-wife is.”

He leaned back in his chair, blowing out a mouthful of air. What a fucking mess this was. On the plus side, Anya had gone quiet. She’d probably gotten distracted by something much more lucrative. And both the Silbers and Chelsea were determined to keep quiet about the whole thing.

This desire he felt for Chelsea was making things worse for her. He should stay away from her.

But he couldn’t. Every time he saw her he wanted to touch her. Kiss her. Feel her body against his.

“What if we approach the Silbers and request an amendment to the NDA? That they provide her with a basic reference?” he asked Liv.

She blinked. “Why would you do that? This isn’t your problem.”

Because he fucking hated injustice. Especially when it made people he cared about suffer. And damn it, he cared about Chelsea.

Way too much.

“She’s a good nanny. I may want to use her in the future.”

Liv leaned forward. “Whoever negotiated that NDA on her behalf made a huge mistake by not including a requirement for a reference,” she said, agreeing with him. “But asking for an amendment could potentially make things worse. It’ll rile them up, and they have all the power here. You’re

better off letting sleeping dogs lie.”

“Do it anyway.”

She lifted a brow. “You’re sure?”

“Yeah. She deserves some justice. Life’s dealt her a shitty hand, and while she plays it well, she needs someone to push an ace or two her way.”

“Okay. But let me do it carefully. Not rock any boats. In fact...” She ran her fingertip along her jaw. “How would you feel if I asked Adrian to do it? He’s an excellent lawyer. And he’s one step removed from you. Whatever happens, we need to protect your reputation. All these peoples’ jobs depend on it.” She inclined her head at the window of his trailer, and the set beyond. “If you give me the go-ahead to talk with Adrian, we won’t only get that separation that we need, we’ll also get his point of view on this. I can guarantee his discretion.”

“Do it.” Chris nodded. He liked Adrian a lot. He’d gone to law school with Liv and apparently they’d hated each other from first sight. It was only when she came back here six months ago to scout for locations that they reconnected. And fell in love.

“Don’t you want to discuss this with your nanny first?”

“I will. But I don’t want to waste any time either. Let’s get to work on it and see where it goes.”

Liv opened her mouth to answer, but there was a rap at the door.

“Come in,” Chris called out.

“Hey,” Neil walked in, holding a phone. “Do you know Dylan Nash of *Everyday Feels Like Sunday*?”

“The drummer?” Chris frowned. “I’ve probably seen him at a party or something. Why?”

“He’s on the line. Or rather his PA is. He wants to talk to you if you’re free.”

“I think we’re done here,” he said, glancing at Liv who nodded. “Okay then, pass it over.”

“He’s here now,” Neil said into the phone. “Sure, go ahead.” He looked at Chris. “They’re just patching Dylan through.”

“No.” Chelsea shook her head. “Please don’t do that. I don’t want anybody contacting the Silbers. I don’t want the NDA changed. I’ll be fine, things will be fine. Let’s just let sleeping dogs lie.”

Chris frowned. They were sitting out on the deck again, Luna’s monitor by the side of the lounge. She’d been asleep for a few hours, while he’d been working and Chelsea had been cleaning up the kitchen as her load of laundry finished.

They’d gotten into a good rhythm here. A strangely domesticated yet pleasing one. He liked her being here when he got home from the set, a big smile on her face as she helped Luna serve dinner, or made him a coffee and insisted that he sit down at the kitchen island while they finished up cooking. Then he would clean up after – she deserved pampering, too.

It was the kind of life he’d seen on TV shows. Or at least it would have been if he and Chelsea were married. Which they weren’t and they wouldn’t be.

Didn’t stop him from realizing that his marriage to Anya had never been like this. It hadn’t been easy. It hadn’t been happy. It had been full of flaring tempers and soaring emotions. Sure it had been good for a while, but it had been bad, too.

And near the end it had been very bad.

Like his parents’ relationship, it was lopsided. He could barely remember his mom and dad being together. Just flashes of memories that he wasn’t sure were real. They might have come from a rerun of *Happy Days* or *I Love Lucy* or whatever else was showing on the few TV channels they had growing up.

As a kid, he'd longed for normality. For two parents who loved each other. For a dad to watch him play softball on the weekend. To teach him to drive his first car, to guide him through life. To be anything other than the douche ball his dad had turned out to be.

Sure, as an adult he knew that normalcy didn't exist. That behind the façade of a happy family life you were as likely to find arguments and scathing remarks, hell even domestic violence.

But sometimes, on nights like this, he still wanted the fucking fairytale.

"Adrian and Liv think you have a chance of overturning the NDA. And I need to know you'll be okay when your contract here ends," he told her, brushing her hair over her shoulder. She was in what was fast becoming his favorite position, leaning back on him as they sat on the lounge, his thighs circling her hips. He could smell the ocean as a breeze lifted up from the coastline, and the soft fragrance of her hair as it danced between her tresses.

"I'll be okay. I always am."

Maybe okay wasn't enough for her. She deserved more than okay. She deserved more than having to beg for jobs because some little punk couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Not that he was any better. And he knew it. He should stop this now. He was the boss, the grown up. And yet he couldn't.

"I'll ask them to pause," he said. "But if anything else happens, let's revisit."

She twisted her head to look at him, and he could see his own face reflecting back from her eyes. "You're kind of protective, aren't you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Is it too much?"

Pulling her lip between her teeth, she paused, considering his question. "No, actually I like it. It's been a while since anybody other than my family stood up for me. And it's not like I can't stand up for myself, because I can, but sometimes you just get tired, you know?"

Yeah, he knew. She made his insides twist in a way that was both pleasurable and painful at the same time. Everything about her fit him. Her body, her mind, her kindness.

Everything except who they were.

"Hey," he said, changing the subject because he was sick of the melancholy. "Want to know who called me today?"

"Who?"

"Dylan Nash."

“He did?” She didn’t sound surprised.

“Don’t you want to know what he wanted?”

“I’m guessing he wasn’t begging you to be the next front man of *Everyday Feels Like Sunday*.” She grinned at him. “Okay, I’m going to hazard a guess that he wants to take Luna and Isla to Disneyland.”

Chris blinked. “How did you know that?”

“I saw Meghan today. She asked me about it, and I was planning on mentioning it to you tonight. I told her you’d probably say no, since you haven’t met Dylan and don’t trust anybody.” Her voice sounded teasing now.

He wrinkled his nose at her. “Actually, I said yes.”

Her mouth dropped open. It made him grin.

“What?” he asked. “Did I shock you?”

“Kind of. After imprisoning me here for the first few days I really didn’t think you’d let Luna loose alone in Disneyland.”

“She won’t be alone. She’ll be with Dylan and his wife and a full security detail. Plus some employees from Disney who’ll escort them everywhere.”

“Will she stay with them?” Chelsea asked. She sounded worried, and the turnabout between the two of them amused him.

“Just for Saturday night, yeah.”

“What if she has a night terror and we aren’t there?” Her brow furrowed. “Did you tell him about them?”

“Yes, I did. And we agreed that if she has one they’ll call me immediately. Both Dylan and his wife sound pretty clued up when it comes to kids. He said he’s taken some parenting classes.”

“Dylan Nash takes classes?”

“Does that shock you? That he might be a good father?”

“No. I just... I’m just worried about her. If she has a night terror it could take two hours to get to her from here. What if she’s afraid? I can’t stand the thought of her feeling alone.”

He loved the way this woman cared about his kid. “That’s why we’re going to drive her to L.A. and stay there for the night, too.”

“We?” she blinked.

“Unless you’d rather have the weekend off. You’d be entitled to it, you’ve been working like a dog.”

She ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip, and damn if his eyes didn’t follow. “What would we do while Luna was with Isla?”

A smirk pulled at his lips and she burst out laughing.

“I didn’t say anything.” He lifted his hands up.

“But you thought it. I remember your promise last night.” She lowered her voice in a poor, gruff imitation of him. “*Next time we do this you’ll be naked and begging.*”

“Did I say that?” he asked, amused.

“Yep.”

“Okay then. That’s what we’ll be doing.” He couldn’t say he didn’t like the sound of that.

“And what will we do for the rest of the time?”

“Are you doubting my prowess?” he teased.

“You *are* an older man,” she pointed out. “And even I might need some rest.”

“Then I’ll take you out to dinner.”

“You can’t do that. If people see us...”

Shit. She was right. “We’ll drive somewhere out of the way. I know a few places.”

“Is that where you take all your women?” Her voice was light, but it still hit a nerve with him.

“I don’t have any other women. Just you.”

She opened her mouth to reply, then blinked, as though she had no idea what to say. “My sister wants to set me up with a hot firefighter,” she finally said.

He frowned. “Is that what you want?”

Her eyes caught his. “No.”

“Then what do you want?”

“You.”

Her words hit him like a Mack truck to the chest. Not in a bad way, though. More in a ‘that’s what I want too’ kind of way that made him want to kiss her.

“Then come with me to L.A.”

“I already said I would,” she said, rolling her eyes at him. But there was something else there, too. An excitement that he could feel as much as her. The knowledge that they’d actually get to spend some time together.

Away from this house. The set. Prying eyes. Just the two of them for twenty-four glorious hours.

“Okay then.” He kissed her temple. “No more talk about hot firefighters.”

“That was my sister, not me. And anyway, you’re an actor. I figure that if

I want a hot firefighter you'd be able to get into the role."

She was teasing again. He liked it. No, he fucking loved it.

"Chelsea?" Luna's voice echoed out of the monitor. A moment later they heard the thud of bare feet against the floor.

"That's my cue," she said, pulling herself out of his hold. A rush of cool air replaced where her warm body had been laying against him.

"I'll do it," he said.

"Nope, she called my name. You just lay there and think about hoses." She grinned. "While I go and do what you pay me to do."

"So you'll let us know if she shows any sign of distress at all? Even if it's the middle of the night?" Chelsea asked Natalie, Isla's stepmom, as they waited in the VIP lounge of the Disneyland resort. Chris and Dylan were talking quietly in the corner with two burly men he'd introduced as their security detail, and Isla and Luna were laughing as they put on their Minnie Mouse ears, both of them so excited they could barely stand still.

"You have my word." Natalie caught her eye. "We know what to look out for and what to do while we wait for you to arrive. Please try not to worry, we'll take good care of her."

Chelsea, Luna, and Chris had left Angel Sands early that morning to meet Dylan, Natalie, and Isla for their VIP experience. One of Dylan's security guards had taken Luna's little suitcase and put it in the corner, ready to take home to Dylan's house after the Main Street Electrical parade was over.

Chelsea was already impressed by the staff's efficiency and care. When Chris had driven up to the security gate the guard had waved them through to the VIP parking, then a concierge had escorted them to meet Isla and her parents.

Luna wasn't batting an eyelid at the extra security. She was probably used to it when she was in L.A. It made Chelsea glad that she was giving her a laid-back, danger-free summer. Sure, VIP treatment was great, but so was being a kid like any other.

"Okay!" A smiley man walked in, wearing a tartan waistcoat over his white shirt, and a pair of blue pants that matched his blue tie. "I hear there's some Disney fans in here. Is that true?"

“Yes!” Luna and Isla shouted out.

“Yay!” He clapped his hands together. “My name’s Peter. I’m a big fan, too. It’s my job to take care of you and show you around the park.”

“Can we go now?” Isla asked, her face red with excitement.

“Just as soon as your mommy and daddy are ready.”

“Natalie is my step-mommy,” Isla said, sounding unconcerned.

Peter nodded. “Okay, as soon as they’re ready, we’ll go.”

Chelsea leaned down to hug Luna. “You have a great time. And make sure you hug Mickey for me.”

“I will.” Luna’s face was serious as she hugged Chelsea back. “I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“Yes, sweetie. Your daddy and I will pick you up after breakfast. Then we’ll go back home.”

“To the beach house?”

“That’s right. Angel Sands.” Chelsea gave her a reassuring smile. “You’ll have so much fun you won’t want to come home.”

“We ready?” Dylan asked, as the circle of him, Chris, and the security detail broke apart.

“Yes we are, sir.” Peter nodded.

“Okay then.” Dylan clapped his hands together. “Let’s go have some fun with The Mouse.”

“Where are we going?” Chelsea asked as Chris pulled up to the security gate, then drove through as the barrier lifted.

“I thought we could get some breakfast,” he said, checking the clock on the dashboard. “Make that brunch. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

Her stomach gurgled at the thought of food. They’d had coffee in the VIP waiting room, but nothing else. And it had been too early to eat when they’d set off that morning. “Brunch sounds good. Should we just pick something up and go back to your place?”

“Are you that desperate to get your hands on me?”

She was, actually, but that wasn’t why she’d suggested it. “I just thought it’d be better if we aren’t seen together in public. Not here in L.A. anyway.” Without Luna with them, they had no business spending time together.

Despite the sprawling nature of the city, gossip moved fast.

“I want to take you out for brunch,” he said, glancing at her from the corner of his eye. Traffic was thick around the Disneyland estate, and he was crawling in a line now. “When will we get the chance to do this again? Either Luna will be with us or people in Angel Sands will talk. Just let me be the guy and buy you some food, okay?”

She nodded. “Okay. But maybe we can go a bit out of town? I know this great café in San Pedro. It’s not fancy but it had the most amazing views of the beach.”

He blinked. “San Pedro?”

“Is that okay?” she asked, wondering if he had something against the pretty town.

He shook his head. “No. It’s only half an hour drive. We can go there.”

It took more like forty minutes in the L.A. traffic before they pulled into the parking lot behind a wooden shack overlooking the ocean and a short wooden pier. It had a different feel than Angel Sands, but was just as beautiful. Together they walked into the café and were shown to a table out on the deck. The waitress gave them two paper menus and asked if they wanted coffee.

“Yes please,” Chelsea said. Chris nodded. He’d put on a baseball cap to come in here – the same cap she’d worn on the beach that time. It didn’t do much to hide his beautiful face, but she assumed that it at least hid him from casual onlookers. She couldn’t imagine not being able to go anywhere without people recognizing you.

A minute later, after the waitress had poured them both a steaming cup of coffee from the carafe, she turned to him, a smile playing at her lips.

“What?” he asked, smiling too.

“I was just thinking how normal this all is.”

“Give it five minutes. Somebody will be asking for my autograph or a selfie. Or they’ll be filming me for Instagram or TikTok.”

“Do you hate when that happens?” she asked, leaning her chin on her hands. Dear God, this man was stunning. From his piercing blue ocean eyes to his strong jaw, she would never get bored of looking at him. It was no wonder so many people wanted a piece of him.

Although the outside was good, it was the inside she wanted most. The man who loved his kid so much he twisted himself in knots to protect her. The one who’d lost his mom and it had changed him, but still he fought

through.

The one who looked at her like she was so much more than a nanny. More than a pretty girl who cooked and took care of Luna and did the laundry. The man who wanted to save her because she'd failed to save herself.

"I don't hate it," he told her. "It's part of the job. I knew when I took it on that the price of success was a lack of privacy. And most of the time I'm okay with that."

"When aren't you okay with it?" She lifted her cup to her lips.

"When I want to take a pretty girl out to brunch."

She grinned. "Good thing I'm only average then."

"There's nothing average about you." His expression turned serious. He glanced over her shoulder then back at her face, shifting in his seat. "You're the most beautiful woman I know."

A thrill shot through her. "That's a lie. I've seen the actresses you've worked with."

He glanced over her shoulder again. Why did he keep doing that? When he looked back this time, his expression was tender. Raw. "I wish you'd see yourself the way I do. Everything about you is beautiful. When I look at you, it's like looking at the sun."

Her heart clenched. This man knew how to say all the right words. "Ditto," she whispered, and a smile pulled at his lips.

The third time he looked away, she could see frown lines appear along his brow.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Why?"

"You keep looking over my shoulder like there's somebody there."

He shook his head. "There's nobody there..." He ran his finger around the rim of his coffee cup, then shrugged. "My dad lives in San Pedro. I keep wondering if I'll see him in here."

Her brows lifted. He barely mentioned his dad previously, and he certainly hadn't said he lived in L.A. She wanted to know more.

"Do you keep in contact with him?" she asked.

"No. But I know where he lives. What he's doing. I make it my business to know."

Oh. "When was the last time you saw him?" she asked, intrigued by his response to his dad. It was so different to her own, yet it explained a lot. How

closed off he'd been when they first met. How determined he was to be a good father to Luna when his own dad had let him down.

How he hated that his daughter suffered from night terrors the same way he had when his dad had left town.

"Just after my first big role. He came to the studio asking for money."

She winced. "What happened?"

"I told him to fuck off. Then had him escorted off the lot." His lips twitched. "I thought it'd feel good but it just felt..." He sighed. "I don't know. Anticlimactic, I guess. I'd spent most of my teenage years imagining what I'd do if I saw him again. Then when it looked like my movie was going to be a hit I imagined him watching it and crying because he realized how he'd let me down."

"Fantasy is rarely as good as reality," she said, sympathizing with him.

"I wanted him to pay. For what he did to me, to my mom." He blinked. "You know she died of cervical cancer?"

"I didn't, no." Her voice was soft. She put her hand on his leg, squeezing it.

"He gave that to her. She'd beaten it once, but it came back. If he hadn't messed around on her..." His voice cracked and she felt her eyes sting. Why did people hurt others so much?

Why did he have to pay the price for his dad's choices?

He reached across the table to take her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

"I'm so sorry." She gave him a sad smile.

"You don't need to be sorry. I just wish he was."

"Have you decided what you're having?" the waitress interrupted them.

"I'll take the pancakes and an extra side of bacon, please." Chelsea handed her the menu.

"I'll have the Salty Dog Breakfast, please." Chris nodded at the waitress.

"How do you like your eggs?"

"Over easy."

She smiled. "Good choice. Anything else?"

"Can we have a coffee refill?"

"Coming right up."

When she walked away, the melancholy expression on his face had disappeared, replaced by a smile as his eyes lingered on Chelsea.

"You have a sweet tooth like Luna," he said.

“And you have a huge appetite. Did you see what comes with your breakfast? Don’t you have to watch your calories when you’re filming?”

“I’ve got a naturally high metabolism.” He shrugged. “And anyway, I’ll be working off some energy later.” The way he looked at her left her in no doubt how he planned to do exactly that.

And the thought thrilled her. She wanted to kiss this man. To climb onto his lap and feel his body pressed against hers. If they weren’t in public she’d be all over him right now. He was this heart aching mix of strong and tender. A man who wasn’t afraid to show his pain. At least to her. And she loved that.

She was falling in love with him.

The thought should scare her, but it didn’t. It just made her feel like she was flying high.

He ran his thumb over the back of her hand, sending a shiver down her spine.

One day and one night with him was never going to be enough.

“That’s his road.” Chris pointed to a lane on his right as they drove through San Pedro. Her stomach was feeling overly full. She’d demolished the pancakes and bacon, then insisted on tasting the hash browns he’d had on his plate. Amused, he’d pretended to bat her fork away, before insisting she try everything he had.

He was a good food sharer. She liked that in a man.

“Have you been to his house?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Aren’t you curious? I’d be there like a rocket. Or at least I’d be cyber stalking him on Google earth.”

“You’re a stalker. Noted.” He nodded, then indicated right. “What the hell, let’s go look at it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I can picture him crying on the stoop as he realizes the errors of his ways.” He turned onto the road. It was lined mostly with unassuming bungalows set on small pieces of land.

“Maybe he’ll throw himself on the path as he realizes exactly what an asshole he’s been,” Chelsea suggested.

