



SHELBY CREEK COUNTY

LOST

Times

JEAN MARIE

Lost Times
Shelby Creek County
Book 6

By: Jean Marie

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Chapter 1

Thalia

“Honey, I’ve asked you five times now. Can you please put on your shoes so we can go? Mommy is already late, and that’s not a good impression to make on the first day.” I said, frustration and stress leaking into my tone as Jasmine bounded out of her room, holding the shoes she’d yet to put on.

Her hair was done in a braid which she’d begged for this morning, the dark strands standing out against her otherwise pastel clothes, and her little face was scrunched into a fiery scowl, one that brought me back to years ago.

Flashes of short dark hair and kind eyes threatened to rip me from the present moment, but I forced them aside. Focus on my child now and the one-night stand that was so much more *later*.

She lifted her shoes and wrinkled her nose. “They don’t feel comfy, though. Why do I have to wear shoes at all? You don’t like wearing them!”

Holding my temper by the tip of my nails, I answered. “I don’t, but I force myself to because it’s not safe or correct by society’s standards to walk around without them. Remember the time you ran down the street after I told you to put them on?”

She winced, shifting between her feet. That hadn’t been a fun day for either of us. I’d had to call into work to bring her to the hospital for all the tiny pine needles and barbs she’d gotten lodged in her feet. She’d been a little more wary of running outside since and the reminder served to cool her heels now too.

Reluctantly sitting down, she put the shoes on and pouted. “Fine...” She grumbled, but I counted it as a win. Putting my phone in my purse, I gestured for the door hurriedly.

“Let’s get you dropped off. I’m sure you’ll make lots of new friends today, and hopefully I will too.” I said almost to myself, my mind thousands of miles away. I could use some friends if I were being honest. Ever since Jasmine came along my life was mostly wrapped around her, not that I’d ever regret the night that gave me her, but still...friends would be nice.

Flashes came again of kind eyes and his name, the only piece of information he’d given, came to me. Ludwig.

He hadn’t seemed interested in anything past one night and while I was open to it, I knew better than to get involved more with a man who all but oozed the vibes he did. Caring, yes, but there was something else there that instinctively warned me away.

Of course, when I found out I was pregnant from our one-night stand, that’d changed things. Then I’d had a different reason for trying to get in contact with him, but nothing worked.

I’d only had his first name and the hotel wouldn’t give me anything more. He’d been in town for a conference, but all the ones I checked didn’t have a ‘Ludwig’.

Most of the guests were listed under their last names, and just like that, I was stuck. It ate at me, but there was nothing else I could do. I’d tried to tell him and when that failed, I’d taken on raising Jasmine alone.

A pang of melancholy hit, as it usually did when my mind drifted to this topic.

Putting it to the side with years of practice, I pulled the car to a stop outside of Jasmine’s school, glancing in the mirror only to pause at the hesitance all but painting her

expression. She was many things, but hesitant was very rarely one of them.

Turning to better face her, I reached out and took one of her hands, squeezing it. “Hey, is something bothering you?” I asked and she bit her lip, looking down at her lap with a frown.

“What if the other kids don’t like me?” She asked, her tone painfully quiet, and just like that my heart twisted.

I’d known moving was hard on her. We’d lived in the big city a few towns over all her life, but when this position opened and it was perfect for my degree I couldn’t *not* take it.

That didn’t make me feel any better about uprooting her though.

“Why wouldn’t they? I may be a *bit* biased, but I happen to think you’re the best.” I said and the edges of her lips quirked up. Raising her chin, she eyed the school before nodding.

“You’re the best too, Mom.” She said, then she undid her seatbelt and opened the door. I copied her, giving her a tight squeeze before waving her inside. She hesitated on the threshold of the school, looking back at me one last time, then disappeared into the crowd.

Taking a deep breath, I fought past the unease and worry twisting its fingers into my chest. She’d be fine. Jasmine was always the social butterfly and she’d make friends in no time.

My phone buzzed with another alert, telling me just how late I was, and I winced.

Right, no time to keep worrying like this. I couldn’t afford to lose this job because I was late on the first day. Forcing all the tangled emotions to the side—and all the thoughts of Jasmine’s mystery father—I got back in the car and drove toward my new work.

Hopefully I won't get in too much trouble over being late...

Chapter 2

Pulling up to the concrete building, I craned my head back to take it in.

This town was *far* smaller than the one we'd come from and in some ways, I liked that. The lack of constant noise and flashing lights was definitely a 'pro' in my book.