He grinned. “It’s number fourteen-seventy-one. Where are we at?”

“Thirteen-sixty-three. Keep driving.”

She kind of wanted to see this man. Maybe go up to him and slap some kind of sense into him. How hard was it to be a good dad anyway? You bring a child into the world, you make sure they’re safe and happy and loved.

Why did so many people mess that up?

She knew she'd been lucky with her own parents. Yes, she'd lost her dad too young, but he'd loved them so much she still felt it all around her. And their mom was always making sure they were okay.

She had Ember, too, and that was a lot. Chris had nobody. He was a single child, his mom was gone, and all he had left was this sperm donor who was only interested in his money and success.

"There it is," she said, pointing at a tiny house clad in peeling white clapboard. It wasn't much bigger than a trailer with a small, unkempt front yard, an old truck parked on part of the grass.

Chris stopped on the other side of the road, a few yards down from the house. His beautiful Mercedes stuck out like a sore thumb.

"What was your house like growing up?" she asked him.

"Bigger than that, but only marginally. Mom would never have let the grass get overgrown. Or the paint on the outside peel. She was a proud woman."

There was so much tenderness in his voice. "I wish I'd met her."

He glanced at her. "I wish you had, too."

The front door opened and a man walked out, wearing a pair of dark jeans and a gray t-shirt. Chelsea swallowed as she realized how much Chris looked like him. His dark hair was longer and graying, but his facial structure was the same. And she'd bet a dime a dozen if they got close enough she'd see those same piercing blue eyes.

"That's him," she whispered.

"Yeah. I look like him, right?"

She tried to find the right words. "Only on the outside."

His lip quirked. "Thank fuck."

The man walked to his mailbox and opened it, then grimaced when he saw it was empty.

"Probably waiting on a check," Chris murmured. Then the man looked up, his brows lifting as he saw the Mercedes.

"He can't see us through the windows, can he?" Chelsea said.

"Nope." Chris grabbed the door handle and pulled. "But fuck it, I'm gonna say something to him."

He stepped out of the car and for a moment Chelsea froze. It had been her idea to come here, and she had a bad feeling that Chris was going to get hurt. She scrambled out of the car onto the blacktop, reaching Chris as he crossed the road toward his father. His gait was determined. Edgy, almost.

She slipped her hand into his. As they reached the other side of the road, his father looked up, a grin pulling at his lips.

“Look who’s here,” he boomed, as though Chris had been away for a few weeks, rather than estranged by him. “Come to see his old man.” He turned his head. “Moira, come out here. Come see my boy.”

“I’m not staying,” Chris said, his voice even.

“You should come in. Have a beer.” Up close, she could see the wrinkles on his dad’s face, but the resemblance was still uncanny. A glimpse of how Chris would look when he was older.

He’d hate that.

“Who’s this lovely lady?” the older man asked, glancing at Chelsea.

“A friend.” Chris’s voice was terse.

“You have an eye for the pretty ones. Just like your old man.” He winked and she felt Chris stiffen beside her. “Moira,” he yelled again. “Bring some beers out.”

Chris shook his head. “I’m fine. I’m driving.”

A woman who looked to be in her late thirties walked out, wearing a pair of skintight jeans and a yellow crop top, her hair pulled messily back from her face. “What’s all the yelling about?”

“It’s my boy,” his dad said, beaming. “Look at him. Handsome as his dad.”

“Did your check come?” Moira asked, not bothering to look at Chris.

“No, ah...” His dad ran his hand through his hair. Even his gestures were like Chris’. Chelsea squeezed his hand and he squeezed it back.

He glanced down at her, and she smiled softly. His eyes widened as though he was asking a question.

What the hell am I doing here?

“Actually, son, you could do me a favor while you’re here. Lend your old man a few bucks...”

Her heart dropped.

“Don’t just ask for a few,” Moira hissed. “We need a lot. You have debts coming out of your eyeballs.”

The older man waved her away. “Just a little loan,” he said smoothly.

“He owes you more than that.” Moira crossed her arms over her thin torso. “Didn’t you say you spent all that money on him growing up? And you got him his first job. You made him famous, Baby. And now he’s rich and you aren’t. What kind of son is he anyway?”

The entitlement made Chelsea's heckles rise. "You didn't get him his first job." The words came out of her mouth before she could think them through. But she was so annoyed by this man. By the way he'd treated his son.

By the lies he was obviously telling everybody when he'd walked out on his family and never looked back.

"He wouldn't be an actor if it wasn't for me." The man frowned at her questioning him. "Wouldn't be anything."

"You walked out on us. I didn't see you for years." Chris' voice was gritty.

"And look at you. It did you good. Made you hungry. You think you'd be where you are now if I'd stayed and played happy family? Hell no. I gave you a back story. I made you who you are." His eyes narrowed. "I made you and you turned your back on me."

A wave of fury crashed through her. "You fucknugget." She covered her mouth because she never swore. Chris' brows knitted but amusement played in his eyes. "I'm sorry," she said, "But he is." She scowled at his dad. "People like you don't deserve to have kids. You think donating sperm makes you a dad? You think leaving a kid makes them better? What the hell kind of person are you?"

"Who did you say she was again?" his dad asked Chris, ignoring her completely.

"I didn't."

His dad folded his arms across his chest. "So she's a nobody. You gotta look out for chicks like her, they're only after one thing. Be careful, she'll get pregnant like your mom did and then you'll be in a mess."

"Don't even mention my mom," Chris warned. "Or I'll beat the living shit out of you."

"You do that and he'll sue you." Moira's eyes narrowed. "Want me to call the cops, Baby? Or one of those news sites? They pay, don't they?"

Chris' hand tightened into a fist. This was such a bad idea. She shouldn't have said anything about his dad's house. Shouldn't have brought him here. And she definitely shouldn't have opened her mouth.

"Fuck you," Chris said quietly. "Fuck you for hurting mom. Fuck you for hurting me."

She grabbed his hand, unfolding his fingers. "Let's go," she said. "Let's go home."

He let out a long breath. "Yeah."

She stepped back, and he came with her. He had that lost look on his face again, like he wasn't sure what the hell to do next.

"Yeah, you go," his dad said. "Leave your old man to his fucking debts just like you always do."

"You thankless assholes. Get off our property," Moira screeched.

Chris slid his hand around her shoulder protectively. "Let's go."

She nodded, and they walked back to his car, aware of his dad and the woman watching their every move. He pulled open the passenger door and helped her inside, then walked casually around to get into his own seat.

It was only when the door was shut that she could see the tension take over him. His jaw was tight, his teeth gritted.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling guilty for the whole scene. "I should have kept my mouth shut."

"No." He turned to her, his eyes blazing. "You did nothing wrong." He cupped her cheek, leaning across the console to press his lips to her brow. "You were awesome."

"Was I?"

She felt him smile against her skin. "Yeah. I just have one question."

"What?"

He kissed her cheek, then the corner of her lips. "What the hell is a fucknugget?"

He felt dirty. That was the only way to describe it. His skin itched after seeing his dad as if it was covered in all the grime of his past. And as he pulled into the driveway of his L.A. house he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to scrub it all off.

"So this is it," he said. "Home."

"It's beautiful."

"I bought it years ago," he told her, climbing out of the car. "And I'm going to warn you now, it's not the best inside. Anya gutted most of it when she left and I haven't had time to make it look better since."

When he'd bought this house he'd just been cast in his third leading role. It had felt like a special kind of magic to be able to buy such luxury with cash – no mortgage or loan needed. But he'd also felt like shit, because he'd always wanted to buy his mom a home. One where she didn't have to hide from the landlord, or decide between heat and food. But he'd been too late.

And she'd died alone.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said to her. "Then I'll show you around. There's a guest shower if you want one, too."

"I'll take one later." Her voice was soft, as though she knew latent anger was simmering beneath his surface. She'd been quiet on their drive away from his dad's, staring out of the window, her brow furrowed as though her brain was overthinking things.

Another thing they had in common. They both thought too much.

He ran the shower hot, enough for it to steam up the bathroom and redden his skin. But the heat didn't wash away the memories of his dad. The broken

thoughts of his mom.

The hatred he sometimes had for his face because it looked so much like *him*.

He'd been in there for more than ten minutes, leaning back against the tiled wall, trying to get his head straight. It was the one day he had with Chelsea. Their one chance to spend some time together alone, and he was letting memories of his dad spoil it.

Fuck that.

Pushing himself from the wall he hit the off button, the water trickling to nothing as he grabbed a towel. Wrapping it around his waist, he took another to rub his hair dry, then ran it over his chest and arms to take away the dampness. Opening the door, he strode into his bedroom, heading for the closet to grab some fresh clothes.

And then he saw her.

Sitting cross legged in the middle of his bed, her jeans tight on her legs, her hair tumbling over her shoulders. Her face was clean of makeup yet somehow it only made her more beautiful. His chest tightened at the sight of her.

"Hi."

Her mouth curled. "Hi. I got bored waiting."

"You should have come in."

Her smile lifted. "I thought about it, but I figured you needed some space." She took a deep breath. "I'm so sorry for even suggesting you see your dad's place. I shouldn't have. He's an asshole who doesn't deserve your attention."

"I don't give a shit about my dad." And he didn't. In the blink of an eye all his attention was on her. She looked like some kind of angel sitting there on his bed.

His own personal redemption.

"I... ah..." She rubbed her temple. "You know it's really difficult trying to think of what to say when you're standing in front of me half naked."

He smiled. "What would you have me do? Get fully naked?"

She bit her lip, still smiling. "I can think of worse ways to spend a Saturday."

"Come here." It wasn't demanding. It was a request, a plea. A deep, demanding need that he was aching to fill.

She scrambled to her knees, putting her hands in front of her, and crawled

across the mattress toward him, her back arched, her ass high, her hair falling over her face. And when she reached him at the end of the bed, she lifted herself up, kneeling, her shining face staring up at him.

“Let me make you feel better.” She curled her fingers around her top and tugged it over her head, revealing a black lace bra and her smooth, perfect stomach. He reached out, tracing along her shoulder, her clavicle, then over the swell of her breasts.

“You’re so beautiful it hurts.”

“Show me,” she whispered.

He ran his hands over her hair, brushing it away from her face, then yanked a handful, her eyes widening with surprise as her head tipped back. There was something else there, too. A desire that made her lips part and her breath come harshly.

His girl liked it a little rough. Noted. But right now he needed the soft.

He dropped to his knees and pressed his face to her neck, inhaling her in like an addict getting his last hit. She was warm and yielding.

But she was strong and brave, too. Iron clad with velvet. The best kind of woman he knew.

He kissed the dip at the bottom of her throat, trailing his lips down the line between her breasts. Her breath was harsh, but she didn’t say a word. Just let him get lost in her the way he needed.

Her stomach was taut and smooth as he continued his line of kisses, reaching the waistband of her jeans. He flicked the button loose and slid down the zipper, revealing the pit of her stomach and the elastic of her black lace panties. He kissed her there, too, but it wasn’t enough.

He needed more. He needed her.

Pressing his hands against her hips, he pulled her to the edge of the bed, then lifted her to the floor. Without taking a breath he knelt before her, tugging the jeans over her hips then sliding them down her thighs. When they reached her ankles she kicked them off, and she was standing in front of him in her beautiful lingerie.

His heart stuttered. Leaning forward, he pressed his face to her, inhaling again, feeling her warmth, her dampness, smelling the very essence of her.

She was like a drug. He could get high just like this.

“Sit down on the bed.” His voice was thick. Without taking her eyes from his, she sat, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she waited for his next move. There was trust there. And something more.

Something that made his chest feel tight.

Sliding his hands around her back, he unhooked her bra, pulling it from her arms to expose her breasts. They were fucking perfect. Her high tipped pink nipples were hard, the swell of them was heavy but not too much. He curled his hands around them, feeling the weight in his palms.

Then he ran his thumb over the peaks and she gasped again. Though she didn't say a word her eyes were so expressive, he was having a conversation with those alone.

"Let me make you feel good," he rasped, needing to watch this woman hit the peak.

"But you..."

He shook his head. "It's a win-win. It'll make me feel good, too."

Gently, he pushed her back until she hit the bed, her legs still curled over the end of the mattress. For the first time he placed his mouth on hers, hovering over her as he deepened the kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her bare chest pressed against his, and a shot of pleasure went straight to his dick.

He was hard as steel beneath the towel, the aching pulse of his need sending his thoughts into a spiral. But he needed to do this first. Needed to have his fill of her. Needed to make her know she was his.

Pulling his lips from hers, he bent his head to capture her nipple, sucking and licking at it until her breathing was a little more than ragged staccato. Then he did the same to the other, tasting her, worshipping her, teasing her, loving the sensation of her body against his tongue.

Her hips started to move in a subconscious rhythm, as he kissed his way down her stomach to her panties, taking a moment to breathe her in all over again. Then he pulled them off, throwing them on the floor as he buried his face in her, finding the swollen part of her that he only had to lick to make her gasp.

He pushed her legs up until her knees were bent, her thighs open, giving him better access to dip his face against her. She was so responsive, so warm and inviting, the taste of her so intoxicating he wasn't sure he could ever stop.

Her hand fluttered down to his head, her fingers sliding against his short hair, and she whispered his name. Fuck, he liked the sound of that. Loved that he was making her his.

That she was getting lost in him the way he was already lost in her.

He slid his fingers inside her, the movement making her gasp, and she tightened around him as he feasted on her.

“Chris...”

“I’ve got you, Beautiful.” He pressed his other hand on her stomach, pushing her down into the mattress as he brought her to the peak.

And when she reached it, she was glorious. Her cries filled the air as he sucked her smoothly, his fingers coaxing the pleasure from her as she bucked beneath his hand.

“Oh my God... oh my *God*...” Her fingers opened and closed against his hair. “I can’t... you’re...ah!” He felt her tense again, her body fluttering around his fingers, as he took more pleasure from her, loving the way she fell so easily.

When she finally caught her breath she reached for him, pulling him on top of her until they were kissing like crazy.

“You can’t keep doing that,” she whispered against his lips. “You’re spoiling me for any other guy.”

“Good.” He kissed her again, then squeezed his eyes shut as she reached for him, her hands circling his cock beneath the towel. She shucked it off him, until he was as naked as she was, running her thumb across his tip and sighing when she felt the wetness there.

Christ he was hard. And so fucking close. Just tasting her was enough to turn him so far on he wasn’t sure he’d ever get back. She was everything. She was his.

And he’d been hers since the moment their eyes had first met in L.A. He just hadn’t realized it.

He did now.

He’d spent most of his life being the big man. The one who took care of others. He’d forgotten what it was like to have a woman go in fighting for you. She was fucking owning him.

And he loved it.

She was moving her hand now, the slow steady rhythm of her palm making his body tense and coil with need. Her eyes didn’t leave his, and there was no way he was pulling his own gaze away. Each slide of her hand took him higher. He was like a teenager with her, all cock and need. She lifted her head to kiss him and he twitched in her hand.

“I need you inside of me,” she told him roughly.

Christ, he needed that too. Needed to slide into her welcoming body.

Needed to feel her heat and her tightness and her response to him.

“I’ll get a condom.”

“I’m on birth control.”

He lifted a brow.

Her smile was gentle. “It’s okay. I’ve been taking it for years. I’m covered. But if you want a condom too, go for it.”

He didn’t do this. But fuck, he wanted to do it with her.

“I’m clean,” he told her. “I was tested last month.” And damn he wanted to be inside of her without any barriers. There were too many already. His job, her job, all the shit that surrounded them.

“Then stop talking and start doing.” A smile flitted across her mouth.

He kissed her, smiling back because this woman was every goddamned thing he’d ever dreamed of. Her legs wrapped around him and he was *there*, touching her, sliding against her, tensing his body as he pushed inside.

His eyes rolled back because damn, this felt good. She fit him like a glove, pulling him in, squeezing him tight, making stars appear behind his eyelids as he slowly pulled out. Then he pushed again, this time harder, and she gasped beneath him. He kissed the surprise from her mouth and she pushed her hands against his ass.

“More.”

He didn’t need telling twice. He could never get enough of this woman. He could fuck her to infinity and still feel like he was missing out. Pleasure buzzed in every cell, tightening his groin and making him swell inside of her. He tipped his hips and dragged himself against her, making her breath catch in her throat.

Their gazes caught again. Her lips parted, her breath short, her eyes never leaving his. And this was it. Heaven. Redemption. Every damn feeling he’d ever been searching for. She reached for his face, cupping his jaw.

“Chris... I...”

“I know, Sweetheart. I know.” He kissed her, feeling her tighten around him, her kisses frantic as he rocked them both to oblivion. Then she tensed, her body arching from the bed, fluttering around him as he swallowed her cries.

The sensation of her orgasm was enough to drive him over the edge. A low, aching groan escaped his lips as he stilled then spilled inside her, his own orgasm so strong it took over his body, his mind, his soul.

And when he looked at her again she smiled. And he knew he was

fucked. Not just literally but metaphorically.

He'd taken a bite of the apple and now he wanted more.

"I should have used a condom."

She blinked, because those weren't exactly the words she was expecting to hear. They were laying beneath his covers, his hand playing with her hair, his lips pressed against her temple as she spooned against him.

"It's okay. I told you I'm on birth control. I have it covered."

"It doesn't always work." He rolled onto his back and flung his hand over his head. She turned onto her side, propping her chin on her hand as she looked at him.

"It's ninety-nine percent effective against pregnancy," she said, her voice soft. She felt weird. A little dirty maybe, for suggesting they forgo the condom.

Did he hate her now?

"Yeah, the other one percent? That's what worries me."

She ran her tongue along her bottom lip. "I'm not going to get pregnant. I'll make sure of it. I'll go get Plan B if you want."

He winced and looked at her. And that's when a horrible thought occurred to her.

"Is that what happened with Anya? Did she get pregnant on birth control?"

"That's what she said." He let out a sigh. "But Neil thinks she was never on it."

"You think she deliberately got pregnant?" Chelsea asked, her chest tight. The thought made her feel sick.

"I don't know. She says not. My gut says otherwise." He turned to look at her. "It doesn't matter. I wouldn't ever change having Luna."

Yeah, it did matter. It was still a violation. "Listen to me," she said, grabbing his hand. "I would never, ever, do that to you. I would never use a baby as a pawn. I'd never try to trap you just because I'm a woman and have the power over my own fertility."

He stared at her for a moment, saying nothing.

"When your dad said your mom got pregnant by accident, did he..."

“He’s an asshole. They were married, they wanted a baby. It’s only after I arrived that he changed his mind. Didn’t like the hard work of being a parent.” He ran his hand over his face. “It ruined all his plans. He wanted to be a famous actor so bad that it ate at him. So then he left. The same way I left Luna. I guess I didn’t fall far from the tree.”

“You’re nothing like him,” she said, because she hated the vulnerability in his voice. “He walked away, you stayed and took care of Luna. You still do. You’re so protective of her. Look at how you waited until you could trust me.”

“I don’t ever want her to feel like she’s not wanted. And I know she must feel that about Anya, somewhere deep inside. But I’ll do whatever it takes to make her happy. Safe. Whatever...” He blew out a mouthful of air. “I want her to have people she can trust.”

“You trusted your mom.”

“Yeah. But she’s the only person I’ve loved who ever really earned that trust.” He lifted a brow. “I guess that’s why I went a bit crazy after Anya left. I had nobody who really knew me.”

“You have Neil.”

He laughed. “I pay Neil.”

He paid her, too. And wasn’t that a bitch? Because she wanted to tell him that he could trust her. That she would always be on his side. That she’d fight off the demons for him if he’d only let her.

“Let me make this clear,” she told him, her expression serious. “I will never, ever use you like that. I won’t lie to you, I won’t con you, I won’t do anything but be your friend.”

The corner of his lip quirked.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” she asked him.

“No, but keep saying it and I might.” He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her on top of him, kissing her long and deep until they were both breathless.

“I’m hungry,” he murmured against her mouth. “Let’s go get something to eat. And then maybe we’ll have a swim.”

“And after?”

“We’re coming back to bed.”

She smiled and stroked his face. “That sounds good to me.”

“What time is Daddy coming home?” Luna asked. She was doing everything she could to delay bedtime. She’d complained she was thirsty so Chelsea had gotten her a bottle of water to take to bed. Then she’d chosen the thickest book she had for Chelsea to read to her, and then she’d made Chelsea go back to an earlier page because she wanted to know *exactly* what the tiger had said.

And now she was tidying up her room, which she usually hated doing, all in an effort to keep Chelsea from leaving her alone.

“He won’t be home until early in the morning,” Chelsea said patiently, because she knew how much Luna hated change. “You’ll see him for breakfast the same way you did today.”

They’d been back from L.A. for a few days, and Chris was now on his week of night shoots. Luna was still so amped up from her trip to Disneyland. She kept coming up with facts that the tour guide must have told them as he escorted them around the park.

They’d ordered every official photograph that had been taken. Cardboard folders with images of Luna with Mickey and Minnie and all the gang were propped up on the hall table. Chelsea planned to get them all framed before filming was over and they all went their separate ways.

Not that she wanted to think about that now. Nothing was going to ruin her good vibe. It had been with her since Saturday and she liked it too much to give it up.

It was like something had shifted between them. On the way home from L.A. while Luna slept softly in the back of the car, Chris’ eyes would catch

Chelsea's and he'd smile softly as though he was remembering the previous day and night.

They'd barely gotten out of bed. Only long enough to swim and eat before he'd chased her back up the stairs and she'd giggled loudly when he caught her.

The sex had been amazing, but so were the softer moments when she lay in his arms as he played with her hair and they talked about their lives. He'd told her that he'd never wanted to be an actor – he'd always wanted to be on the other side of the camera – but he'd received an offer too good to refuse.

And she'd told him about her love for her job. How much she cared about the children she looked after – and he'd stared at her intently before kissing her and telling her that he was so lucky to have found her.

"It's really hot in here," Luna complained. "Can I sleep in Daddy's room? He keeps the window open for the ocean breeze."

"He closes it when he's asleep." Chelsea was trying not to show her amusement. "And it's cool in here. Only sixty-eight degrees." She pulled Luna's sheet from the mattress and pointed at the bed. "Come on, I'll tuck you in."

Luna wrinkled her nose. "Can I have one more story?" she asked, scrambling onto the mattress. "I didn't like the last one. It'll give me nightmares." She widened her eyes. "Or night terrors."

Chelsea had been waiting for this one. She had to look away so Luna couldn't see her smile. "The doctor said the best thing for night terrors is a cool room and lots of sleep."

"Just one more?" Luna asked, batting her eyelids, and for one moment Chelsea could see her dad in her. He had that same look when their eyes clashed. She let out a mouthful of air. Luna was such a good kid, she didn't usually push for things.

"Just one. Then you have to promise to sleep."

"Okay." Luna nodded. "I'm gonna try really hard."

"Good girl." Wiping the hair from Luna's brow, she winked. "Since you made a promise, how about I go get one of my special books."

"The ones you read when you were little?" Luna blinked. Chelsea had only read from one of them once for Luna. She preferred the more contemporary books. But Luna's restlessness came from a need for connection. And since she couldn't have it with her daddy right now, Chelsea wanted to give her that security.

“Okay,” she said, when she’d gotten the book and was back in Luna’s bedroom. “This one was my very favorite when I was little. My mom bought it from the bookshop here in Angel Sands.”

“The one with the cushions?” Luna asked.

“That’s it.” They’d spent an hour in there last week, stocking up Luna’s story collection.

“That must be really old if it was there when you were little.” Luna’s eyes widened.

This time Chelsea didn’t hide her laugh. “I’m not *that* old.”

Luna’s expression was serious. “I mean, you’re not as old as daddy. But you’re an adult, right?”

“Right.” Chelsea opened the book, an old, worn copy of *Guess How Much I Love You*. “Would you like to read it? I think you can read all these words.”

“No.” Luna shook her head and laid back on her pillow. “I’m tired. You read.”

“Okay.” A smile flitted across Chelsea’s lips, because Luna was finally giving in. She cleared her throat and ran her finger along the page, turning it to show Luna the illustrations of Little and Big Nutbrown Hare, the book reminding her so much of her dad. He’d loved doing the voices and making her giggle.

So she did the same for Luna.

“It’s Angel Day on Friday. You’re coming, right?” Ember asked, as Chelsea sat in the living room looking out at the darkness. The sound of the ocean crashing against the sand wafted in through the open doors, a breeze dancing with the voile curtains as she spoke on the phone.

“It’s this week? I thought it was earlier in the year?” Chelsea frowned, confused.

“It usually is,” Ember admitted. “It’s a long story, but it involves Frank Megassey, a stray dog, and a broken femur. Long story short, we had to move the day to now.”

“Do I want to know the story?” Chelsea asked. Frank Megassey was the unofficial mayor of Angel Sands, and a bona fide busy body. If he’d broken a

bone and couldn't go to Angel Day it stood to reason he would have postponed it.

"Not really." Ember shook her head. "Just take it from me it's this week."

"Is Lucas on duty this year?" Chelsea smiled because her brother-in-law always claimed he hated Angel Day, but she knew he had a soft spot for it. Not least because it was at the fair that he first kissed Ember.

"Of course." Ember nodded. "But I managed to get out of it because it's the first year Arthur can go on some of the rides. Do you think you can come with us? I figure there's safety in numbers."

"I'm working on Friday. Chris is still doing night shoots."

"Oh." Ember sighed. "I guess I'll ask Mom. She's just such a worrier, she'll panic every time I take him on something."

"I could bring Luna with me, maybe..." Chelsea mused. "I'd need to ask Chris." Luna would love Angel Day. It was the town's annual foundation day, full of music and fairground rides. As a kid, Chelsea had loved it, too.

"You think he'll go for it?"

"Maybe. Leave it to me, and I'll let you know." Chelsea picked at a piece of lint on her denim shorts. "Changing the subject, how are things with you and Lucas going?"

"Better." Ember lowered her voice. "We talked things through. We've stopped putting so much pressure on ourselves. Just see how things go."

"That sounds like a good plan," Chelsea nodded. "I knew you two would work things out."

"The sex is better already," Ember said, laughing when Chelsea told her to stop.

"Seriously. I don't want to think about you or Lucas like that."

"Well at least one of us is getting some," Ember told her. "Mom's worried that you'll never find a guy."

The laughter died in Chelsea's throat because she felt so bad hiding that part of her life from her sister. But she didn't want to worry her. And as far as she knew, when her job was over, she and Chris would be too.

He hadn't made any promises and she didn't ask for any. She was taking things one day at a time.

And Ember would never understand that. She'd had two long term relationships, one with her ex-fiancé who'd left her, and then with Lucas.

"What is it with Mom wanting me to settle down?" Chelsea asked, shaking her head. "Doesn't she know that women nowadays don't need a

man to be complete?”

“She just wants you to be happy,” Ember said softly. “I do, too.”

“I am happy.”

Ember let out a breath. “Okay. But at least let me introduce you to some of the guys from the firehouse that we talked about. They’ll all be on duty at Angel Day.”

“I’ll have Luna with me,” Chelsea said, relieved to have an excuse. “I can’t be talking to guys when I’m on duty.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to throw them down on the ground and ravish them,” Ember said, amused. “Just say hi. Be friendly. Then later you can tell me which ones you think are hot. There are some seriously good looking single guys at the station.”

“We’ll see,” Chelsea said lightly, though she planned to do nothing of the sort. A noise came from the second floor. “Listen, I have to go. I think I can hear Luna moving around upstairs.”

“Okay sure.” Ember paused for a moment. “Honey, you know I’m kind of kidding, right? You don’t have to date a firefighter. You can just make some new friends.”

“I know. And it’s sweet.” Chelsea pushed herself up. “But you don’t have to worry about me, I can manage my own love life.”

“Of course you can. But everybody needs a little help sometimes.”

She felt lips on hers. Soft and warm and oh so teasing. For a moment she wasn’t sure if it was a dream or if it was real. She blinked, her eyes slowly coming into focus, and she saw Chris kneeling next to her bed, a smile playing on his lips.

“What time is it?” she murmured, turning onto her side. It was gloomy in her room, the only light coming from the hallway.

“Four a.m. I just wanted to see you.”

Her lip curled. “You’ll see me at breakfast.”

“Okay, I wanted to kiss you.”

This time her smile was big. “Then why aren’t you?”

He looked tired. She reached for him, and he let her pull his face toward hers, their mouths connecting as she let out a soft sigh. He moved onto the

bed, his body hovering over hers, the sheet a barrier between them. When he broke the kiss he was still smiling.

He tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. “Everything okay here?” he asked.

“Mmhm.” She was still half asleep. “How was the shoot?”

“Long. And you weren’t there.” There was warmth in his eyes. “No night terrors?”

“No. She slept like a log. When she finally got to sleep, that is. She came downstairs about five times with flimsy excuses.”

“Sounds like my girl.” He lifted a brow. “How about you. Were you lonely without me?”

“Always.” He smelled of the night air. Cool and crisp. She lifted the corner of her sheets. “Lay down for a minute.”

He glanced at her closed door and back at her. “Only for a minute,” he agreed, shucking his jeans off and climbing beneath the sheets with her.

She reached for him, hooking her leg around his hip. “This is nice,” she murmured.

“Yes, it is.” He reached behind him and checked the monitor connected to Luna’s bedroom. No sound was coming out of it. “I need to be in my own bed by five though. In case she wakes up.”

Chelsea wriggled over to give him more room on the mattress, and he rolled onto his back, pulling her into his crook. Sliding her hand beneath his t-shirt, she sighed when she felt the warmth of his chest. A little pulse of pleasure rushed through her as she traced the ridges of his stomach muscles.

He squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re making this really hard.”

“That’s the plan,” she teased, then pulled her hand away. “Sorry, I was just kidding. It’s good to feel your skin though.”

He put her hand back where it was, pressing it down with his own. “I like it. Don’t stop.”

He kissed her again, his mouth achingly soft. She wondered if this was what it would be like to wake up with him every morning. To be able to roam her hands freely over his body, to feel his warm lips urging her awake.

To make slow, sleepy love as the sun rose in the sky.

She could feel the outline of his excitement pressing against her pajama shorts. “I wish...”

“I know.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “But we can’t. If Luna comes in now at least I can jump out of bed and be fully clothed.”

She grinned. “True. Though I’d love to hear you explain to her why you’re in here in the first place.”

“You had a nightmare.” He traced her bottom lip with his finger. “I heard you scream. I’m just comforting you.”

“Is that right?”

He looked down at her mouth then back at her eyes. She could see a desire there, the same need that she felt rushing through her veins. “Yeah. You were inconsolable. The only way I could stop your screaming was to put my rock hard...”

“Shut up.” She laughed, batting his hand away and snuggling closer to him. She loved the way his chest felt against her cheek. “You are hard, though.”

“I know. I’m working on it.” He groaned. “We need to plan another night away.”

“Let’s check with your nanny and see when she’s free.”

It was his turn to laugh. “She’s a pain in the ass. Keeps bossing me around.”

“Sounds to me that you like it.”

He traced his finger down her bare arm. “Maybe I do.”

“Tell me about your shoot,” she said, closing her eyes. “Did you get everything done that you needed to?”

“Four scenes in the can. We need another couple of nights and we’re done.”

“That’s good news. I’ve never seen a night shoot. What’s it like?”

“The same as the day except everybody’s a little more tired.”

“I meant technically.” She shook her head. “Do you have to light it differently? What about catering? It must take a lot of organizing.”

“It does. We have a catering truck and craft table for food, and the crew takes breaks the same way we do in the day. But there’s something about a night shoot that concentrates the mind. It’s more serious somehow. Most scenes require less takes than during the day. Maybe we all just want to get home.” He kissed her brow. “I know I do.”

“Hey, I have another question for you,” she said, changing the subject. “My sister called. She asked if Luna and I would join them at the Angel Day Fair.”

“What’s Angel Day?”

“The town’s foundation day. Rumor has it that a ship’s captain was

sailing along the coastline and saw an angel pointing right at where the town is now. He thought it was a sign so he dropped anchor and started building houses and businesses here.”

“An angel...”

“I know. The other rumor is that he’d drunk half a barrel of rum a few hours before.”

“This place is so damn quaint.” Chris shook his head. “What kind of fair is it?”

“The usual. Sideshows and rides. Food stalls and choirs and dancers.”

“Is it safe?” he asked. She could hear the frown in his voice.

“As houses,” she promised. “The only accidents are from the little kids going on the ghost train.”

“Ugh. No ghost train then.”

“Wasn’t planning on it. But seriously, my brother-in-law will be there. And most of the firefighters from his station. Everybody knows everybody, nothing will happen, I promise.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “Let me think about it and I’ll let you know later today.”

“Sure.” That was fair enough. It was so early she could barely stay awake. And he’d been working all night, he must be exhausted. “Hey, can you grab my phone?” she asked him.

“Why?”

“Because I want to set my alarm in case we both fall asleep. That way Luna won’t have to hear about your rock hard...” she trailed off.

He smirked and passed her the phone. “Set the alarm, woman.”

“What’s going on?” Chelsea asked, opening the door to find Neil standing on the top step of the house. “You don’t usually knock before letting yourself in.”

“It’s late. I didn’t want you to think I’m a burglar.” Neil kissed her cheek and she stepped to the side, letting him into the hallway. It was just before ten at night. Chris had left for the set an hour earlier.

“If you’re looking for the boss he’s already on the set,” she told Neil, closing the door behind him. Neil wandered into the living room and sat down on the sofa.

“I know. I just came from there.” He picked up a movie magazine and leafed through it.

“So what can I do for you?”

He lifted a brow. “It’s more what I can do for you. Or what I am doing for you. You can go, I got this.”

“Got what?” Her brows knitted. He was talking in riddles.

“Chris sent me to babysit Luna. He wants you on set. Said you’d never seen a night shoot before and were asking him all these questions about it, so he’s gonna take you on a tour.”

“He wants me to go to the set?” she asked. “Now?”

Neil lifted his eyes from the magazine. “Yeah. Didn’t I make that clear?” He blinked. “Wait, you haven’t been drinking, have you? If you have I can arrange for a driver to pick you up.”

“Of course I haven’t been drinking. I’m on duty.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m perfectly capable of driving to the set.”

His eyes flicked down. "You'll probably want to change. Though they're very nice pajamas."

"Thanks." She'd put her pajamas on right after Luna had gone to bed, figuring she might as well get an early night. Especially if Chris decided to visit her before the sun came up again. "I'll go get changed now."

"Sure." He opened the magazine again. "Hey, is there something going on between you two?"

She froze on the spot. "What?" She blinked, trying to keep her expression neutral. "I have no idea what you mean."

"He's been in a good mood since you two came back from L.A.," Neil pointed out. "Especially since he's shooting nights, and he hates them. So I figured it might be due to you."

"Maybe he's just glad his daughter had a good time at Disneyland," Chelsea said lightly.

"Yeah, probably," Neil murmured. And for a moment she thought they'd gotten away with it, right up until he opened his mouth again. "Doesn't explain why I got a call on Saturday from the security service telling me there were two naked people in Chris' swimming pool, though." He lifted a brow.

"They called you?" What the hell? The thought of him seeing them together mortified her.

He smirked at her discomfort. "Yeah. They run checks on the place while Chris is away. I had to tell them that he was staying there for two nights. And that you were, too. I guess you forgot your swimsuit or something." His lips twitched.

He was trying not to laugh, the bastard. "It wasn't me. Must have been somebody else," she said lightly.

"Sure." He nodded. "Must have been." Three lines appeared on his brow, and he cleared his throat. "If it had been you, though, I'd probably want you to know something."

"What?"

Neil finally put the magazine down and looked at her. There was no malice in his expression. Only a careful consideration that touched her.

"Be careful. He's a good guy but he's... sensitive. He hasn't had a good run with women. Don't do anything to hurt him..."

"I wouldn't."

"And don't let him do anything to hurt you either. You're both friends of mine. I want you to be happy."

“I am happy.” Her voice was soft. “Really happy.”

“Okay then.” He nodded, as though the conversation was over.

She swallowed hard. “You’re not going to tell anybody, are you?”

“Of course I’m not,” he scoffed. “Now go get changed and drive over to the set before he starts blowing my phone up asking where you are. Let me babysit in peace.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, she caught his eye. “Thank you. I’ll try not to be too long.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. I’m going to raid your fridge and mess up your kitchen.”

She swallowed a laugh. “Be my guest.”

All five of them in the video village had their eyes glued to the monitor as the director called action. The grassy area where they were sitting was covered with a green striped awning, protecting the monitors that were perched on thick stands, each showing a different camera angle. During the daytime this part of the set was usually full of cast and crew – those not needed for a scene at least – watching the action as it was shot, talking about whether a scene worked or not.

It was where the script supervisor spent all her time, too, making notes on the paper in front of her and suggesting line changes through the radio. But tonight they were running on a skeleton crew, and the usually bustling area was silent as the scene played out on the monitors in front of them.

It was one of the few night scenes that Chris wasn’t needed to act in. It was being shot on the cliff after his character had taken his boat out into the choppy ocean, and they searched helplessly for signs of life.

“Mr. Vaughn?” a production runner murmured.

He turned to look at the local college kid they’d recruited. A film student, he’d jumped at the chance to earn some extra money.

“Yep?”

“You have a visitor. Said her name’s Miss Kennedy. I wasn’t sure if you were expecting her.”

A rush of warmth went through him. She’d come. He wasn’t certain she would. “Thank you. Can you show her here?”

“Of course.” The runner left and two minutes later reappeared, Chelsea walking a few feet behind him.

Christ, she looked beautiful. She was wearing a pair of old faded jeans that had frayed at the knees, and a light cream sweater that skimmed her perfect curves. Her hair was down, tumbling over her shoulders, the moonlight catching it as she walked toward him.

“Hi.” She smiled uncertainly, looking at everybody gathered there.

“Hey.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “Everybody, this is Chelsea. Chelsea, this is everybody.”

They all greeted her, but then the director called action again and the video village went quiet. He leaned over to whisper in her ear. “Why don’t I show you around?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be here watching?” she whispered back.

“I don’t think they’ll miss me.” He glanced over at a woman making notes on the side. “Let’s go grab a coffee.”

He slid his fingers between hers and they walked out of the screening area, but her gait still felt uncertain.

“You okay?” he asked once they were out of earshot.

“Is it a good idea me coming here?” She looked back at all the people and then to him.

“I get visitors all the time. And does it matter?”

She looked up at him, her eyes shining. “I don’t know. I just don’t want people to talk.”

And that was understandable after what she’d been through. Any personal connection to him opened her up to criticism. More than that, it opened her up to a backlash from the media, his fans, and every other goddamn busy body who thought they had an opinion.

“I’m not ashamed of you,” he told her.