It was still weird though, to look down 'main street' and be able to see the other end of it. There weren't many shops, mainly a bar, a grocery store, and a few office buildings.

The biggest of which, I stood outside now.

It'd been a stroke of luck or divine provenance that led me to that newspaper clipping; I'd just been out of college with my shiny new degree and wondering what I'd do next. The bar I'd worked at before was nice, it brought in money and most of the regulars weren't a problem, but now I could finally pursue what I actually wanted to do with my life.

I still had to start from the bottom of the company and work my way up, but I could do it. I wouldn't let them down.

"Are you going to stand outside and stare at the building, or come on in?" A deep voice called from behind me, yanking me back to the present with pitiless force and slapping an embarrassed flush over my cheeks.

This was *not* the first impression I wanted to make on my coworkers.

Fighting down the heat lancing through my cheeks, I turned to face the stranger, already in the middle of an apology. "I'm sorry, I'm new to town and the building really is gorg-."

Whatever else I was going to say dropped off when I locked eyes on the one who'd spoken. He stood a yard or so away, his arms crossed and face set in a scowl that was *painfully* familiar.

I saw it on Jasmine's face whenever she threw a fit.

Memories of years ago hit me with the force of a brick as I took in him, Ludwig.

The man I thought I'd never see again.

His short dark hair was carefully styled back, not a strand out of place, and he wore a full suit that looked fitted to him. The air around him seemed to spark with irritation, but when I turned, fully facing him, that irritation faltered.

"Wait, I know you-." He started to say and my stomach dropped into a freefall. I'd wanted to meet him again for years, but not like this!

Looking away before I could embarrass myself by drooling, I cleared my throat and nodded. "Yeah, I remember you too," I said, my voice strained and awkward. What was I supposed to say to this?

Images of Jasmine flashed behind my eyes and my stomach soured.

I'd tried to find him for months to tell him about her, but now that I wasn't looking anymore, here he was. Should I even bring it up? He probably wasn't interested in having a child, especially one that was already as old as Jasmine was.

She wouldn't understand if he did choose to reject her. She'd be hurt and I'd seen what that hurt could do first hand.

No, he'd stayed in the dark so far and that's where he'd stay. I would pretend that nothing was amiss and we'd work together like nothing happened.

Nodding, I solidified the decision and offered a hand to him. "But we didn't actually introduce ourselves last time, so I'm Thalia Thomas, and you are?"

He blinked, seemingly broken from his stupor. Staring down at my hand for a minute, he took it and responded. “Ludwig Evans.”

Evans...

Something about that name picked at the back of my brain, as if I *should* know it.

It was only when I glanced past his shoulder to one of the signs for the building that I realized why the name was familiar.

At the entrance to the parking lot was a giant billboard that read, ‘Evans Financial Services.’ Everything spun around me, the world blurring into a blob of sickening colors as the truth hit.

I’d slept with my new boss and he had no idea about Jasmine.

Panic hit with the force of a tidal wave, threatening to rip me apart from the inside out as that fact rebounded around inside my head. I didn’t realize I wasn’t breathing right until my lungs squeezed in protest and Ludwig’s voice cut through the fog.

He’d moved to stand partially in front of me, his scowl now deeper with what might have been worry as he grunted. “Are you alright? You went paper white there.”

Swallowing past the bile trying to climb up my throat, I nodded, only slightly hysterical. “I’m fine, I just realized I slept with my boss, but other than that I’m *totally* fine.”

It slipped before I could stop it and he looked at the billboard too, then back to me. Something lingered behind his eyes, something painful that I didn’t have a name for, then it disappeared in my next blink, replaced by an icy mask.

“It doesn’t matter, it was years ago. I won’t give you any preferential treatment and we’ll act as if it never happened.” He said and again, Jasmine’s face lit the inside of my eyelids.

If it weren't for her, I could do just that, but I wasn't about to tell him that. Instead, I nodded, fighting to swallow past my dry throat.

“Right, I don't expect any special treatment, and as a matter of fact, I prefer you didn't. I want to earn my way here, not have it handed to me.”

His brow ticked up, something notably warmer lighting in his eyes before it too was snuffed out by that mask of his. “You're late on your first day, all employees get *one* warning and this is yours. After this, I'll put it on your record.” He said, his tone turning cold and stern.

Ice dripped down my back and I instinctively straightened with a nod. He seemed satisfied with that, leading the way into the building as I followed. With his eyes finally off me, I could *think*.