She shivered and he realized she was cold. The night temperature had dipped to the low sixties, and even though she was wearing a sweater it wasn’t thick enough to keep the cool air out.

“Let’s go to my trailer,” he suggested. “It’s warmer in there.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

The trailers were on the east side of the set. Three rows of long white caravans, each affixed with the star’s name on the front. He led her past the dark, unoccupied ones to his own at the end of the first row, and opened the door, ushering her inside.

He flicked the lights on to illuminate the interior, watching her look around and take everything in. The walls were covered with cream wallpaper, and two lines of spotlights shone down from the ceiling. At night the air conditioner was switched to seventy degrees, making it warmer than the night air.

“That’s the kitchen,” he said, pointing at the black lacquered cupboard and counter to his left. “And that door leads to the bathroom.”

“Does it have a shower?”

“Yep. The smallest in history.”

A smile pulled at her lips. “That’s a shame.”

He felt himself thicken. “I didn’t bring you here for that.”

She tipped her head to the side. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Because I miss you. And I want to see you. Alone.”

She ran her tongue along her lip. “Well here I am.”

“That’s the couch,” he murmured, pointing to a three seater leather sofa that took up the width of the cabin at the other end. “And the entertainment area.”

“That sounds kinky.”

He laughed. “It’s got a TV and laptop. It’s where I reply to emails.”

“Ah. Disappointing, but necessary.”

She walked over to the couch, dropping down on it and flinging her arms out. “Do you sleep here?”

“Not usually. During the day I might sit there and go over my lines. If I go to sleep I like it to be in my own bed.”

“But you’ve had to sleep in trailers in the past, right?”

“Sometimes.” He nodded. “If it’s a long shoot. That’s the thing that most people don’t realize about making movies. Ninety percent of the time it involves sitting there waiting. Whether it’s for your scene, or for the crew to change the set, or for some kind of technical glitch to be fixed. The actual acting is such a small part of it.”

“But you have more to do now that you’re a producer, right?”

“Yeah, but half of that work was done before shooting even began.”

He sat down beside her on the couch and ran his finger along her jaw. Her lips parted and she stared up at him, her eyes warm and waiting.

“I didn’t bring you in here to kiss you,” he told her.

“Tonight you’re ruining all my fantasies,” she said, smiling. He lowered his head to hers.

“I know. Let me do something about that.”

He could never get tired of kissing her. Never bore of her soft sighs, or the way his hand fit perfectly around the curve of her waist. She set him on fire from the inside out. It was as though she was made for him.

And he for her.

“I meant what I said when I told you I’m not ashamed of us,” he said, when they pulled apart.

“I know. But there are complications.”

“Luna,” he murmured.

“Yes, she’s the most important. And there’s also my job. After everything that’s happened, if the agency discovers I’ve been sleeping with you.” Chelsea swallowed. “I can’t lose my job.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “But there has to be a way. If you lose your job, I can help you.”

“No.” She frowned. “I don’t want you to help me. I support myself. End of story.”

She was stubborn when she wanted to be, but he liked that. He’d been brought up by a strong woman who didn’t take handouts.

And now he was falling for one.

“I think Neil knows about us,” she said, pulling her lip between her teeth.

He lifted a brow. “Of course he does. But he’s discreet.”

“And the people here tonight?”

“We’re a tight bunch. We don’t talk about things that have nothing to do with us.” He pulled her into his arms, loving the way her chest felt against his. “We’ll work this out, I promise.”

“You don’t have to make any promises.” Her voice was soft.

“Yes I do. I want to make them. You deserve promises. I don’t want you to think this is some goddamned sordid hookup that I’m going to walk away from as soon as the shoot is over. Yes, it’s complicated and yes we’ll need to have a lot of conversations to work this out. But I want that, Chels. I want you.” He took her hand, lifting it to his jaw. “But what do you want?”

She blinked, at his nickname for her. It made her feel warm. “I want you.”

“Then let’s work this out.”

“Okay.” She nodded, exhaling softly. “Okay.”

Just four letters but it felt like he’d won the damn lottery. And maybe he had. Because Chelsea Kennedy was the full goddamned package. Beautiful

inside and out.

Strong, compassionate, caring.

His.

When their lips connected, her arms wrapping around his neck, he knew he'd come home.

And he never wanted to leave again.

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“Did you manage to get one?” Ember asked, as Chelsea and Luna walked toward her at the fair. It was late afternoon and the area between the stalls and the rides was already bustling with people. Luna held tightly to Chelsea’s hand, her head turning left and right in quick succession as she took everything in.

She wasn’t paying attention to the adults, thank goodness.

“Yep. You want it now?” Chelsea’s voice was low.

Ember’s eyes widened. “Not here. We need to go into the bathroom where people can’t see.”

“There’s one small complication,” Chelsea pointed out. “Little eyes and ears can see and hear everything.”

Ember grimaced. “Just walk with me to the bathroom and slip it to me before I go in. I’ll take it from there.”

“What’s she talking about?” Luna whispered, bringing her attention back to Chelsea and her sister.

“Um...” Chelsea looked at Ember for help. “She... uh... wants me to date a firefighter. And I made a list of which ones I liked.”

Ember bit down a laugh. “A very long list. And I made her put it in a box.”

Chelsea glared at her. She was making this worse. And making her lie to Luna. She didn’t like that, not at all.

This was the last time she did Ember a favor. Her sister had called earlier begging Chelsea to buy her a pregnancy test. Lucas had her car to set up the Angel Day Fair, and she didn’t want to go into a pharmacy in town, because

the news would spread like wildfire.

Being the dutiful sister she was, Chelsea had gone and collected one in the next town over and thankfully they'd been discrete when she'd purchased it. She'd managed to distract Luna by offering to buy her candy.

Strike two against her sister. She was making her bribe kids.

"Can you wait here?" Ember asked, as Chelsea slid the package into her hands right outside the bathroom. "I don't want to do this alone."

"Sure." Chelsea nodded. She didn't want Ember to be alone anyway. If it was good news, she'd want somebody to share it with. And if it was bad...

Chelsea wanted to be there for that, too.

"Does your sister have a tummy ache?" Luna asked.

"No, sweetie. Why do you say that?"

"She needed the bathroom badly."

Chelsea's lips twitched. "She did. But she's fine. Once she's out let's go hit the rides. Do you have a favorite one?"

"Do they have flying Dumbos?" Luna's eyes lit up.

"I don't think they have Dumbos, but they'll have something like it. And there are bumper cars and a Ferris wheel and a rollercoaster, too."

"I don't like rollercoasters. They're scary."

"Okay then. No rollercoasters." She leaned down and whispered in Luna's ear. "I don't like them much either."

Her phone started to buzz in her purse. She lifted it out, fully expecting to see Ember's name on the screen. Instead, it was Chris'.

She couldn't help but smile. "Hello?"

"Hey you. How's it going?" His voice was low and smooth.

"We just got to the fair, but all good so far. We're just deciding which ride to go on first. How's things on set?" He'd finished his night shoots and was back on days again. They were getting closer to completion.

And the end of her contract.

She needed to make some plans with the agency but that was for another day.

"Good. We should be finished by eight tonight. What time are you planning on leaving the fair?"

"About the same time," she said.

"I'll come and pick you two up on my way home."

"I have my car here."

"Okay, then I'll get dropped off and you can drive me home."

Luna was looking up at her with interest. “Is it because you want to hear from Luna about the fair?”

“That and other things.” He sounded amused. “Is she listening?”

“Yep.”

“Put her on.”

“Okay.” She handed her phone to Luna. “It’s Daddy. He wants to say hi.”

Luna’s eyes sparkled. “Hi Daddy.” She paused, as though he was saying something to her. “Yes, I’m being good. I want to go on the Ferris wheel first. Then Chelsea said I can try some funnel cake. It’s like a cone made of cake.” Another pause and she giggled. “Did you know that Chelsea’s going to date a firefighter?”

Oh shit. She knew that lie would come back to bite her, but she didn’t realize how fast.

“I don’t know his name,” Luna continued. “She has a long list of her favorites. She gave them to Ember.”

This was only getting worse.

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll see you later. Love you.”

She handed the phone back to Chelsea. “He wants to talk to you again.”

She swallowed hard then placed it to her ear. “Hi.”

“How many firefighters are we talking about here?” She couldn’t tell if he was amused or annoyed.

“There’s a simple explanation for this I promise.”

“Then I look forward to hearing it later. In the meantime, try and restrain yourself. You’re mine.”

His words sent a shot of heat through her. “Ditto.” The bathroom door opened and Ember walked out. “Call me when you get here,” she told him.

“I will. I’ll try to avoid the busy areas.”

When they said goodbye and hung the phone up, she looked at Ember with questioning eyes.

Ember nodded her head so slightly she could hardly tell.

“Really?” Chelsea asked, trying to keep the excitement from her voice.

“Yep.” Ember’s face was shining. She held out the white stick for Chelsea to look at. She took it, saw the two lines and grinned widely.

“After all those arguments you were positive all along,” she whispered.

“I know. And now I have to figure out how to tell Lucas.” Ember said.

“What are you whispering about?” Luna asked, suddenly interested in their conversation.

Chelsea widened her eyes at Ember and quickly slid the test into her bag. “Nothing sweetie,” she told Luna. “Ember just wanted to tell me something.”

“Then can we go on the Ferris wheel now?” Luna asked, pulling at Chelsea’s hand. “Daddy says I might be able to see him from the top.”

“Of course.” Chelsea winked at her. “You coming?” she asked Ember.

“Yep. Let’s go get Arthur. I think he wants to go on it, too.”

The Angel Day Fair was in full swing by the time Neil dropped Chris off at the side gate just before eight that evening. Music boomed from the rides, mixing in the air with excited conversation and the smell of hotdogs and popcorn. He walked up to the locked gate and frowned.

“Hello?”

Chelsea had sent him a message to say this would be the best way for him to come in. If he lined up at the main entrance he was sure to get spotted, even if he was wearing a baseball cap pulled low on his brow and a pair of nondescript jeans and a t-shirt.

“Chris?” A tall, broad man opened the gate and walked toward him, wearing a blue t-shirt with ASFD emblazoned on the front. “I’m Lucas. Ember’s husband.”

He held his hand out and Chris shook it.

“Chris Vaughn. Chelsea’s boss.” He already knew Lucas was a good guy. If he was a friend of Liv and Adrian’s, he was a friend of Chris’.

Lucas nodded. “If you come inside I’ll get somebody to show you where Chelsea and Luna are.”

“Are they having fun?”

Lucas smiled. “Yep. She’s a good kid.”

“Thank you.” Chris nodded, then realized he hadn’t bought a ticket. “I need to pay for my entrance.”

“It’s okay, Chelsea covered it.”

Another thing he’d have to talk to her about, along with the firefighters. Which reminded him...

“Are there a lot of you from the fire department here?” He glanced over Lucas’ shoulder, his eyes scanning the crowds for the familiar blue t-shirts and logos. There were a group of four guys laughing together. Short hair,

muscled arms, great tans.

He wondered which one of those was intended for Chelsea. Not that they could have her. She was his and he wouldn't let her go without a fight.

"Daddy!" He looked up to see Luna running toward him. She was clutching a huge white teddy bear and the stuffed arms bobbed up and down as she ran. "I won a prize. Chelsea says I'm the best shot." Luna was breathless as she reached him. "Look! I'm going to call him Angel Bear."

"Isn't Angel a girl's name?" he asked her. Over her shoulder – and the bear's fluffy ears – he could see Chelsea walking toward him. Their eyes met and a slow smile pulled at his lips.

"No, silly. Angels are boys and girls. The angel who came to see Mary was a boy, wasn't he?" She glanced at Chelsea for confirmation.

"That's right. His name was Gabriel."

"See?" Luna was sassy as heck. It had to be all that sugar. "You can be an angel, no matter who you are."

He glanced at Chelsea again, and she was biting down a smile. A possessive wave washed over him. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss those full, curling lips. Wanted to make sure everybody knew she was his.

He wanted life to be easy. To be able to put his arms around her and take her on some rides, to nestle Luna between them and kiss over the top of her golden head.

Chelsea deserved that. She deserved everything. The goddamned fairy tale.

"Angel Bear it is," he agreed solemnly. "Would you like me to carry him?"

"Yes please." Luna grinned at him. "He'd also like some more funnel cake."

"Definitely not," Chelsea told her. "You already had two plates." She widened her eyes at Chris. "She'll be sick if she eats anymore."

"At least it isn't watermelon," he murmured, nestling Angel Bear under his arm. "Are you two ready to go?"

"Do we have to?" Luna pouted.

Chelsea ruffled her hair. "I think we do, sweet pea. You were half asleep on that last ride. And don't you want to find Angel Bear a home in your bedroom?"

"I guess..."

“And Daddy’s been working all day. I bet he’s tired, too.”

Chris shot her a look that told her he wasn’t tired at all. He felt more awake than ever. All he wanted to do was get Luna to bed safe and sound and then curl up with Chelsea on the deck.

He’d missed their nights together while he was shooting. Missed having her curled against him as they stared up at the stars. Missed mixing drinks for her just to see her try to figure out what was in it.

He just missed her, dammit.

“I’m exhausted,” he lied. “How about we go home and I read you a story and we’ll all hit the hay?”

Luna pulled her lips between her teeth as though considering the offer. “Okay,” she finally agreed. “But I want you to read Chelsea’s special book.”

He lifted a brow and looked at Chelsea.

“It’s one I used to read when I was a girl. And of course Daddy can read it to you.”

Okay then. The special book it was. Whatever it took to keep his girls happy. Luna leaned tiredly against him as Chelsea said her goodbyes. He was gratified to see the only firefighter she hugged was her brother-in-law.

Chelsea’s sister, Ember introduced herself and kissed his cheek. “Thank you for letting me steal her for the day,” she said.

“I’m the one who should be thanking you for letting me steal her.”

Ember smiled. “I’m glad she’s getting along so well with you guys. She’s had such a hard time this year. Hopefully things will get better for her now.”

“Yeah, they will,” he said gruffly. He was going to make sure that happened.

Chelsea hugged her sister goodbye, then took Luna’s other hand, and the three of them walked back through the security gate to the parking lot.

“You want to drive?” she asked him when they reached her Acura. “It’s your car, after all.” She threw the keys to him and he caught them easily.

“Nah. Down with the patriarchy.” He threw them back to her. She looked at him quizzically.

“What?” he asked as she unlocked the car and helped Luna inside.

“I don’t know.” She lifted her head out. “I guess I’m just a little surprised. The last thing I expected was to hear you quote Taylor Swift.”

“I didn’t quote her. I misquoted.”

“But you knew you misquoted her. And you misquoted her because little ears are listening. I’m just trying to get used to the fact that you’re a Swiftie.”

“Isn’t everybody?”

“I hear Jake Gyllenhaal isn’t a fan.”

He grinned and opened the driver’s door for her, standing back as she sat inside. “I don’t have a problem with you driving me if you don’t.” Walking around the car, he got into the passenger seat.

“You had a problem with my driving a few weeks ago,” she pointed out, firing up the engine. Her Bluetooth was connected to the stereo and some kids’ song blasted out. Luna let out a whoop and started singing.

“I had a problem with everything a few weeks ago,” he said, his voice low. “But somebody made me forget all that.”

“Okay then. Put your seatbelt on, I’m taking you for a ride.” She grinned and shifted into reverse, pulling out of the parking space and turning the car around. Luna giggled and held tightly onto Angel Bear.

“Can we put that song on?” she called from her car seat.

“What song?” Chris asked her, amused. It was like his girls were ganging up against him.

It felt good. He rolled down the window and a cool breeze blew in as Chelsea took a right out of the parking lot.

“The bones song,” Luna said, her tone reminding him of a teenager. “Keep up, Daddy.”

Chelsea pressed her lips together. “She means “Bad to the Bone”.” She inclined her head at the entertainment touchscreen. “It’s in the shortcuts.”

He lifted a brow and touched the screen, selecting the shortcuts. Sure enough, George Thorogood came up and he hit play.

A moment later the familiar guitar riff came on.

“Turn it up,” Luna instructed.

“Volume twenty,” Chelsea told him. “We like it loud.”

His lips twitched as he turned it up, the subwoofer making the car vibrate with the bass. Then George started singing and Luna joined in, her high voice really trying to convince him she was bad to the bone.

“Is this what you do when I’m not home?” he asked Chelsea.

She grinned. “Pretty much.”

“Maybe I should be home more.”

She glanced at him before looking back at the road. “Maybe you should.”

Luna had stopped singing. He looked over his shoulder to see she’d fallen asleep mid-sentence. Her head lolled to the side, her arms still clutching the bear in front of her. He could see cake crumbs clinging to her lips.

She looked like any little kid in the world. Damn, he loved that.

“She’s asleep,” he told Chelsea, lowering the volume as he slid his hand onto her denim clad thigh. He could feel the warmth radiating from her soft skin.

A half smile pulled at Chelsea’s mouth. “She’s had a long day.”

“So did I. Without you. Especially with all that talk of firefighters.”

“Were you jealous?” She pulled onto the cliff road. The smell of salty ocean breezed in through his window.

“Jealous?” he repeated, his eyes narrowing as he thought her question through. “Maybe a little. But it got me thinking...”

“What about?”

Luna let out a long sigh. He checked that she was still asleep.

“I’ll tell you later,” he promised, his fingers still curled around Chelsea’s thigh. They reached the security gates and Chelsea went to lift her hand to press the button, but frowned when she saw they were open.

“Did you come here before you met us at the fair?” she asked Chris.

“No.” He shook his head.

“I could have sworn I closed them,” she muttered.

As she swung the car into the driveway, he could see exactly why they were open. And it made his heart drop to the pit of his stomach.

In front of the house there were two cars. His own – driven by Neil, who had obviously gotten out and had stalked across to confront the occupant of the second car.

His ex-wife. Anya Sky.

She sensed the change in him immediately. Chris snatched his hand from her thigh and sat up straight, the smile slipping from his lips as he stared out of the windshield.

Pressing her foot to the brake, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. She knew what his ex-wife looked like. She might have googled her once.

Or a few times.

Whatever. He was jealous about imaginary firefighters. She was allowed to be curious about his ex-wife.

“Is that—” she began.

“Mommy!” Luna leaned forward in her seat, as bright as a damn daisy. “Look, it’s my mom. Chelsea, can you see her?” She started jabbing at her seat belt to get it unlatched.

“Wait until we’ve stopped,” Chelsea murmured. She pulled up behind his car, her heart slamming against her chest. Chris wouldn’t look at her, he was too busy staring at his ex-wife.

As soon as she killed the engine, Luna was releasing her seatbelt and pulling her door open. A moment later, she was running across the driveway toward Anya.

“Darling,” Anya said, taking a step back when Luna tried to launch herself at her mom. “Try not to get me dirty, this is Chanel.”

There was a tic in Chris’ jaw as he climbed out of the car. Chelsea followed suit, closing and locking the car behind her. She walked toward Neil who was looking at them with wide eyes.

“She was waiting outside the gates when I brought your car back,” he

said, looking guilty. “Followed me in.”

“What do you want, Anya?” Chris asked. There was no friendliness in his voice, not even for Luna’s sake. Chelsea shifted her feet.

“To talk to you.”

He glanced at Chelsea. “Can you take Luna inside?”

“But I want to talk to Mommy,” Luna protested. “We went to the fair. Chelsea helped me win a bear. Do you want to see him? He’s called Angel because Angels can be boys, too.”

Anya’s cool gaze swept to where Chelsea was standing next to Neil. She looked her up and down, then looked back at Chris, ignoring Luna’s chatter.

“You didn’t tell me she was pretty.”

“I told you she’s a nanny. That’s all you needed to know.”

“Luna, go inside with the nanny,” Anya urged. “I’ll come see you once I’ve spoken to your daddy.”

Well that put her in her place. Chelsea looked at Neil and he winked at her. “Come on, let’s take her in,” he said. She nodded and reached for Luna’s hand. The little girl frowned, her eyes darting from her parents to Chelsea as though wondering where she actually belonged.

“Come on, sweetie,” Chelsea urged. “Neil, could you get Luna’s bear out of the car? We’ll take him inside and make him comfortable.”

As though that settled the matter, Luna finally put her hand in Chelsea’s. “See you in a bit, Mommy?” she asked, her voice full of hope.

“Of course.” Anya was dismissive as she turned back to Chris. “Shall we find somewhere to talk inside?”

There was a tic in his jaw. “We can talk here.”

Chelsea and Luna followed Neil and Angel Bear up the steps. He punched in the code and the door opened. He stepped inside, bear first, then let Luna and Chelsea walk past him before he closed the door.

“Okay?” he murmured to Chelsea.

She nodded, because what else was there to say?

“Come on, honey, let’s get your pajamas on and find Angel Bear a home. Then you can come down for a drink and wait for your mommy,” Chelsea said. If she concentrated on Luna she could ignore what was happening outside.

“If she comes inside,” Neil said under his breath.

Chelsea blinked. She wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye to her daughter, would she? “Go on up,” she said to Luna. “I’ll bring Angel Bear up

to you in two minutes.”

“I’m counting,” Luna warned her.

“Sure.” Chelsea winked.

As soon as she heard the pad of Luna’s footsteps on the stairs, Chelsea turned to Neil. “She wouldn’t leave without seeing Luna, would she? She promised.”

Neil shrugged. “There’s only two reasons Anya comes to see Chris. Either she’s broke and she wants money, or she’s bored and she wants to play with him.”

“Play with him?” she asked, confused.

“Rile him up. Make him angry. She’s an emotional vampire, she feeds off that shit.”

Chelsea let out a mouthful of air. “You think that’s why she’s here now?”

“I have no idea. All I can tell you is that she’s a pain in all our asses, and whatever reason she’s here, Chris is gonna be in the worst mood for the next couple of days.”

“No change there then,” Chelsea joked. Neil smiled at her.

“You’re good for him. You’ve made him happier than I’ve seen him in a long while. I hope you know that. But he’s a complicated man. He doesn’t deal with his ex-wife well. If I was a shrink I’d say it’s because she reminds him of his old man.”

“His dad? Why?” She couldn’t see any resemblance between them. Chris’ father was a wash out. A man who had ambitions he’d never achieved. A man who felt that his son owed him something for just existing.

Oh.

“You mean they’re takers?” she asked.

“Something like that. He’s got a big heart, and he’s had it fucked over too many times. You’re the first person in a long time I’ve seen him open up to.”

Her chest tightened. “He’s the first person I’ve wanted to open up to in a long time, too.”

“Then you’re made for each other.” Neil smiled at her. “Go on up and see Luna before she starts bouncing off the walls. And try not to interact with Anya. She’s a bitch and she’ll enjoy making you cry.”

“Noted.”

He winked. “You’re a good person, you know that?”

“Yeah, well you’re not so bad yourself.”

“I want him to sleep with me,” Luna said, putting her hands on her hips.

“He can’t. He takes up too much room.” Chelsea put Angel Bear on the chair next to Luna’s dresser. “Look, he fits perfectly here, and you can see him from your bed, so if you’re lonely at night you know he’s watching over you.”

Luna opened her mouth to protest, then obviously thought better of it. Instead, she pulled her pajamas from under her pillow and started to walk to her bathroom to get ready for bed.

“Isn’t my mommy beautiful?” she asked Chelsea. “Like a princess?”

“Yes she is.” Chelsea kept her voice light. “Just like you.”

“She and my daddy used to be married. They were in love. She still has the pictures on her wall.”

“Does she?” Chelsea followed her into the bathroom and squeezed toothpaste on Luna’s toothbrush. “That’s nice.”

“That’s okay though, isn’t it?” Luna asked, as though she could sense Chelsea’s unease. “Everybody loves princesses.”

Taking a deep breath, Chelsea helped Luna take off her top, throwing it into the laundry basket as Luna put her pajama top on. “All I know is that everybody loves you. And that’s how it should be. Your mommy and daddy love you. Neil loves you. I love you.” She kissed the top of Luna’s head. “You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Can I borrow your special book? I want to read it to Angel Bear.”

“Of course. You brush your teeth and I’ll go grab it.”

Chelsea went to her bedroom and closed the door behind her, leaning on it for a moment to take a deep breath. What a shitshow. They’d been having such a good day, and now this.

Neil was right, she needed to keep away from Anya. Chelsea wore her heart on her goddamned sleeve and it wouldn’t take much for Chris’ ex to see what was happening between them. Neil had figured it out, after all, and women often had a better intuition.

As she walked to her shelves to pull out the book, she could hear the low murmur of conversation coming from the driveway. The cleaner must have left the window ajar when she’d aired out the house today.

“It’s just a few thousand. Or would you rather I starve?” Anya asked.

“You don’t eat anyway,” Chris replied, his voice low. “And the last time I

checked, fifty thousand was more than a few. What the hell do you need it for?"

"Luna needs clothes for school."

"And?"

Anya let out a sigh. "I want to get a little work done. It's an investment. I'm getting old, Chris. I'm not getting the roles I used to. There's a wonderful place in Mexico. Everybody's raving about it. If I stop getting acting roles I'll have to ask for an increase in child support, so this way I'll be saving you money."

"You don't need to get any fucking work done. You look fine."

Anya's voice turned smoother. "You always were a sweet talker."

"I didn't..."

"The only problem is, the things you loved about me, the screen hates. I know you liked my thighs soft. My ass big."

"Anya..."

There were hushed voices for a moment. Chelsea imagined Anya's hand pressed against his chest. Her face tipped to his.

"No." His voice was harsh. "Get your hands off me."

A wave of jealousy washed through Chelsea. Now she knew how he felt about the firefighters. Except this was so much worse. He'd been married to this woman. Known her intimately.

And Luna was right. She was achingly beautiful.

"What? You used to love me touching you. Used to beg me to do it."

"I'm not interested now," he growled. "Go inside and see Luna, then you can go."

There was another pause, as though Anya was thinking things through.

"Do you have somebody else?"

"That's none of your business."

"Who is she? One of your costars? Please tell me it's not Diana. She's such a bitch."

"There's nobody. There doesn't have to be someone else for me to reject you. You're not that alluring."

Anya let out a huff. "Your nanny's very pretty."

Chelsea felt a shiver snake down her spine.

"Is she? I hadn't noticed," Chris replied, his voice neutral.

"Of course she is. If you like that dumpy girl next door vibe. Neil seemed interested in her. Did you ever find out what happened between her and the

Silbers?”

“No.” His reply was short.

“You shouldn’t have stopped me from inquiring. Maybe she tried to seduce Dan Silber. Isn’t that what nannies do? Seduce their bosses and become the new wives?” Anya laughed. “Maybe she’ll try that with you.”

“She’d have her work cut out. As you said, she’s the dumpy girl next door. Not interested.”

Oh that hurt. She knew he was only saying it to put Anya off their scent – or at least she hoped he was – but it was the worst kind of reminder that eavesdroppers only heard bad things about themselves. She straightened her spine, carrying the book back to Luna’s room where the little girl was waiting impatiently.

“Come on,” she said, as Chelsea handed her the book. “We need to read to Angel Bear so he can get some sleep. Then it’s drink and snack time, right?”

“Well I suppose I should go. I have a party to get to.” Anya was still pouting from not getting her own way. *Too bad.*

“Come in and say goodbye to Luna. You promised you would.” And there was no way he was letting his kid bear the brunt of her parents’ mistakes. “She wants you to read her a story.”

“I really don’t have time. If you’d just agreed to the money...”

“I’ll pay for Luna’s school clothes. Send me the bill.” Officially, they were ordered to split the cost fifty-fifty, but he ended up paying for them every year. He didn’t give a shit about that.

“Okay. Five minutes. There are important people at this party. I need to be seen.”

Wasn’t that a goddamned understatement? He nodded at the house and she walked up the steps, Chris following behind. She waited while he tapped in the code then walked inside, frowning as she looked around the hall.

“This is nice.”

“The kitchen is over there.” He nodded at the door to the left. “Luna, mommy wants to read you a story.”

The kitchen door opened and an excited Luna burst out. Through the

doorway he could see Chelsea and Neil talking at the kitchen island.

From the direction of Anya's stare, she could see the same thing. "Go on up," she murmured to Luna. "I just want to talk to the nanny for a moment."

She couldn't even remember Chelsea's name. It annoyed him to hell.

"I thought you had a party to go to."

"I'll drive a little faster." Anya walked into the kitchen and offered Chelsea her hand. "Anya Sky."

"Chelsea Kennedy."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Anya smiled warmly at her. It was like watching her go into character. "Thank you for taking such good care of my baby."

Chelsea blinked. "It's a pleasure. She's a great little girl."

"Thank you. I think so, too. Now tell me, are you single?"

"Um..."

"Because I have to tell you, I thought there was something going on between you and Neil. Chris tells me there isn't."

Chelsea visibly swallowed. She was a fucking terrible actress. "No, nothing's going on. We're just friends."

Neil lifted a brow and said nothing.

"How wonderful. You should come out with me and my friends some time. I know all the hottest guys in Hollywood. You'll be back in L.A. soon, right?"

"I think so."

"Wonderful. I'll get your contact details from Chris." She tipped her head to the side, looking carefully at Chelsea's face. "If you ever wanted to do something about your nose, I know a great surgeon in Mexico. Not too expensive, either. I'll give you his details."

Chelsea's mouth opened but no words came out. Neil winced and muttered something.

"Okay then, Luna," Anya called out to her daughter, who'd barely made it out of the kitchen. She looked back at her mom, confused. "Let's read a book, sweetie. And then mommy has to go meet some friends."

"Do you have to leave? Can't you stay tonight?" Luna asked, her voice wobbling.

"I'm afraid not, darling." She smiled and looked at Chelsea again. "What can I say, she loves me, but I have to earn a living." Then she swept out of the kitchen, leaving the scent of Chanel behind her.

“As delightful as ever,” Neil murmured. “And ignore her, your nose is perfect.”

Chelsea laughed. “Thank you.” But there wasn’t much joy in her voice. Anya seemed to have sucked all of that from the house.

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Neil and Chris were talking in the kitchen long after Anya left. Chelsea decided to give them space. After Luna fell asleep, she sat in her room and caught up on her emails, then let herself get pulled down the rabbit hole of social media, reading about her friends' summer vacations and new jobs, engagement announcements and even one pregnancy.

And then somehow she found herself on Anya Sky's Instagram page. The woman really was stunning. Her cheekbones were like razors, her lips full and plump, and she knew exactly how to strike a pose to get the best out of her body.

And yeah, her nose was perfect, too. Frowning, Chelsea climbed off the bed and looked at her own. It wasn't bad. Sure, there was a bump on it, and if you looked at her in profile it was a little too prominent.

But nothing so bad that a surgeon's knife was needed.

She didn't know why the woman was getting to her. Neil had told her she was poison. And Chris wasn't married to her anymore. Yes, they had Luna, but that was all they had in common now.

Yet she couldn't get his words out of her head.

She's a dumpy girl next door. Not interested.

Ugh, she needed to get out of this funk.

Somebody wrapped their knuckles on her door. She jumped off the bed, hope rushing through her. When she saw Neil on the other side, she tried to hide her disappointment.

"I'm heading out," he told her. "Just wanted to check that you're okay."

"I'm fine. Thank you for everything." She leaned forward to hug him. He

patted her back and laughed.

“You sound like you’re saying goodbye forever. I’ll see you in the morning. I’m coming over for breakfast.”

“Sounds like a pancake kind of day.” This time her smile was genuine.

“Excellent. Hang in there, okay? An Anya visit usually only causes misery for a couple of days. Then everything is right with the world again.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she said.

“Do that. Sleep tight.” He winked.

A minute later she heard the front door slam shut. She tiptoed across to Luna’s room and smiled when she saw the little girl fast asleep. At some point she’d gotten Angel Bear and brought him into bed with her, so Luna was pushed right against the wall so there was space.

Chelsea would put him back on his chair later, before she went to bed.

But right now there was somebody else she wanted to see. When she got downstairs she first checked in the kitchen, then in the living room and on the deck. But he wasn’t in any of those places. She frowned then saw the door to his barely-used office was closed. Rapping lightly on it with her knuckles, she felt her stomach tighten when he replied with a terse “come in.”

“Hey.” She pushed the door open. He was sitting at the desk in the center of the room, his back to her. The office overlooked the gardens to the side of the house, but right now all she could see was darkness. The room itself was gloomy, too, lit only by the lamp on his desk and the glow of his computer screen.

He looked over at her and it made her heart ache. His face was taciturn, but there was warmth in his eyes. Walking over to him, she stood in front of his chair, leaning against his desk. It only took one move for him to pull her forward, until she was straddling his legs, sitting on his thighs.

“Hey.” His voice was low. He brushed the hair from her face. “I’m sorry about Anya.”

“She didn’t bother me.” She didn’t want to tell him what really bothered her. He had enough emotions to deal with already. The memory of his words felt like a rash she wanted to scratch but she knew they’d only hurt more if she did.

“She’s always going to be around, you know?” He grimaced. “Annoying me. Annoying you. I’d understand if you want to walk away.”

Her brow creased. “Why would you say that? I don’t want to walk away.”

“Because I’m complicated. My whole life is. Which makes your life

complicated if you're with me."

She reached out to cup his jaw, feeling the roughness of his beard growth on her palm. "Yeah, well maybe I like complicated."

He swallowed hard. Shifting forward on his lap, she felt the hard ridge of him brush her pelvis. The sensation made her breath catch in her throat.

"Luna's asleep," she whispered, leaning forward to kiss him. He breathed softly against her lips. She could feel him getting even harder beneath her as he parted her lips with his, his tongue teasing her mouth, his hand cupping her neck so he could angle her head.

"I just..." He shook his head.

She put her finger against his lips. "No words," she whispered. She wanted to soothe him. To make him understand that he wasn't alone.

To remind him who he belonged to.

She rocked her hips against him and he groaned. His hands slid down her back, pulling her closer, encouraging her movements until pleasure pooled inside of her.

And his kisses. Dear God, they were soft and hard and everything in between. He kissed her like she was an angel then plundered her lips like she was going to hell.

His hand slid between her thighs, his fingers moving her panties to one side, feeling her wetness. His thumb found her achiest part, circling her as she circled her hips, his fingers pushing inside her until her breath was escaping in tiny gasps.

"I need you," she whispered against his lips. His eyes flickered to hers. She could see the heat in them. The need as great as hers. The ache inside of him that demanded to be sated.

She unfastened his pants, sliding her hand inside. He was hard as a rock and it made her want him even more. He groaned again as she circled him with her palm, pulling him out of his shorts until he was jutting in the air.

Her thumb brushed over the plush head of him.

"Condom?" she whispered.

"Fuck it." He shook his head. "Upstairs."

"It's okay," she told him. "I'll just touch you." She held him tighter, moved her hand harder, and a tortured moan escaped his mouth.

He moved her hand away, then pulled her forward, until she could feel him slide against her. His eyes met hers, and she could see the question in them.

Is it okay?

“Yes,” she hissed. “Yes.”

He lifted her hips and steadied himself against her, then she felt him pushing inside, opening her up to his girth.

She rolled her hips and he kissed her again, his eyes closed as he slid his hands beneath her ass, angling her until he was grinding against exactly the right place, his rhythm steady and teasing.

“Jesus Christ.” His voice was rough. “You’re all I think about. This is all I want to do. Be inside you twenty-four fucking hours a day.”

“You’re all I think about, too,” she told him, gasping because he was hitting her right where she needed. Her toes curled with the pleasure of him inside her, with the teasing of him as he pulled out and then thrust her back down. She could feel the fire start to burn deep inside, as he kissed her desperately, murmuring how beautiful she was.

And that’s how she felt. All the memories of his words disappeared, replaced by the emotion of staring right into his eyes. Her heart felt full of him, the same way her body did.

“I love you,” she told him.

“Fuck.” He started to buck, his pleasure taking him by surprise. She felt him pulse inside her, thick and warm, and he reached down to touch her until she joined him at his peak.

For a moment all she could see were stars. Pinpricks of light danced before her eyes as her body shook. He held her against him until the wave subsided and they both found their breath again. She collapsed against him, feeling as boneless as a ragdoll.

“I love you, too,” he told her. And that’s all she needed to know.

“We’re out of eggs,” Chelsea said, as she turned from the refrigerator to look at Neil.

“We’re still having pancakes, right?” Neil asked. He’d arrived ten minutes ago. Chelsea had been the only one up to answer the door. Luna had stumbled down in her pajamas when she’d heard the doorbell and she was sitting at the breakfast bar next to Neil. Chris was taking a shower, and had yelled he’d be down in a minute.

“Um, yes?” She grimaced. “But I’m going to have to go to the store.”

“How long will we have to wait?” Luna asked dolefully.

“About twenty minutes. Hang in there.” Chelsea ruffled her hair. “Have a bit of watermelon to keep you going. There’s some cut up in the refrigerator.” She grabbed her phone and her keys from her purse. “Can you watch Luna until I’m back?” she asked Neil.

“Yep. We have an hour. I only came over early because I need to talk with Chris about plans for when we go back to L.A.”

They were due to go back in less than two weeks. Chelsea had agreed to stay on until Luna went back to live with Anya once school started. They hadn’t talked about what happened after that – they hadn’t had a chance – but she’d need to talk with Lois about her next job soon.

The grocery store was empty when she arrived. She headed straight for the coolers, picking up a twelve pack of large white eggs and heading to the self-checkout. As she scanned the barcode, her phone started to ring, Ember’s name flashing on the screen. Smiling, she accepted the call.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” she asked her sister.

“Tired. But that’s because Arthur decided to stay up most of the night,” Ember told her. “Remind me next time not to let him have any sugar.”

“It was a good night though,” Chelsea said. “Hold on a second, I just need to use Apple Pay.”

“Where are you?” Ember asked.

“At the grocery store. I’m supposed to be making pancakes for everybody but we’re out of eggs.”

“Everybody?”

“Luna, Neil, and Chris.”

“Oh.” It was amazing how many syllables Ember managed to get out of that one small word.

Ignoring her sister’s curiosity, Chelsea put her phone against the payment screen and waited for the transaction to go through. When it did, she picked up the eggs with one hand and put the phone back against her ear with the other.

“All done,” she said, heading out of the store. “What are you calling about so early for anyway?”

“I can’t find the test I showed you yesterday. I wondered if you still had it.”

“Um…” Chelsea frowned. “Yeah, I might. I probably put it in my bag when Luna got interested. You want me to bring it over?”

“Nope. I ordered a cute t-shirt for Arthur that should arrive tomorrow. It says *I’m the Big Brother* on it. I thought I’d dress him in it and see if Lucas figures it out. I’ll grab the test from you before then.”

“That’s sweet.” Chelsea grinned. “Video it when you tell him. I want to see his face.”