He seemed like a totally different person to the man I remembered from that night. Back then, he'd been open and kind, his smile a tad hesitant but still genuine when he asked me to go to his room with him. We'd been chatting at the bar I worked at for hours before then and I hadn't hesitated to agree.

Every touch had lit me on fire and not once had he hurt me, the night spiraling into a blaze of passion I'd only dreamed of before then.

Now though...he was different.

That excited and almost shy spark was long gone, replaced by a hard flinty glare that made me want to hide. This wasn't the man I'd gone to bed with all those years ago, and something told me *this* was why my instincts had screamed not to get connected.

If this was the real him, then I wanted him nowhere near Jasmine.

I was broken from my thoughts when he pulled up short and I crashed headlong into his back. Backing up several steps, the fire in my cheeks fanning higher, I tried to sputter out an

apology but he waved it off, his jaw tense enough to cut glass with as he growled.

“It’s fine, but watch where you’re going.”

I nodded, keeping my mouth shut instead of pointing out that he’d been the one to stop short. I was already on thin ice from showing up late on the first day, better not to add anything else that may get me into trouble.

He waved at an empty desk and nodded. “This is yours. Someone will be by soon to walk you through the daily tasks. They’ll also go over the do’s and don’ts of the company.” Then he turned without another word, moving toward the head office and leaving me to gather my thoughts.

Releasing the breath holed up in my lungs, I leaned against the desk and took everything in. Alright, my new boss was the man I’d slept and conceived a child with. No big deal. He didn’t have to know anything.

I didn’t want someone who could glare so coldly anywhere near her anyway, so this worked out. I could do my job, keep my head down, and he wouldn’t know a thing.

Steadying myself, I straightened just in time as a woman with a kind smile walked up, her long blond hair pulled up into a bun as she waved.

“Hi, I’m Kelly. It’s great to have someone new in the office. Are you alright?” Her smile faded toward the end, genuine concern bleeding into her tone, and I tipped my head.

“Yes? Why wouldn’t I be?”

She gave a tiny nod toward the direction Ludwig had left in. “Everyone knows the boss is a bear, and you looked ready to bolt. I figured he’d ripped into you for being late.” She winced. “Not your best first impression with him, considering how sharp he is about that.”

Yeah, I’d caught that.

Rubbing my hands together against the sudden chill in the air, I sighed. “I know, my daughter-..” I cut myself off, not

wanting anyone here to know more than they absolutely had to about Jasmine. “Well, it was a hard start, but it won’t happen again.”

Kelly nodded in sympathy, digging out her wallet to show a picture of a little girl beaming at the camera. “I get that, this is my munchkin. Maybe we can set a playdate sometime?”

I barely managed a nod before she continued. “Perfect, now let’s go over all the daily duties. It might be a bit overwhelming at first, but trust me, you’ll have it in no time.”

I sure hoped so, I could use an easy win after the heart attack today turned out to be.

Chapter 3

My feet throbbed from walking all over the building, Kelly's tour truly covering *everything*, and by the time I picked up Jasmine and dropped onto my couch, I was beyond tired.

Everything ached and exhaustion tugged at my eyelids. I couldn't give in yet though, I still had to make dinner and help her with any homework she may have.

Forcing aching muscles to work, I got up from the couch and called down the hall. "Did you have any homework?"

A beat, then she answered in a none convincing tone. "Nope."

Biting back a tired sigh, I rubbed a hand over my face and walked into the kitchen, leaning over the counter. One thing, I wanted *one* thing to be easy.

Shaking the frustration to the side, I peaked out of the kitchen to meet Jasmine's eyes. She was doing her best to look anywhere but me, and I raised a brow.

"So if I call your school, they'll say you had no homework today?"

She toed the ground, bottom lip stuck out in a pout. "Maybe..."

Shaking my head, I gestured for her to get her backpack. "Honey, go get your homework. The sooner it's over, the quicker you can go play in your room without worrying about getting in trouble for not doing it."

She heaved a massive sigh before reluctantly dragging her feet toward her backpack. Once we both sat at the table,

the papers between us, she mumbled.

“I don’t understand any of it. I tried to raise my hand to ask, but the teacher didn’t see it, and by the time I *could* ask, they were even further ahead.” Tears shone in her eyes and I scooted my chair closer, hooking her into a hug and squeezing.

“It’s alright, that’s what I’m here for. We can figure it out together, and then you’ll be all caught up by tomorrow.” I said, stroking a hand through her hair until the tears faded.