“I’ll try to remember,” Ember said dryly. “Anyway, it was good meeting Chris. I really liked him.”

“Shut up.” Chelsea rolled her eyes, knowing exactly where this was going. Ember hadn’t called about the test at all.

“He seems to like you,” her sister teased.

Chelsea sighed and put the eggs on the hood of the car so she could open the door of the Acura. Then she grabbed them again and put them on the passenger seat. “I really have to go. There are some hungry people waiting for me,” she told Ember.

“Talking of hungry, your boss looked at you like you were his favorite meal.”

Gah, she really was enjoying this.

“I can’t hear you,” Chelsea half-shouted down the phone. “You’re cutting out.”

Ember laughed. “You can run but you can’t hide. I need all the details.”

“Goodbye, Ember.”

“Bye, gorgeous. Give your boss a big kiss from me,” Ember teased.

Chelsea rolled her eyes and hung up the phone.

“Where’s Chelsea?” Chris asked, walking into the kitchen. Luna was sitting at the breakfast bar munching on a wedge of watermelon while Neil was showing her something on his phone.

“She needed eggs,” Luna told him. “So she went to the store.”

“She forgot her purse,” he said, frowning. Chelsea’s bag was in its usual place on one of the breakfast bar stools. He lifted it up and set it on the counter, and it immediately fell over, a few of the contents falling out.

“She took her phone,” Neil said, not bothering to look up from his own phone. “Apple pay.”

“What’s this?” Luna asked, leaning forward to pick something up from the counter. “Is it a magic wand?”

Chris blinked. She was holding a pregnancy test in her hand. He leaned across the counter and tugged it from Luna’s fingers. “It’s nothing,” he grunted. “You shouldn’t look at other people’s stuff.” He turned it over in his hand, a cold rush of blood pulsing through him.

The word across the window was clear. *Pregnant.*

His fingers tightened around the test. “Luna, go to your room.”

Neil finally glanced up from his phone. “What’s going on?” He frowned when he saw what Chris was holding. “Is that?”

“Luna,” Chris said harshly. “Now.”

She blinked. “I didn’t mean to touch Chelsea’s things. I’m sorry.”

Chelsea was pregnant? She’d promised him it couldn’t happen. No wonder she didn’t care if they used a condom last night. She’d known this all along.

She’d lied to him.

Neil’s eyes were wide as he let out a long breath. “Go upstairs and get

your shoes, Luna. You and I can head out for breakfast,” he suggested. “We can go to Déjà Brew. I hear they make a mean hot chocolate.”

“But Chelsea’s making us breakfast,” Luna said, looking confused. “She just went to get eggs.”

“She just messaged me, the store’s out of eggs,” Neil lied. So now they were all doing it. “Go on,” he urged. “Let’s fill our mouths with as much sugar as we can get.”

Luna giggled. “Okay. Can I bring Angel Bear?”

“Yeah, bring him,” Chris said, wanting to get her out of here. Because he was about a minute away from exploding. “Go on, sweetheart, get ready.”

She ran out of the kitchen and Neil turned to face him.

“Chelsea’s pregnant?” he asked.

“That’s what it says.” His heart was hammering against his chest as he collapsed onto a barstool. It was like he’d been transported back in time to when Anya landed the bombshell on him. He was a fucking idiot. He knew that contraception didn’t always work.

But dammit, she’d promised him.

“I’m guessing from your expression that you didn’t know or plan this?”

“Nope.” His reply was terse.

“Shit. I guess you guys need to talk.”

“Yeah.” Chris nodded, trying to keep his emotions under control. “We do.”

“Just take it easy on her,” Neil said. Before Chris could reply, Luna walked back into the kitchen, her body half concealed by that giant goddamned bear at the same time a shout came from the hallway.

“I’m back! Who wants pancakes?” Chelsea’s footsteps pummeled the floor. A moment later she appeared behind Luna, her brows furrowed when she saw the little girl standing in the doorway holding her bear.

“You got the empty box!” Neil called out, forced jollity lightening his voice. “Thanks for that.” He jumped up and stole the carton of eggs from her hands. “You ready, Luna?”

Luna’s lips moved but she said nothing. She was too busy looking at the eggs in Neil’s hands.

“I want to make something with it,” he told her.

“Like a toy?”

“A dragon,” he said solemnly.

Her eyes widened. “Ooh. Cool. Can I help?”

“Sure.” Neil nodded. “But let’s go now. We can leave the egg carton here.”

“Is there something wrong?” Chelsea asked. She blinked as she looked from Chris to Neil. Chris twirled the test in his fingers, keeping it from her gaze.

“Um.” Neil flashed her an awkward smile. “We’ll catch you later.”

“You’re taking Luna? I thought I was in charge today.”

“I’ll bring her back later.” Neil patted Chelsea’s arm. “Can you put the egg carton on the table for me?”

“Sure.” Chelsea took it from him and watched as he left the kitchen, taking the bear from Luna and leading her down the hallway. She slowly turned back to Chris.

“What’s going on?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me.” His voice was low. Harsh. He held up the pregnancy test.

“Oh. You found it.” A smile pulled at her lips. Was she fucking kidding him? She was happy about this? “Isn’t it great? We were starting to think it wouldn’t happen.”

He tightened his grip on the test. “No, it’s not fucking great.”

The blood drained from her face. “Are you angry with me? I didn’t mean to keep the test in my bag. Oh.” Her eyes widened. “Did Luna see it?”

“Yes.” He spat the word out. “She did. And she wanted to know what the fuck it is.”

Chelsea blinked. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I should have thought about that. I hope she wasn’t too upset.”

“She doesn’t know what it is. But I guess she will soon, huh?” He let out an annoyed laugh. “She’ll find out you’re a goddamned liar just like I have.”

The smile dissolved from Chelsea’s face. She looked like he’d just slapped her. “I don’t understand.”

“You promised me you were on birth control.” He stood up and flung the test on the counter. “You fucking lied to me. I should have known.” He shook his head. “I should have known you were a liar like Anya. Should have listened to that voice in my head that told me you were trouble.”

Her mouth dropped open. He could see the glisten of tears in her eyes. But they couldn’t touch him. Crocodile tears never did. He’d seen enough of them to last a lifetime.

“Were you even on the pill?” he asked her. “Or was that a lie, too?”

She inhaled raggedly. "I didn't lie," she whispered. "I'm not a liar."

"No. You're just a user, right?" He'd trusted her. He loved her. Christ, he'd told her that just last night.

He'd believed it when she said she loved him. But it was all wrong. He tried to breathe in, but his chest wouldn't move. Everything fucking hurt. He'd been betrayed before. So many times.

But this pain... he'd never felt anything like it.

He inhaled again, but the air wouldn't reach his lungs. His breath was shallow and harsh. He started to panic.

"Chris..."

"Don't touch me." He lifted his hand to keep her away. He couldn't let her near him. Couldn't bear to feel her hands on him. "Keep your fucking hands to yourself."

"I don't understand." Tears were flowing freely down her face now. He'd been wrong, she was a *good* actress.

And then the dam broke. He slammed his hand down on the table and she winced. "You don't understand? It's fucking simple. You're trying to trap me, the same way Anya did. But you're worse, because you knew I didn't want this. You promised me it wouldn't happen."

She looked at the test, laying in the center of the counter. "You think the test is mine?"

"Of course I fucking do. Well done." He clapped his hands slowly together. "You got the prize. A lifetime of an easy ride, thanks to an easy ride."

"You need to think about what you're saying," she said, her voice low. "Because you're crossing the line."

"*I'm* crossing the line?" His laugh was harsh. "I'm not the liar here."

"Nor am I." She crossed her arms over her chest, blinking away her tears. "The test isn't mine."

"Then whose is it?"

"Ember's."

He frowned. A slow wave of horror washing over him. "Your sister's?"

"Yes. And you can go to hell, you asshole."

“I ’m sorry.” He looked confused. And almost deflated. She stared at him through the tears still in her eyes. “I thought...”

“I know what you thought.” She couldn’t even look at him. “I know what you think of me. Good enough to have sex with but not good enough to have babies with. Just a dumpy girl next door, right?” It was getting hard to breathe, her chest was so tight. His words felt like a knife to the chest.

He thought she was a liar. The same as Anya, as his dad. And it hurt so much she didn’t know what to do with it.

“You heard that?”

“I was getting a book for Luna last night. The window was open. You and Anya weren’t exactly being quiet.”

“I was lying,” he said. “I was trying to protect you from her.”

“So it’s okay for you to lie?” she asked, shaking her head. “Is that because you’re the big bad movie star and I’m the dumpy nanny looking for an easy ride?”

He winced. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, you shouldn’t. But you can’t unsay that now, can you? Can’t make me forget what you just said?” She closed her eyes for a moment then opened them again. “You know the worst thing about this?”

“What?” His voice was low.

“All I can think about is what if that test *was* mine? What if I had gotten pregnant? Vulnerable and afraid and looking for support?” She shook her head. “You treated me like shit when you should have treated me like a fucking precious carrier.” She had to look away from him. It was too painful

to catch his eye. “And by the way, contraception can fail even when you use it right. Which would make you as responsible as me, you asshole.”

He ran his hand over his short hair. “I just... I’m sorry.”

“No.” She shook her head. “That’s not good enough.”

“What did you expect me to do when I found the test?”

“I expected you to talk to me. To ask me about it. Not to accuse me of being a gold-digger and talking to me like shit.” She screwed her face up, she didn’t want to cry anymore. At least not while she was here. “You said you loved me but that was a lie too, wasn’t it? You don’t even trust me to be truthful with you.” She sucked in a ragged breath. “I have to go,” she said, to herself more than him.

“What?”

“I need to be someplace that isn’t here.” She grabbed her purse, then stuffed the test back in it. “I can’t do this.”

He reached for her arm. This time she was the one who shrank away from him. “No. Don’t touch me. Leave me alone.”

“Chelsea. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

Her eyes met his. “That’s not good enough.”

“You need to breathe,” Ember whispered in her ear. Somehow she’d managed to drive to her sister’s house, keeping it together until she’d pulled into her driveway. But as soon as Ember opened the front door the floodgates had opened, and the tears flowed down her cheeks.

“I’m breathing,” she whispered, taking another shallow breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know where else to go.”

She was somewhere between devastated and furious, and the cocktail of emotions were making her shake.

He’d accused her of being like his ex-wife and it hurt like hell. He’d made her believe him. He’d opened up, been vulnerable.

And then today he’d closed up like a clam. She barely recognized him.

“You don’t need to be sorry,” Ember whispered. “You came to the right place.” She stroked Chelsea’s hair. “Come on, let’s go get a drink.”

Arthur was sitting in the living room, watching an episode of *Bubble Guppies*. He looked up at them as they walked through to the kitchen, but

wasn't at all perturbed by Chelsea's presence. Ember grabbed two glasses and filled them with water from the refrigerator, passing one to Chelsea.

"Okay," she said softly. "Sit down. I'm sure it's not as bad as you think."

"He accused me of trying to trap him." Chelsea had already told her about Chris finding the pregnancy test and assuming the worse. "Said I was as bad as his ex-wife." She lifted the glass to her lips and swallowed a mouthful of water. "Called me a gold digger and a liar. I thought he trusted me, but he doesn't."

"Ouch." Ember winced. "What did he say when you told him it was mine?"

"He said he was sorry. But he didn't mean it."

"How do you know?" Ember asked.

"Because he was still so angry. His face was bright red. And it doesn't matter anyway, because now I know what he really thinks of me." The same thing the Silbers thought. But it hurt so much more hearing it from him.

Ember looked at her with sympathy. "Give me a minute to take this all in, okay? Last thing I knew he was your boss. Now he thinks he got you pregnant. How long has this been going on?"

"A few weeks." Chelsea rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "I'm sorry for not telling you about it. I guess I felt bad."

"Why would you feel bad about that?"

"I work for him. It's not exactly a good look, is it?"

Ember shrugged. "You're both free agents. Who am I to judge?"

"You're the only one who wouldn't judge," Chelsea muttered.

"You're adults. And I'm assuming you made sure Luna wouldn't find out."

"Of course. I'd never do anything to hurt her." Chelsea looked at her watch. "Oh God, should I go back? I'm supposed to be taking care of her."

"Her dad's there. Let him sort it out," Ember urged. "This is his fault, anyway. And you're in no state to look after a child right now. Just take a breath and we can talk."

Chelsea dropped her head into her palms. "This is such a mess. What if the agency finds out?"

"You think he'll call them?"

She lifted her head, horror washing over her. "He wouldn't. He promised..." But now she knew what he really thought about her. And that made her sob all over again. She hated this. She knew it was wrong. Knew

she shouldn't have let herself fall for him.

And yet she did. What an idiot she was.

"You should call the agency first," Ember said. "Explain your side of things."

"Lois'll never let me work for her again." This was so much worse than the Silbers. Why hadn't she realized how bad this could get?

Because you were too blinded by Chris Vaughn to be rational.

No, this was her fault, not his. She knew she was on her last chance. And she'd still thrown it away. "I'm an idiot," she whispered.

"No you're not. You fell for your boss. It happens somewhere every minute."

"I thought that was a baby being born?"

Ember blinked. "Is it? Hmm. Anyway, it's not exactly unusual. But I take it back, don't call Lois now. Let's think this through first, okay?"

"If I can't be Luna's nanny they're going to need another one."

Ember tipped her head to the side. "You don't think you can go back there?"

"I don't know." Chelsea grimaced. "I don't think I can see him. It hurts."

"Oh honey, I know." Ember grabbed her hand. "But there has to be a solution. Let's think this through. There has to be a way for you to save your career, at least."

"You're a fucking idiot," Neil said, his face unsmiling as he walked into the kitchen a few hours later. Chris hadn't left it since his argument with Chelsea. He'd been too paralyzed to do anything except think about what a fool he'd been.

"Thank you." Chris nodded. Then he frowned. "Where's Luna?"

"I dropped her off with Chelsea."

"You spoke to her?"

"Yes."

"Is she okay?"

Neil rolled his eyes. "What the fuck do you think? You accused her of getting knocked up on purpose. Of using you for your money. So no, she's very far from okay. But she's a goddamned professional so she's looking

after your kid anyway, even though I told her she didn't have to."

"Where are they?"

"At her sister's house."

Chris stood. "I should go talk to her."

"Hold on there." Neil pressed his hand to Chris' shoulder. "I made a deal with her. She looks after Chelsea at her sister's house while we finish on location. Then we get another nanny when we go back to L.A." He frowned. "Don't mess this up, we have a movie to finish."

"I don't give a shit about the movie. I want to see her."

"And she doesn't want to see you. If you want to fuck everything up, including her career and your movie, then go." Neil shook his head. "Can't you see what you've done? She loved you, man. She trusted you. You made all these promises to her then you smashed them in her face. She thought you were one of the good guys, and it turned out you were the villain after all."

Chris winced, because Neil was right. He'd fucked up so bad and had no idea what to do. But he couldn't sit back and do nothing. Couldn't think of her crying because of him.

He wanted to hold her until everything around them disappeared.

"Think about Luna," Neil urged. "She needs stability. She needs Chelsea. Don't fuck this up for her."

"I'm in love with her." He looked at Neil.

"I know." Neil nodded. "But you also hurt her. Give her some time, okay? You both need to lick some wounds. And though I hate to say it, we also have a movie to finish. We were supposed to be on set an hour ago."

He wanted to say 'fuck the movie'. Wanted to stay here and brood and think about all the things he'd said to her that he shouldn't have. Wanted to beat himself up over every word, then slink to the deck and remember how she felt in his arms.

But he couldn't. Neil was right, they had a movie to make. People's livelihoods depended on it. His own future depended on it.

If he messed this up everybody would pay the price.

"Okay." He nodded. "Let's go."

"Hallelujah!" Neil threw his hands up in the air. "For once the man is listening to me."

He hadn't called. That was all she could think of as she sat on Ember and Lucas' small deck, an untouched glass of wine in front of her.

Neil had picked Luna up from Ember's house as he'd promised at six that evening, and although she'd wanted to ask about Chris, she'd somehow managed to restrain herself. She was just lucky that Ember wasn't suffering from morning sickness yet, because her sister had done most of the childcare today, entertaining both Arthur and Luna, while Chelsea tried to keep it together.

She let out a mouthful of air. Tomorrow she would be better. She'd take Luna out somewhere and try to have some fun. Even if it was forced, it was better than sitting around here moping. And Chris was still paying her to take care of his daughter.

She didn't want him thinking that she was using him for that money, too.

"Hey." Ember walked out on the deck. "So I told him."

"You did?" Chelsea smiled. "How did he take it?"

"He's ecstatic," Ember said, flopping down onto a chair next to Chelsea's. "Then he asked me if we can still have lots of sex even though we've achieved our goal."

"I thought he hated that," Chelsea said.

Ember laughed. "Apparently he was getting used to it."

"I'm sorry you had to tell him sooner than you'd planned." Arthur's T-shirt hadn't arrived yet. But Ember needed to explain to her husband why Chelsea would be staying with them for the next couple of weeks, and get his agreement that she could look after Luna there.

“It’s okay.” Ember winked at her. “I’m terrible at keeping secrets anyway.”

“Don’t you want to spend some time with him?” Chelsea asked. She felt terrible interrupting their special day.

“He suggested we have some girl time. He’s watching football, we’ll talk later.” Ember reached for Chelsea’s hand. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay.” She glanced at her phone again. Nothing.

“You don’t look okay. Has he messaged you?”

“No, he hasn’t. The bastard.”

Ember bit down a smile. “That’s good, isn’t it? You said you didn’t want to hear from him.”

“I at least wanted him to try,” Chelsea said. “And I know that’s stupid. I don’t want to play games, I just want to know that he’s suffering, too.”

“He is. Neil told you that. And Neil also promised that he would stop Chris from contacting you. That’s what you asked him to do,” Ember gently reminded her.

“I know.” Chelsea exhaled heavily. “I just want...”

“What do you want? And that’s a serious question.” Ember glanced at her. “If you could have anything right now, what would it be?”

“I want it to be last night again,” Chelsea told her. “The three of us driving home. Chris touching my thigh as the ocean air breezed in through the window. Before we saw his ex-wife and before he saw the pregnancy test. I just want things to be like they were.”

“Maybe they can be again,” Ember said.

Chelsea shook her head, her throat tight. “I can’t forget what he said to me. What he really thinks of me. How can we have a relationship if there’s no trust?”

“Maybe he doesn’t really think that about you. Maybe he was lashing out. You said he’d been riled up by his ex-wife’s visit. Don’t we always do that to those we care about the most?”

“He doesn’t trust me. And even if he did, he doesn’t want kids and I do.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“Yes. Not that he needed to, his reaction made it clear. And I do want kids one day. Not now, but one day.” Her eyes met Ember’s. “His kids. I wanted his kids.”

And that’s what hurt. She wanted him to want that, too. Wanted him to be as happy as Lucas was about Ember having his baby. But his reaction this

morning made it obvious that he never would.

“You took him by surprise. You two haven’t been together long. Maybe it would be different if the baby was planned.”

“I don’t think so.” Chelsea took a long breath. “But it doesn’t matter. He thinks I’m a user and I think he’s an asshole. End of story.”

“It’ll get better, you know?” Ember’s smile was soft. “Remember how I was when Will left me?” Her ex-fiancé – the man she’d lived with before he’d left her and she’d met Lucas. “And when I lost the baby? I never thought I’d be happy again, yet here I am, deliriously happy. With Lucas and Arthur and this little one.” She rubbed her still flat stomach. “You’ll get this, too.”

“Sure.” Chelsea nodded, even though in her heart she knew it wasn’t true. She was the mess up of the family. The one who couldn’t keep a job or an apartment. Or a man. But Ember meant well and she didn’t want to upset her sister. “I think I might head to bed in a minute,” she said, because she didn’t want to think anymore.

Just wanted to let sweet oblivion swallow her up for a few hours before she had to face the world and her choices all over again.

“Are you sure?” Ember asked, her brows knitting. “We can talk for as long as you’d like.”

“I’m sure.” Chelsea nodded. Ember had shadows under her eyes. It was bad enough she was putting her sister and Lucas to all this trouble. She didn’t need to steal anymore sleep from them. Not to mention that Ember and Lucas had a lot to talk about. She wanted to give them as much alone time as possible. “And I’ll be on Arthur duty tonight. You two can catch up on some rest.”

“No,” Ember protested. “That’s not fair.”

“I’m happy to,” Chelsea told her. “You’ve given me somewhere to stay, the least I can do is repay you the only way I know how. And anyway, I need some nephew time. I never get to see Arthur enough.”

“You might change your mind once you’ve seen him in the middle of the night,” Ember warned.

“We’ll see,” Chelsea said, grabbing her still-undrunk glass of wine. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

“Chelsea was sad today,” Luna said as Chris closed the book he’d been reading her. “Ember said she was tired, but I know she was sad. She kept looking away and I could see tears in her eyes.

And the prize for world’s worst asshole went to Chris Vaughn. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I hurt her.”

“You did?” Luna frowned. “How?”

He swallowed, trying to think of the right words to say. “You know when you fight with a friend at school?”

“Yes.”

“It’s something like that. I accused her of something she hadn’t done and I shouldn’t have. I didn’t let her explain and said some things that hurt her feelings.”

“Did you say sorry?”

“I did. But it’s not enough.” He swallowed. “I need to figure out a better way to say it.”

“Maybe you should buy her a present. Or ice cream. She loves ice cream.”

His lips twitched. “Maybe.”

“She’ll still be my friend though, right?” Luna asked.

“Of course she will, sweetheart.”

“She promised she’d keep in touch when she’s not my nanny anymore. But she said she’d have to keep in touch through you. That she’d message you to arrange to take me out sometimes.”

His mouth was dry. “She can message me or Neil. You’ll still get to keep in touch, I promise.”

“How about you?” Luna asked. “Don’t you want to keep in touch with her? Don’t you want to be friends still?”

“Yeah, I do.” He nodded.

“Then make up with her.”

He let out a mouthful of air. “I’m going to try. But she may not forgive me. I said some very hurtful things.”

“You should think before you speak,” Luna told him. “Take a breath and count to ten.”

Why the hell was this kid more sensible than him? “That’s good advice. I’ll remember that next time,” he promised.

After Luna fell asleep, he felt lost. He stood outside Chelsea’s bedroom for a moment, then pushed the door open, wincing when he saw her perfectly

made bed. For a moment he could see her laying there asleep as he tiptoed in from a night shoot.

He blinked and the bed was empty again. So was his fucking heart. He walked down the stairs, heading for the cocktail cabinet, then blinked when he heard voices.

Neil was sitting on the terrace with his girlfriend, Lisa, along with Liv and Adrian.

“I wasn’t expecting company,” he said, walking onto the deck. He tried to decide the most polite way to tell them to get out and leave him alone.

Because he really wanted to wallow and beat himself up.

“Yeah, well you’ve got it whether you like it or not.” Neil pointed at the empty chair around the table. “Sit. I’ll grab you a beer.”

“I don’t want a drink.”

“Oh God,” Liv said to Neil. “He has it bad.”

“I told you.” Neil sighed. “If I have to deal with his bear-with-a-sore-head act, so do you.”

“Guys, I appreciate you being here, I really do. But I’m tired and I’m in a fucking terrible mood. I’ve already upset one person today, I don’t want to upset any of you.” Chris tapped the back of the chair with his fingers. He was done. He wanted to sleep, to forget what a dick he was for a few hours.

Not that any of them seemed in any mood to let him forget.

“I’m going to head to bed. Knock yourselves out at the cocktail bar,” he said.

“Nuh uh. You’re not going anywhere.” Neil pointed at the chair again. “Sit.”

Chris exhaled heavily, giving in to the inevitable as he pulled the chair out and sat down heavily. It was a beautiful evening, if you cared about that kind of thing. Which he didn’t, not now.

Because she wasn’t here to share it with him.

All four of them were looking at him, and he couldn’t stand to see the sympathy in their gazes. He didn’t deserve it. Didn’t want it either. “So what, you want me to spill my guts or something?” he asked skeptically.

Liv reached for his hand. “We just want to be here for you. We’re your friends. We care.”

Okay, now that was worse. “You don’t need to worry about me. I’m the one who fucked up, you should save your sympathy for Chelsea. She’s the one who deserves it.”

“Maybe we have enough for both of you,” Liv said softly. “But we’re here now so let us help.”

He looked at Neil. “Do they know what happened?”

“Nope.” Neil mimed pulling a zipper across his lips. “They just know you’re miserable.”

Well, maybe if they knew they’d leave him alone. They’d be as disgusted with him as he was with himself. So he looked at Liv and lifted a brow.

“I accused her of getting pregnant to trap me for my money.”

Liv and Lisa exchanged a shocked glance.

“See?” Neil said. “He really fucked up.”

Tell him something he didn’t know. “So now you can go with the safe knowledge that the only person who deserves to suffer is me.”

“Why did you say that to her?” Liv asked, clearly not getting the message.

“Because I found a pregnancy test in her bag. A positive one.”

“But it wasn’t hers?” That was Adrian.

“No. It was her sister’s. But I made an assumption.”

“But why would you accuse her of trying to trap you?” That sympathetic expression was still molding Liv’s features. He wondered what it would take for it to turn to disgust.

“Because that’s what he’s used to,” Neil said, before Chris could answer. “Everybody in his life has fucked him over. His dad, his ex-wife...”

“My mom didn’t fuck me over,” Chris pointed out.

“Yeah, but she left you and it killed you.”

His chest tightened so hard it was impossible to breathe. It still hurt, after all this time.

“So, when you finally found somebody who wasn’t going to let you down. Somebody, who, by the way,” Neil said, “was fucking perfect for you. You decided to push her away before she could hurt you like the others did.”

Chris lifted an eyebrow. “You been studying psychology in your spare time?”

“No.” Neil shook his head. “Just you. And it doesn’t take a lot to add two and two together. Your ex-wife visits and by the next day you’ve totally screwed up your relationship with Chelsea.”

“She really was great,” Lisa said, nodding. “So sweet and funny and perfect.”

Thanks for the reminder. Maybe he should have gotten a drink after all.

“She is,” Neil agreed. “She’s still looking after Luna because she doesn’t want to upset the kid.”

Liv sighed. “I wish I’d met her. Though I feel like I already know her.”

“How?” Chris frowned.

“Because you never stopped talking about her on set. You spent most of your time between breaks calling her or asking Neil about her.”

“I did?” He blinked. She had to be exaggerating.

“Poor girl,” Lisa said. “She must have been so upset. Imagine the guy you love accusing you of getting pregnant on purpose.”

“Especially when it takes two to tango,” Liv pointed out. “I mean, if you don’t want a girl to get pregnant, all you gotta do is wrap it up.”

“Like we did?” Adrian asked her.

Liv blushed. “Okay, I’m talking hypothetically here. But we were both clean and I’m on birth control.”

“So were Chelsea and Chris,” Neil said. Chris closed his eyes for a moment because did *everybody* have a fucking opinion on his sex life? “But it’s harder for guys,” Neil continued. “We have to trust what you’re telling us.”

“So do we,” Lisa pointed out. “Women can get STDs just as easily as we get pregnant. Having sex is always a risk. But we carry the burden, because we’re the ones who pay the consequences.”

Neil blinked. “I guess you do. But why don’t you just insist on condoms whenever you have sex?”

Liv laughed. “*Oh baby, it feels so much better when I’m closer to you.*”

Adrian frowned. “I don’t say that.”

“Yes you do. And it’s not just that. We’re grown women and we can take care of ourselves, but we’re also emotional people. We want to trust you. We want to feel close to you. And when two consenting adults have the conversation about contraception, we *should* be able to believe you. That’s not too much to ask.”

“Yeah, but Chris has been burned before,” Neil pointed out.

“We’ve all been burned in one way or another,” Liv said softly. “But we have to let ourselves heal. Chelsea isn’t Anya. She sounds like a beautiful soul who’s hurting right now. I can’t imagine what she must have gone through. Especially after...” she faded away. “Does everybody know about her last position?”

Neil looked embarrassed. “Yeah, we all do.” So he’d told Lisa. Chris

couldn't blame him. Even Neil needed someone to confide in.

"This is the second job in a row where she's been accused of something she hasn't done," Liv said, running her finger around her glass. "That must hurt so much."

"She probably thinks it's something she's doing wrong," Lisa agreed. "I mean, once is a mistake. Twice? Well..."

And that's what everybody would think. He felt sick. Not only had he hurt her with his damned accusations, but he'd broken the confidence she'd built up again within her career. And even worse, his friends weren't beating him up about it. And he deserved to be beaten.

"I want to talk to her," he admitted. Christ, did he want to. "But she doesn't want to talk to me. And I have Luna to think about. Right now she still has Chelsea, but if I push things..." He couldn't hurt his daughter as well. He'd already done enough.

"Yeah, definitely don't contact her. I promised you wouldn't." Neil pressed his lips together.

Liv gave him a soft smile. "Maybe she just needs time. You only have a couple of weeks before you go back to L.A. Once you have a new nanny, then you can talk to her."

But time wasn't enough. It never would be. He needed to do something. To make things better. Even if she never forgave him, he needed to make this right.

He'd hurt the woman he loved and it was killing him.

“I’m really not in the mood for this,” Chelsea said, as Ember pulled into a space behind the Tiki Bar at the Silver Sands Resort.

“Just come in for one drink,” Ember urged her, turning off the engine and opening the door. “You’ve been moping for almost a week. An evening out will do you good. If nothing else, maybe you’ll stop looking at your phone every five minutes.”

“I don’t look at it that often,” Chelsea protested, climbing out of the passenger seat. She could hear the low beats of music drifting from the bar, mixed with laughter and conversation.

Ember was right about one thing, though. She *had* been moping. Not in the daytime when Luna was there. Somehow she managed to keep a bright smile on her face until Neil arrived every day at six to pick her up. But the evenings were hard. So hard. She’d help Ember with Arthur and cleaning but the hours still stretched ahead of her like an empty, gaping wound.

And today had been the worst. Luna had cheerily told her that she spent the night with Neil and Lisa because her daddy had gone to L.A. for a couple of days.

That’s when she’d understood. He was moving on without her. Preparing for his return home. Probably interviewing nannies to fill the gap until school started. He was alone in that beautiful house in the hills where they’d lain tangled together in his bed, his hand softly brushing the hair from her face as they talked about their future.

And now it was all gone.

Ugh. Ember was right, she did need to get out of this funk. She couldn’t

live her life like this. Maybe tonight *would* do her good. It was better than waiting around for a phone that never rang.

Ember's friends were already there, waiting at a table on the far side of the open air bar. They stood and hugged Chelsea, each one of them whispering in her ear that men were assholes, that it was his loss.

That she was beautiful and could do so much better than a movie star that every woman wanted.

She knew Ember's best friends, Ally and Brooke, very well. She'd grown up with them – they were practically big sisters to her. Caitie, Lucas' sister, was there, too, along with her best friend, Harper. And then there was Meghan, the one she'd become closest to since she'd been back in Angel Sands. Meghan squeezed her extra tightly. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "Just say the word and we'll all head to his place and beat him up."

Chelsea smiled, though her heart still ached. "It's okay, he's not there. He's in L.A."

"He is?" Meghan said. "Why?"

"I guess he has things to do." Things that didn't involve her. And that was okay.

All right, that was a lie. But it would be okay. Just as soon as her heart mended.

The bartender walked over to take their order. The others already had glasses so Ember ordered two Porn Star Martinis and a glass of orange juice.

Chelsea frowned. "You can't drink," she whispered to her sister.

"It's all right," Ally said grinning. "You don't have to whisper. We know she's knocked up. Lucas shared a picture of Arthur in his new t-shirt on Instagram."

"There's nothing like social media to let everybody know you're pregnant." Ember rolled her eyes. "And the orange juice is for me, the two cocktails are for you. I figure you're drinking for both of us tonight."

"How are you feeling, anyway?" Meghan asked Ember.

"Pretty good over all," Ember told her. "I had a little bit of nausea this morning, but I don't know if it's psychosomatic or not."

They all launched into a discussion about pregnancy, and Chelsea realized that every woman around the table was either a mother or a stepmother. They had their lives together while hers was falling apart. And though she smiled and sipped at her cocktail, she couldn't help but think about Chris and wonder if *he* was hurting too.

Or if he was just having a good time in L.A.

She still hadn't heard from him. And Neil was always closed lipped when he picked Luna up, just asking about her day and whether there was anything Luna needed for the following morning. He hadn't even told her that Chris had left town, it had taken a child to tell her that.

And that was what hurt most of all. She'd been at the center of that family. She'd been Chris' confidante, Luna's caretaker, Neil's friend. And now their lives were going on without her and she was lost.

Like a ship adrift in the ocean, she had no idea where she was going to go.

In a few days, Luna would be going back to L.A. and her job would be done. She hadn't even bothered to call Lois yet, because she knew there wouldn't be another job for her. She didn't even know if Chris would give her a reference.

And in her heart of hearts, she wasn't sure she could take on another job anyway. The thought of getting to know another family only to have them wrenched away again felt almost painful.

"You okay?" Ember asked, noticing how quiet she was.

"Yeah. Just thinking about what to do next."

"Have another drink?" Ally suggested, and they all agreed. She hailed the waiter over, and ordered another round of cocktails and a glass of juice for Ember. When they arrived, Meghan lifted her glass to Chelsea's. "To the future, whatever it may bring."

And that's all it took for the tears to sting at her eyes. She blinked, but they spilled over anyway.

"Oh God," Meghan said, putting her drink down and hugging Chelsea. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's okay." Chelsea took a deep breath and fumbled in her bag for a tissue, wiping her tears away. "I was just thinking about what I'm going to do when this job is over. You took me by surprise."

"Won't you get another nanny job?" Meghan asked.

"I don't know," Chelsea admitted. "I messed up the last two. Maybe it's a sign that this line of work isn't for me."

"You didn't mess up either one," Ember told her. "The Silbers messed you up. And this one... well, it wasn't your fault either."

"I shouldn't have slept with my boss." It was obvious. Anybody knew you didn't do that. It only caused the kind of misery she was suffering right

now.

“You fell in love with him,” Ember said. “And you couldn’t help that.”

Chelsea blinked the tears away, looking away from her sister because she couldn’t take the sympathy. She’d made mistakes. Sure, not the kind of stupid asshole ones that Chris had made. But she’d still made some.

Like falling in love with a man she couldn’t have.

“Has he tried contacting you?” Ally asked.

Chelsea shook her head, her throat feeling congested.

Ally grimaced. “Well that sucks.”

“She asked him not to,” Ember pointed out. “He’s respecting her wishes.”

“Do you want him to contact you?” Meghan asked.

Yes. No. She had no idea.

“There’s no point. It’s over. He’s probably trying to make it a clean break.” Chelsea swallowed hard. “And he’s right. There’s no future here. He doesn’t want any more kids and I want my own.”

“But did he say that?” Ember asked her.

“He went crazy when he thought I was pregnant,” Chelsea told her. “It was like I was trying to trap a wild animal. He looked at me like I was a murderer.”

“But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want children,” Ember said gently. “It just means he was shocked.” Seeing Chelsea’s expression, she waved her hand. “Don’t get me wrong, I think his response was awful. He’s an asshole, and when I see him next I’m going to tell him that. But people can react badly to being blindsided. Remember how I reacted when I found out my ex and his new fiancée were pregnant? It wasn’t because I wanted that with him, it’s because I was shocked.”

“I remember that night.” Brooke smiled softly at Ember. “You were so confused. In love with Lucas and afraid all at the same time.”

Chelsea nodded. “I know, but look at you and Lucas, you have it together.”

“Not all the time.” Ember gave her a pointed look. “Remember what you told me? That we needed to talk. To be honest. That our relationship was bigger than the problems we faced.”

“I remember.” Chelsea caught her sister’s eye.

“Maybe you should listen to your own advice,” Ember suggested. “Relationships will always have problems. You won’t agree on everything. The best thing you can do is talk things through and see if there are any

compromises to be made. And if there aren't, then at least you know you've tried your best to make things work.

Chelsea opened her mouth to reply when her phone started to ring, the shrill tone cutting through their conversation. And for one stupid moment she thought it was him. Until she saw Lois Marx's name flashing on the screen.

Her stomach did a flip. "It's the head of my nanny agency."

"At this time?" Ember frowned. "Why would she call you now?"

Because she's found out that I've messed up again. This time she knew Lois wouldn't give her another chance. And she shouldn't. Chelsea didn't deserve one. She thought about ignoring the call, but Lois had always been good to her.

She didn't deserve to be ignored.

"Give me a moment," she told her friends, leaving them behind in search of a quiet spot. She accepted the call. "Hi Lois, I'm out at the moment. Let me find somewhere quiet so I can hear you."

"No problem." Lois sounded upbeat.

The Tiki Bar stretched as far as the beach. Chelsea followed the path toward the golden sand, the sound of the music fading as she walked. "Okay, I can hear you now. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, it is. More than okay. I'm so sorry to call you so late, but I just got an email and I thought you'd want to know."

Chelsea blinked, confused. "Know what?"

"The Silbers have given you a reference. A glowing one."

"They have?" She waited for the wave of elation to wash over her. This was a good thing. The thing she'd been hoping for all this time. And yet the joy she thought she'd feel wasn't there.

Only the same numbness she'd felt for days.

"Isn't it wonderful? You'll have your pick of the next job. Especially with the reference I've received from Mr. Vaughn as well."

"He's given you a reference already?" Chelsea asked, her voice faint. "But I haven't finished this position yet."

"He wanted to make sure you were able to get your next job easily. And you only have a couple of weeks left, so we should have been looking already. Well, to be honest," Lois lowered her voice, "I've already been looking, but with the reference problem there wasn't a lot out there. But that's all changed now. I'll send you a list of possible opportunities tomorrow and we'll schedule a call to discuss them, okay?"

“Sure.”

“I’ll let you go back to whatever you were doing. And if you’re anywhere near a bar, have a drink on me. You deserve it.” Lois disconnected, leaving Chelsea standing on the sand, her ears filled with the crashing of the waves against the shore.

He’d given her a reference already. He must be desperate for her to find another job. To have her off his conscience so he could carry on his movie-star life without her.

And for the first time in days, that numbness disappeared, replaced by a fury so hot it made her eyes narrow. How dare he push her away like she was nothing?

She *wasn’t* nothing. She was worth so much more than that. So much more than a man who could treat her like she was trying to trap him.

Swallowing hard, she pulled up another contact on her phone. Neil answered almost as soon as the call connected.

“Hey, everything okay?”

No, it wasn’t. She felt like she wanted to punch something. “I just got a call from my agency. Did you know Chris already gave me a reference?”