It took over an hour to explain all the concepts to her, but by the end of it she was working through the practice problems with ease. Kissing her head, I stood and started gathering the ingredients for dinner.

With any luck, I’d finish this and finally have a chance to just relax. My shoulders ached something fierce thanks to them being tense nearly all day.

Part of me expected Ludwig to come barreling around the corner, demanding to know about his daughter, despite the fact he didn’t even know I *had* one. No matter how illogical the worry was, it kept me on edge until I’d left.

If this was how things were going to be from now on, I’d underestimated how exhausted this job was going to make me.

Shoving the thoughts away before they could send me into a spiral, I focused on the present. He didn’t know about her, and he *wouldn’t*. I wasn’t about to spend any time outside of work alone with him, so there was no reason Jasmine would be brought up in conversation.

My secret was safe.

At least, I hoped so...

My phone rang, pulling me back to the present, and I answered on instinct. “Hello?” I asked, and the voice on the other end smoothed over my frazzled nerves as it always did.

“Hey, Thalia! How is your new job? I wasn’t sure when to call, but I knew I had to soon.” Naomi’s voice drifted

through the line, tugging at the tension built between my shoulder blades. Leaning back on the counter, dinner still in the corner of my eye lest it burn, I answered.

“It’s good, exhausting, but good.” I hesitated, not sure if I should tell her the rest. Jasmine always had the ability to hear exactly what I *didn’t* want her to, and the last thing I needed was her knowing about Ludwig.

She hadn’t asked about him too many times over the years, thankfully, but she was about the age where she’d start. I wasn’t ready.

Not focusing on that, I continued. “How are things with you and your boyfriend?” I wanted to tell her about Ludwig, I did, but something told me not to. The best way to keep something a secret was to tell *no one*.

So despite the urge to have someone to confide in, I shoved the words down and listened as she gushed.

“Oh, Robby and I are doing great! We’re thinking about getting a cat, but you know how my allergies can get. I’d need to keep stocked on medication, but it would be worth it.”

I hummed, listening with half an ear as she dropped into a full description of her day. She and Robby were the definition of painfully in love and not for the first time, a splash of envy wormed its way into my chest.

Since I was young, I’d wanted what she had. It stung, seeing all the happy couples while knowing it probably wouldn’t be for me.

Not that I’d ever wish her anything but the best of course, Naomi deserved all the happiness the world had to offer.

I just...wish I had it too.

Jasmine walked in, proudly offering her homework with a beaming smile. I looked over it and nodded, patting her head affectionately. “Good job. If that’s all your homework, you’re free to go play.”

She nodded again, bounding away with a new spring to her step. Once she was out of hearing range, I turned back into Naomi's voice.

“And you should have seen the cute little dress I found the other day. I'm going to drive to that new town of yours soon just so we can go on one of our night outs.”

A pang hit and longing sank its nail into me. God, I wanted that right now, to have her here. I'd always had trouble making friends, and Naomi was my oldest one to date. There would never be a day I didn't thank whoever was listening that I'd met her.

She'd been my crutch during the pregnancy and all the uncertainty that followed it.

“We definitely should, but we'll have to bring Jasmine. I haven't found any sitters yet and I think it'd be good to have someone familiar for her with all the changes.” I said, already going over my days off over the next few weeks.

It'd be a bit of a crunch, but we could probably make it work.

Naomi's happy gasp dragged me back to the present and she beamed. “Of course! You know I love hanging out with that munchkin. I know that tiny little town doesn't have much, but I think there'll be a fair soon. It's going to come through here first, but it should stop at least near by your new place. Want to plan for that?”

It only took a few seconds of internet searching to find the fair she was talking about and after a cursory sweep of the attractions, I nodded. “Sounds perfect. I have weekends off, so we'll have to plan for that.”

My mind wandered to Ludwig and the fierce scowl that seemed permanently etched into his face. Without thinking, I added on. “I was late today and I doubt the new boss would take kindly to me calling in to go to a fair. He's already less than pleased with me.”

A beat of silence passed, and I could all but feel Naomi's attention zeroing in on the subject. I cursed myself inwardly, but before I could change the topic, she asked. "So your new boss is a he... Is he cute?"

I should have seen this coming and never let the topic get this far. Biting back a groan, I spoke.

"Naomi, he's my *boss*. Beyond off limits."

She snorted and I could all but imagine her flipping her hair with a roll of her eyes. "I'm not asking you to sleep with him, I just want to know if you have eye candy while you work."