Neil cleared his throat. “Um, that’s probably something you should talk to him about.”

“Well I would,” she said, her voice icy, “but he won’t call me.”

“You told him not to,” Neil pointed out. “He’s just following your request.”

She let out a huff, because Neil was right. But it didn’t make her feel any better. “Do you know when he’s coming back from L.A.?”

“He came back tonight. Picked Luna up a few hours ago.”

Of course he did. “Okay.” She nodded, even though Neil couldn’t see her. “Thanks, Neil. I’ll let you go.”

“Chelsea, don’t do anything stupid.”

“Like what? Sleep with my boss?” She let out a dry laugh.

“Just...” Neil sighed. “You’re still okay to have Luna tomorrow, right?”

“Of course I am.” The gall of these people. “I’d never let her suffer because her dad’s an asshole. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay. We’ll talk then.” Neil still sounded worried as he hung up. But she wasn’t worried at all.

She was confused and more than a little bit angry.

Gripping her phone in a vice hold, she stomped back to the bar. Ember

looked up, concerned as she approached them, her eyes widening as she took in Chelsea's angry expression.

"Are you okay?" she asked her.

"Not even close." She blew out a mouthful of air. Ember said she and Chris should talk, and maybe she was right. Chelsea was dying to know what he was thinking right now. "Can you give me a ride to Chris' house?"

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She changed her mind three times in the short distance between the Tiki Bar and the big house on the cliff. Even when Ember pulled up outside his gate she wasn't sure whether she could go through with it. It didn't help when Ember started praising the fact that he'd already written her a glowing reference.

"That's so sweet."

"No it isn't. He just wants me to get another job and stop being his problem," Chelsea replied, her teeth gritted.

"Or maybe he wants you to be happy."

This was stupid. She climbed out of the car and walked to the gate, wondering if she should push the intercom or key in the code. She didn't work here anymore. And knowing how much he trusted her, he probably changed the number.

"What do you want to do?" Ember asked, climbing out of the car. "We can't stand out here all night."

Chelsea looked up at the house. Though most of the lights were out, the hallway lamp was still glowing through the front windows. He turned them off when he went to bed.

Which meant he was still up.

"I don't know," Chelsea whispered. "I'm confused."

"Let's go home and you can sleep on it. You've had some drinks, you're probably not thinking straight."

But she couldn't leave. It was like a magnet was drawing her in. They stood at the gate, Ember's brows furrowed, Chelsea's mind racing, and then

the front door opened and the silhouette of a man stepped out.

He must have seen them on the security cameras, and wondered what on earth was going on.

Her heart lurched. Why couldn't love disappear when somebody hurt you? Why did it conspire inside you, eating you up until you were a mess of emotions and tears?

He walked down the steps, and she swallowed hard. There was at least fifty yards between them. Her breath stuttered as he made it to the driveway, striding toward her. She leaned against the gate, her fingers curling around the cast iron bars like she was trying to keep herself upright.

"Jesus, this is like a movie," Ember murmured.

The closer he got, the harder she found it to breathe. Her fight or flight response was frozen, like a deer in the headlights. She didn't move, she didn't take her eyes off him.

She just waited.

Within thirty seconds he was close enough for her eyes to catch his. His jaw was tense, he had at least two days' worth of beard growth there. His lips were parted, like he was trying to say something. Not that she could hear him – the rush of blood through her ears had drowned everything else out.

He was only a few yards away now. Wearing a pair of gray sweatpants and a black t-shirt, and from here she could see that his hair was wet. Had he been swimming or in the shower? She inhaled and the fragrance of his shampoo lifted in the breeze, giving her the answer.

"Chelsea." His voice was low. Rough. Like he'd been talking too much.

"Chris."

"Are you coming in?" He glanced at her then Ember.

"I..." Chelsea blinked. "I just wanted to ask you something."

"Okay." He didn't ask why she hadn't just called. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe he needed to see her face as much as she needed to see his. "Can I open the gate?" he asked. "You can drive in, or walk?" His eyes grazed Ember's again. "Do you want to come in, too?"

"I'm fine. I'll just wait in the car," Ember said, waving her hand. She glanced at Chelsea and she nodded.

Yeah, she'd be okay.

"I'll come inside," Chelsea agreed.

He pressed the buttons and the gate mechanism whirred, pulling them apart. She stepped in, and the closeness of him overwhelmed her. It had been

easy to hate him when she couldn't see him.

But now, all she felt was an aching hole inside of her. Caused by this man who'd been hurt and then hurt her right back. And yeah, he looked like shit for once and that made her feel grimly satisfied.

"Are you tired?" she asked him, seeing the shadows beneath his eyes.

"I haven't been sleeping well."

"Is it Luna? Has she been having night terrors?" That was one of her biggest fears. That her leaving would cause the little girl to regress into those dreams again.

He shook his head. "She's been fine. And I was in L.A. last night anyway. I just can't..." He ran his hand through his hair. "I just can't live with myself. After the things I said to you. They were wrong. So fucking wrong. When I close my eyes all I can see is your hurt. It kills me to know that I'm the one who caused that."

She blinked. "You said I was a gold digger."

He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, pinching the top of his nose like he was in physical pain. "You know the worst thing?" he whispered. "I didn't mean it. I saw red and I lashed out."

"Because you thought I was like all the rest?"

He shook his head. "I knew you weren't. No, I know you aren't. But there's part of me that always expects to be let down. Maybe that part wanted to get it over with. To preempt the pain. I don't know. I'm thinking it might take some therapy to work that out. And it doesn't matter, because I'm a goddamned asshole. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. For me and Luna. And this last week without you has been so goddamned painful. Not seeing your face in the morning. Not holding you in the evening. And knowing all of that is my fault." He winced. "And thinking about what you must be going through..."

"You didn't call me," she whispered.

"Because you didn't want me to. Neil made that perfectly clear." He ran his thumb over the scruff on his jaw. "You didn't believe I trusted you, but I do, and I trusted your judgment of when you'd be ready to talk. And I knew that when I did come to you, I needed to show you exactly how serious I am. That's why I went to L.A."

Her brows pinched together. "To give me a reference?"

"And to speak to the Silbers."

Her stomach tightened. "You're why they gave me a reference?"

“Yeah.” He nodded. “We came to a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“One where you don’t sue the ass off them for ruining your career. My lawyer – well her fiancé – explained that non-disclosure agreements can’t supersede your right to earn a wage.”

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “Do you want me to move on from you? Do you want me to get another job and walk away?”

“Fuck no.” He shook his head. “But I want you to have the choice. I realized something when I fucked things up between us. People keep taking your choices away by not trusting you. Especially me. And I don’t want that. I trust you to choose what you want for your life. Even if it isn’t me. Us.” He grimaced and it made her heart lurch.

“Are you saying I have a choice that includes you?” she asked, still trying to make sure she understood.

“Yes. Abso-fucking-lutely. I want you to choose me. Luna and me. I want you to choose coming back with us and making a life together. I want you to choose making love at night and pancakes in the morning. But I only want you to choose that if it’s what you want, too. If you want to walk away, it’ll kill me but I’ll accept that.”

“You’d let me go?” she asked, her heart racing. He trusted her to make the right decision for herself. Something about that touched her. She’d been as bad as him, jumping to conclusions and running away. Refusing to talk to him. She’d been scarred by her experience with the Silbers and assumed he was the same.

She was wrong. So wrong. He was nothing like them.

A half-smile pulled at his lips. “Okay, maybe that’s a lie. I’d fight for you, Chelsea. Because a woman like you is worth fighting for. I’ve already agreed to rent this place for another year with an option to buy it,” he said, looking over his shoulder at the whitewashed walls of the beach house.

“Why would you do that?”

“Because your family is here. And Luna loves it. And if you agree to give me a second chance, I want to be able to spend as much time as possible in the place I fell in love with you.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I’ll spend my time moping around here and scheming to get you to change your mind.”

She laughed, and it felt so good. His smile widened as their eyes clashed,

the intensity of his emotions knocking the wind out of her.

“I did it all wrong,” he told her. “And that’s all on me. I want to date you. Properly. Take you out and make you feel like the prize you are. I want to talk to you about our hopes and dreams and how we can build a life together. And then I’m going to do whatever it takes to get you to marry me. Because I don’t want to ever let you go again.”

Her throat felt tight. “I want children one day and you don’t.”

He exhaled. “Beautiful, I want to have a family with you. If the last week has taught me anything, it’s taught me that. As soon as you walked out of that door there was part of me that wished that test was yours. That you were pregnant with my baby, because fuck it, we’d make gorgeous children. And I already know for damn certain that you’d be the best mom in the goddamned world.” In the glow of the moonlight he looked so young. Boyish and vulnerable. “I know I messed up. I know I hurt you. I never want to do that again. And if you need time to think about it, that’s okay. I’ll wait for you for as long as it takes. I love you, baby. I always will.” He breathed out softly, his eyes not leaving hers. “It’s killing me not to touch you right now.”

“Then touch me.”

“Not until you’re mine.”

She felt ragged, like every part of her had been torn to pieces. “I was always yours. Don’t you see that?” Tears pooled in her eyes, making him look blurry. “I love you. I think I’ve loved you from the moment you gave me a chance.”

“You were worth more than a chance. You were worth everything.”

Tears were pouring down her face. All the fear and pain of the past few days were mixed up with the overwhelming hope that suffused her body. He’d hurt her, but he’d soothed her, too. He wanted her to have choices, and it made her heart burst from her chest.

“I want us,” she whispered.

He didn’t need her to say anything else. Within a second, he’d closed the gap between them, sweeping her into his arms. His mouth crashed against hers, his fingers tangling into her hair. He kissed her hard and hot, his body pressed against her softness, sending pulses of pleasure right through her as she felt the ridge of him grow against her.

She curled her arms around his neck, loving the pressure of his hard muscles against her chest. They fit perfectly together. Like ying and yang.

He was her fantasy and her reality. Her hopes and her dreams.

He was hers.
And that's all that she wanted.

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EPILOGUE

Four months later...

There was nothing the people of Angel Sands loved more than a party. Especially one they didn't have to pay for. The parking lots of the Silver Sands Resort were overflowing with old trucks and new sedans, and the paths and bars were full of their owners. Neil was standing at the entrance to the resort welcoming the townsfolk inside.

"Are the drinks really free?" one of them asked him.

"Sure is. It's on us," Neil said. "Our way of thanking you for putting up with the production."

The movie had wrapped over a month earlier and Chris was heavy in post-production and marketing meetings now. This was the first free weekend Neil had found where all the cast and crew could get together to celebrate the end of filming. It seemed right that they hold it here and use it as a way to thank the community, too. And from the looks on everybody's' faces, the locals were loving it.

Chelsea held Luna's hand as they explored the hotel, flanked by a six-foot-four security guard Chris had insisted they have with them at all times.

"When we're in private, you can do whatever you like," he promised her. "But when I'm at an event like this, I need to know you and Luna are safe."

She'd decided to go with it, even though she had half of the Angel Sands Fire Department guarding their backs. Since she and Chris had reconciled

and moved back to L.A. for them to finish production, she'd seen more than her fair share of craziness. There were great fans. The ones who hung around to say hello to him as he left the studio, or wrote lovely things on his Instagram account about how happy they were for him and Chelsea.

But there were the scary fans, too. She was getting accustomed to the used underwear being sent to his office. She was even blasé about the horrible comments she saw on his social media before his publicist had a chance to delete them.

But after a fan had cornered her and Luna at the local grocery store, she'd understood his need to keep them safe.

That's why they both loved coming to Angel Sands. It was their escape from the rat race. Their chance to be a normal family. For Luna to play with her friends on the sand without fear.

She was a normal kid when she was here.

"Look at Daddy," Luna said, pointing out at the Tiki Bar. They'd allocated an hour for the locals to have their photographs taken with the cast. Chris' line was huge, but he was being a trooper, smiling and talking to each of them.

She loved seeing him like this. The ultimate movie star dressed in a white shirt and navy pants, his shades slid up over his head and a smile on his face.

But she loved it more when they were alone. Just Chelsea and Chris. No pretenses or celebrity. Two people who'd fallen desperately in love.

He looked up and caught her eyes, smiling sexily at her. She felt her insides melt. They'd spent the first week back together talking for hours about the best way forward for them and Luna. When they finally told her they were a couple she was delighted.

"Look!" Luna said. "There's Isla. Can I go play with her?"

Following Luna's pointing arm, she could see Isla with Meghan and Rich, and Isla's dad and stepmom, too. Like Chris, he had a security guard with him.

"Sure." She nodded to Luna, then looked back at Simon, their guard. "We're just heading over there."

His lips twitched. "You don't need to keep telling me where you're going. You go, I follow."

Yeah, well she was still getting used to this.

As soon as they were close enough, Isla's eyes caught Luna's and they both squealed and ran toward one another, hugging. Meghan's eyes lit up as

she caught Chelsea's gaze. "Hey. I was wondering where you were."

Chelsea leaned forward to hug her. "Sorry, we were caught up in traffic. I wanted to make sure the movers took all the boxes."

Much to Luna's delight, she and Chris had talked long and hard and agreed that they should base themselves here in Angel Sands. It was close enough for Chris to commute for work, and Anya had agreed that Luna could live with them full time to attend the same school as the friends she'd made here, as long as she could take her on the weekends. That agreement had cost Chris some money, but he gladly paid it.

Even still, Anya seemed to find excuse after excuse when her weekends came up. Over the past four months she'd seen Luna twice. Chelsea had worried about the effect it would have on Luna, but the little girl was thriving.

And she hadn't had a single night terror.

Moving back to Angel Sands meant Chelsea could be close to her family, as well as spend her time studying for her master's in child development. She and Lois had agreed to part ways after she'd come clean about Chris. The decision had been mutual – taking care of another family's children didn't fit in with Chris' schedule and taking care of Luna.

She was loving studying again, so it suited her perfectly.

Her family had taken Chris under their wing since they'd formally been introduced to him. Her mom had the biggest soft spot for him, mothering him like crazy whenever they visited. She loved Luna, too, and often babysat her and Arthur for cousin time.

It made her so happy to see her two worlds combined together perfectly.

"Miss Kennedy?" Simon murmured. "Mr. Vaughn asked me to escort you to him."

She looked up. Sure enough, another actor had taken Chris' place in the photo booth. His hour must be up. "Where is he?"

"Heading to the beach. He's asked that you join him."

"Luna?" she called to their little girl. "Let's go, honey."

"Can I stay here?" she asked. "Please?"

Meghan nodded. "We'll look after her for you."

"I guess." She glanced at Simon. "They have their own guard," she reminded him, pointing at Dylan Nash's security detail.

"Very well, ma'am. Follow me."

As they approached the private beach attached to the hotel, she could see

Chris facing the ocean. A gentle breeze ruffled his hair. She kind of missed the buzz cut he'd needed for the movie, but she liked being able to tangle her fingers in his hair, too.

"You go ahead, ma'am, I'll stay here and keep things safe." Simon stepped back into the shadow of a palm tree, leaving her to walk to the end of the path. She stopped to pull off her shoes, looping the straps around her finger, and sunk her feet into the still-warm sand.

As though he could sense her presence, Chris turned his head, his eyes softening when he saw her. She felt the familiar rush of hot blood through her veins. She'd never get used to calling him hers.

And yet he was.

He smiled warmly, holding his hand out for her as she tiptoed across the sand, her shoes in one hand, the other holding the hem of her dress. He took her shoes and pulled her close, pressing his mouth to hers.

"I've missed you," he murmured when they broke apart, breathless.

"You've only been gone for two days." He'd left a day earlier than she and Luna had, needing to do interviews and promotional videos here at the Silver Sands Resort. She'd stayed behind to supervise the packing of their things.

"It felt like a lifetime," he told her. "How are my girls?"

She loved how he called them that. It was like he couldn't believe he finally had the family he'd dreamed of.

"We're good. We listened to the Beach Boys all the way down the Pacific Highway."

"Did you keep to the speed limit?" he asked.

"Mostly." She wiggled her brows at him and he shook his head. "Baby, I drive safely. I just like to push the boundaries," she told him.

He kissed her throat, her jaw, the tender skin behind her earlobe. She felt her thighs clench.

"Maybe I'll push some of your boundaries tonight," he said softly. A shiver wracked down her spine.

"Is that a promise?"

He glanced down at her lips, his eyes heavy lidded. "It's our first night in our new home. It's a guarantee."

"Only if Luna sleeps well," she reminded him.

"That's where you're wrong. Lucas and Ember are keeping Luna. We get to spend our first night alone."

Chelsea blinked. She wasn't expecting that. "When did you arrange this?"

"I might have visited them last night. Your mom was there, too."

Her lips curled. She loved how he and Lucas had become buddies, and how Ember had welcomed him in with open arms. But this was new – them spending time together without her being there.

"Were you lonely here without me?" she asked him.

"Always." He kissed the tip of her nose. "But that's not why I went to see them."

"Why did you?"

"I needed to tell them something."

She smiled at him, confused. "What?"

He brushed the hair from her face. He was always touching her when they were together. It was like he couldn't bear not to have that connection. "That I love you so damn much. And that I'm always going to take care of you."

"They already knew that."

"Yeah," he agreed, his voice low. "But I needed to reassure them, because there's something I want from you."

"What is it?"

He dropped to his knee suddenly. Her mouth fell open as he pulled a ring box from his pocket, opening it to reveal a sparkling pear set diamond ring nestled in the velvet cushion.

"I want to be able to make you happy every day of your life. I want to wake up with you and go to sleep with you knowing that you'll be with me forever. I want to make a family with you. To see you pregnant. To watch you give birth to our babies. I want to hold your hand through the pain and marvel at what a lucky sonofabitch I am for having you with me." He was smiling at her, his perfect, beloved face shining as he stared into her eyes. She felt tears well in her eyes, because he always found the right thing to say.

Or at least, he did most of the time.

"Will you marry me, beautiful?"

"Yes," she said, trying to keep the tears from falling. "Yes, please."

He slid the ring on her finger, lifting her palm to kiss it with his warm lips. Then he was kissing her again, and she was laughing and crying as he lifted her and swung her around.

"Daddy! Did you do it?" Luna asked, running across the sand. Behind her was Chelsea's mom holding Arthur's little hand, flanked by Lucas and a pregnant Ember. Their friends were there, too, along with the familiar faces

of the town that she'd grown up with.

Luna reached them and Chris lifted her, Luna's little arms circling his neck. "Did she say yes?" she asked.

"She sure did." He kissed his daughter's cheek and she grimaced. "You kept a perfect secret. She didn't suspect a thing."

"Do you like the ring?" Luna asked. "I picked it out."

"I love it," Chelsea said, her throat tight. "And I love you."

"I love you, too," Luna told her. And it made her heart do a little dance. "And Daddy loves both of us, doesn't he?"

"I do," Chris said, his eyes catching Chelsea's. "Now, let's go get some champagne. We have a lot to celebrate."

Chelsea slid her arm around his waist. "I'll drink to that."

Want more of Lost in Him?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Elks writes contemporary romance with a sizzling edge. Her first book, *Fix You*, has been translated into eight languages and made a surprise appearance on *Big Brother* in Brazil. Luckily for her, it wasn't voted out.

Carrie lives with her husband, two lovely children and a larger-than-life black pug called Plato. When she isn't writing or reading, she can be found baking, drinking an occasional (!) glass of wine, or chatting on social media.

You can find Carrie in all these places

www.carriemelks.com

carrie.elks@mail.com



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