Rubbing a hand over my face, I sighed, giving in. There was no point in trying to argue with her, I knew this tone and it would be infinitely easier on me to just go with it.

"Yes, he's attractive, but he's also *grumpy*." As if telling myself more than her, I continued, digging up all the things that made my hair stand on end about him. "He stopped short and then growled at me when I bumped into him, and that's not getting into the permanent scowl all but attached to his face. He can't be eye candy for me if I feel like I'm going to get lectured every time I see him."

She made a low noise of agreement. "You're not wrong on that one. I used to date a guy like that, and wow was that a mistake. He never relaxed and it seriously cramped my style, having to always walk on eggshells around him. Not like my Robby." Her tone shifted, turning all sunshine again as she gushed.

"He's the only man I've ever known to encourage me when I get on a roll. Did I tell you that he bought me roses the other day after I mentioned how down I felt about you moving? He bought me one of every color! Hold up, I have a picture."

Turning off the burner, I readied dinner and glanced at the picture, smiling to myself at the beaming grin on Naomi's

face as she buried her nose into the array of flowers. Robby really was perfect for her.

Hopefully, I'd find someone equally as perfect for me.

Ignoring the familiar sadness clawing its way into my chest, I spoke. "Can I call you back later, Naomi? I just got dinner on the table, and you know how it is."

She made a noise of sympathy. "Yup, I do. Kiss the munchkin for me!" We gave our goodbyes and I put the phone to the side, taking a deep breath and reveling in the calm that talking to her always brought.

I definitely needed that 'fair day,' especially if work made me this tense. By the time we actually went, I'd probably be ready to collapse from it all.

Putting that to the side for now, I called up the stairs. "Jasmine. Dinner!"

A beat passed, then a stampede of steps came. She flashed by me, cheering as she went, and I shook my head, following with a chuckle.

At least I never had to fight her about eating her food. She'd never been picky on that front.

Her shoes, on the other hand, were a whole new story. She hated wearing them and even after the hospital visit, it was still a battle some days.

Sitting across from her, I pulled my plate closer and dug in, listening to her regale me with tales of her day. Contentment settled into my bones as she talked, and not for the first time, I reminded myself that *this* was all I needed.

As long as I had Jasmine and Naomi, everything was perfect.

Chapter 4

The numbers all but swam across the page as I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I'd been staring at this particular paper for what felt like hours and it still didn't make any more sense than it did when I first picked it up. I'd been here a few weeks already, but still adjusting to the mounds of work I needed to complete.

The low hum of activity at the office served as background noise for my frustration as I tried, yet again, to understand. I hadn't been having too many issues with the paperwork before now, but for some reason, this particular sheet was awful.

There was a discrepancy somewhere in here, I knew it. I just...had to find it. No matter how many times I redid the equations, the numbers weren't lining up.

Footsteps thudded to a stop in front of my desk and I reluctantly glanced up, right into the confused face of Kelly. Her brow had a furrow and her lips were tugged into the tiniest frown, her tone low when she spoke.

"Are you alright? You've been stuck on that paper for half an hour now."

Just how obvious was I?

Shaking that off, I bit my lip and considered my options. I hated asking for help at work, especially with my late start. I needed to prove I was capable and that meant doing all my work without having to have my hand held through it.

But I'd have to make an exception this time.

Offering the paper, I sighed. "Something about the numbers isn't adding up. No matter how many times I rework

them, the end result isn't the one listed, but I can't see where it went wrong."

She took it, looking it over as her frown deepened. "I can't see a thing wrong here, are you sure it isn't right?"

I could all but feel the judging eyes of the room on me, and heat crawled over my cheeks. This was why I hadn't wanted to bring it to someone's attention. I must have just done the math wrong, and now I looked like a jerk.

Resolutely keeping my eyes on the desk, I shrugged. "Maybe it is, I didn't get a lot of sleep last night." Kelly hummed her sympathy, giving me back the paper, and I resisted the urge to bury my head into my arms and nap on the desk.

One of the kids at Jasmine's school had the flu and while she'd thankfully dodged catching it, I hadn't. Or maybe it was just a cold or sinus infection. All I knew was my head felt stuffed with cotton and the longer I sat here, the more a headache pounded at my skull. I should have stayed home, but that nagging doubt wouldn't stop.

I needed to prove myself and I couldn't do that by calling in.

Kelly straightened, pulling my attention back to her and away from how miserable I felt. "Let me know if you need help shoving through that mountain of paperwork. There's no shame in asking for help."

I nodded despite knowing I'd be doing nothing of the sort and once she was back at her desk, I threw myself into the papers again. I *would* get this done without any help.

Hours slid by at a painful pace, the headache steadily hammering away behind my eyes only getting worse with each new paper that passed in front of me. The writing was tiny and the longer I stared, the harder it was to make out what was typed.

By the time I finally put the last paper in the correct spot my head was splitting and the sky outside was changing color.

Thankfully Jasmine had an after school practice today so I had time before I needed to pick her up. I didn't realize I'd started drifting off until a deep rumble snapped me awake again.

“Ms. Thomas, work isn't the place to sleep.”

I jerked upright, nearly toppling out of my chair as I took in Ludwig. He stood not a yard away, a frown curling his lips—as was normal—and his arms crossed over his chest. The shirt he'd chosen fit him well and I spared the briefest second to enjoy the sight of his arms before I forced my attention back up to his face.

Ignoring the heat scalding my cheeks, I nodded. “It isn't, which is why I'll be headed home now that I've finished the last of my work.”

Standing, I went to push out my chair only for the world to spin into a sickening blur of color. I braced a hand on my desk, thankful that most everyone had already gone home.

The world righted itself in a minute and Ludwig's expression took on the tiniest flare of concern, one of his hands raised as if to catch me. “Ms. Thomas, did you come into work sick?” There was a note of steel under his tone, and I grimaced.

“Yes, but it's just a little cold, and I managed to work through it.” I braced for whatever he had to say. One thing I'd learned while working here? It was rare he dolled out praise, which meant if he was talking to you, you were about to get chewed on.

To be fair, from what I'd seen everything he pointed out was accurate and he was never cruel about it, but still... would it kill him to smile or compliment someone who did a good job?

Biting that back, I focused on him again as he shook his head. “It doesn't matter if you *can* work through it. There's a policy in place specifically to prevent this when it happens. You read the policy on your first day...right?”

One of his brows raised and it ground against my nerves like glass. Did everything he say *need* to be negative? Forcing all the irritation back with years of experience, I nodded.

“I did, but I also had work that needed to be done. I don’t need to give you another reason to glower at me.” The last bit slipped out against my will and he blinked, tipping his head just a little bit.

“I glower?”

He was kidding, right?

A soft snort dragged from my lungs and I shook my head. “Sir, is there anything else? I have something I need to get done soon and I should probably go home and take some medicine, so I can work tomorrow.”

A flash of something I couldn’t name cleaved through his features, then they shut down again and he shook his head. “You read the policy, so you know that isn’t going to be happening. If I’d known you were sick, I would have sent you home immediately this morning. Come back when you’re well again.”

Frustration burned low in my veins at his insistence on this, and this time it was my turn to scowl. “I don’t have sick time saved up yet and the cold isn’t that bad.” Even if it was, I didn’t want to use that sick time unless absolutely necessary.

His lips pressed into a thin line and he shook his head. “I won’t put tomorrow as a strike against you, and you *won’t* be coming in. In a building as large as this, it’s easy to spread common colds and then they last for weeks longer than needed. Go home and stay there until you’re healthy again.”

I gripped the edge of the desk, the irritation only spiking higher as I growled. “Why are you so insistent about this? Most companies would be delighted with my *not* calling in.”

I’d worked for quite a few that punished you for doing it...

Without thinking, I added on. “With how you act with all of us, I figured you’d be irritated with me not getting my work done more than my coming in while sick.”

He shifted, his arms uncrossing then recrossing after a second. After a loaded minute, he sighed. “I know I have a reputation, but there’s nothing more that I hate than overworked and underpaid employees. Yes, I demand a lot of you all, but I also never expect any of you to work in conditions that aren’t at least passably decent.”

Then he frowned again, deeper this time. “And what exactly do I act like with all of you?”

Through the exhaustion dogging my brain, logic rose up, forcing me to not answer that. He was my boss, a jerk definitely, but still my boss. I needed this job and that meant I couldn’t throw caution to the wind and insult him.

So, instead of telling him what I thought, I shook my head. “Nothing. I take it you’re going to be enforcing your want for me to stay home tomorrow?”

His eyes narrowed, displeased with my changing the subject clearly, but he allowed it. “I will. You’re not allowed in tomorrow at all. If you’re feeling well by the day after, then come back.”

I didn’t respond, gathering my things and pushing off the desk again. This time the world didn’t spin and I took my win where I could. Before I made it out the door, Ludwig called after me, his tone heavy with something I couldn’t name.

“Take care of yourself, Ms. Thomas.”

I nodded, not turning around. Frustration with his insistence on this fueled me all the way to the car, keeping me steady through picking up Jasmine, but when I walked through the door to our humble abode, I dropped into the nearest chair and felt the exhaustion hit in force.

Okay, maybe I shouldn’t have gone into work today, but I’d gotten my work done and that’s what mattered.

Jasmine raced upstairs, a wide smile stretching her lips, and I eyed my phone. There'd been a missed call from Naomi and I should get back to her...

Hitting the dial on her name, I waited for the rings to stop, and after a second her voice drifted through the line. "Hey! How was your day?"

I rubbed a hand over my face and groaned in answer. "I'm getting sick, and my boss was an ass about it."

She made a low noise of sympathy. "What, did he insist you stay and work through it? I think there's a law against that."

Before she could start pulling together some kind of lawsuit or other insanity, I cut her off. "No, I went into work and stayed there willingly, but when he found out I was sick he *lectured* me about the policy and how I should have stayed home. He even demanded I take tomorrow off despite the work I still have to do."

The frustration from before came back at his stubbornness, but before I could sink into it, Naomi spoke again, hesitating.

"Just to make sure I've got this right, he insisted that you not come into work while sick, and you're...angry at him for it?"

I scowled, leaning heavily on my hand as I grumbled. "Of course! I have a mountain of paperwork to do, and this is going to put me behind by a lot. I was fine and I don't appreciate him forcing me to take time off, as if I'm some child."

Naomi sighed. "Thalia, I love you, but in this one case, I think you're overreacting. He has a policy that says you can't work while sick and I have to admit, I'm impressed by that. Most companies don't care about their employees and while yes, he's a strict jerk, he also isn't the worst he could be."

I knew that, but did she have to point it out? I wanted to be irritated with him. Being irritated was better than mooning

over what would never be or worrying about him figuring out what happened all those years ago.

Rubbing the bridge of my nose again, I eased a tiny bit. “I know, it’s just... When he’s not buried in paperwork himself, he’s always pointing out what we’re doing wrong. He never throws a compliment, never admits when we’re doing something right, just constant negativity. It rubs me wrong sometimes.”

It was work, and he was the boss. To a certain extent I knew he needed to stay on top of things, but did he have to be like that? There was no harm in occasionally telling someone they did a good job. Kelly did the work of two or three people some days, and I’d never heard him so much as thank her for it.

Naomi hummed. “Sounds like he has high standards and is used to them being met. Try to keep your head above the water, and don’t give him a reason to start in on you. Take the day off tomorrow, relax, and go back in when you’re feeling better. That’s all I can really offer on this one.”

Leaning back in the chair, I reluctantly gave in. “Fine, fine. I’ll take some medicine and rest until the cold passes. How is everything with you?”

The subject change was painfully obvious but she went with it gracefully. “Things are going perfect. Robby and I are planning a picnic soon. I love the parks here, they’re so scenic...but before I talk your ear off for the next three hours, I’m going to hang up. Get that medicine and sleep, Thalia.”

I hummed my agreement, muttering my goodbyes before hanging up and resting my head on the cool wood of the table. I’d just started to drift off when my phone blared, only this time with a different ringtone. Mom’s.

Answering, I pulled on my best ‘everything is fine’ tone and spoke. “Hey Ma, how are things with you and Dad?”

A beat passed, then she answered. “Fine, but don’t try to fake that you’re okay if you’re not. I raised you, Thalia, I

know when something is wrong. If you don't feel like talking about it, that's fine, but don't try to hide it from me either."

I should have seen that coming. "Sorry, work drama. The new boss is stubborn, has no hesitation in pointing out every flaw he sees, and forced me to stay home tomorrow because I'm sick."

Her low hum came through, the consideration clear. "I could see where the second would chafe you. Ever since you were young you always did your best to compliment others. As for the last bit, that sounds like a responsible business owner."

Dang it, now both her and Naomi were against me on that. "I was fine, and he shouldn't have gotten involved." I grumbled, and Mom waited a second before continuing.

"Honey, why are you so set on this? Usually you would be delighted to know your boss cared about his employees enough to implement something like this. Why is he different?"

She didn't know what happened to make Jasmine, she'd never asked and I'd never offered, past a simple explanation of a one-night stand with lasting consequences. Was now the right time to tell her, though?

I could use her advice...

Decision made, I deflated, eyeing the direction Jasmine had disappeared in. I could hear her playing in her room, so it should be safe to talk, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to talk to *someone* about this.

"Mom, he's Jasmine's father." I said it in a whisper, wary of listening ears, and I could all but hear Mom choke from the other end.

"Her father?! But you said-."

I cut her off, rubbing the bridge of my nose again. "Yes, that she was born from a one-night stand, and she was. We met while I was still working at the bar and things just...escalated

from there. We used protection, but obviously it isn't one hundred percent fool-proof. I tried getting in contact with him, but couldn't."

A sigh dragged from my lungs. "And now I'm working for him. He told me on the first day that he wouldn't give special treatment, and so far, he hasn't seemed interested in bringing up the past."

Thankfully, I was already on edge enough as it was.

This time the silence was loaded and when she spoke, it was the last thing I wanted to hear. "He doesn't know about Jasmine, does he?"

A tiny flash of disapproval wormed into her tone and I cringed.

"No, he doesn't and if I have it my way, he never will. He has the money to fight for custody if that's what he wanted, and I can't risk that. Besides, he's cold and always buried in work. I wouldn't want Jasmine around that anyway."

It felt more like an excuse than anything, but Mom didn't point that out. "I'll support you in whatever decision you make, but I really suggest you consider telling him, Thalia. You never know, he might surprise you."

I sincerely doubted it, but I didn't say that. Instead, I hummed. "I'll think on it. I should probably get some medicine now, before Naomi comes to bust down my door."

She chuckled. "I like that girl. You're right, though. Feel free to call later and update me on that situation. I love you."

"I love you too," I said and hung up, eyeing the clock with disdain. I had too many things to do to sleep yet, but I could fantasize about it.

Chapter 5

Walking through the halls at work, I braced for the mountain of paperwork that waited for me. I'd have to catch up on all the stuff I didn't get done yesterday, plus finish all of today's work on time.

It wasn't impossible, but it'd push me a hair closer to being late for picking up Jasmine. I'd have to keep an eye on the time and pray nothing else came up.

Putting that to the side, I waved at a few of my coworkers before rounding the corner to my desk.

Only to freeze at the almost clear area that met my eyes.

That wasn't right. I should have a mountain of paperwork to get done. Turning to Kelly's desk, I gestured to mine and asked.

"Did someone grab my work by mistake?"

She shook her head, flicking a glance over my area before answering. "Nope, the boss came by yesterday and took it."

He what?

Surprise hit like a brick and it must have been obvious on my face, because Kelly waved a hand. "Don't look so freaked out. He won't get on you for it, if that's what you're worried about. He insists on upholding that policy of his, and whenever he makes one of us stay home, he covers the work so we don't get swamped coming back. It's normal."

That was...surprisingly nice of him.

Not putting a strike on my record was one thing, but I hadn't expected him to go this far. Eyeing his office door,

through which I could just see him pouring over his own paperwork, I felt my estimation of him shift just a bit.

He'd probably had to work late to get all of it done.

Something warm fluttered in my chest, and I buried it in the next second. He did that for *everyone*, I wasn't about to let myself look any further into it.

Sitting at my desk, I pulled my short stack of paper closer and got started. If he was still busy by the time I finished this, I'd ask if he needed help with anything.

It was better than sitting here doing nothing.

It only took a few hours to finish my work, all the clients' files sorted by last name in their correct places, and I snuck a glance to his office.

He looked as if he hadn't moved once, still hunched over his work with that deep furrow to his brow. Giving my empty desk one last look, I stood up and moved deftly through the maze of people.

It was not uncommon for one of us to ask him a question during the day so no one's eyes followed me, thankfully, and in no time I stood in front of him.

The scratch of his pencil paused for a minute and he glanced up, meeting my eyes with a scrutinizing stare. After a second, he nodded. "You look much better today, but that isn't why you came here. What can I do for you?"

Forcing down the nerves trying to riot in my stomach, I answered honestly. "I wanted to thank you for helping with my work. I would have gotten it done, but it was nice not to have to stress about it. Is there any extra paperwork you can delegate? I've finished my work for today, so have time to help with whatever is needed."

He stared in complete bewilderment, then, after a beat, said. "That isn't something to thank me for, it's part of my job here. I don't do it because I want or expect gratitude."

Biting back the irritation yet again, I shook my head. “You may not do it for gratitude, but there’s nothing wrong with showing appreciation when someone does something nice or well.”

His frown intensified, the confusion behind his eyes seeming to deepen too. Then he shook his head. “You’re welcome then, and as for the work, no. I have everything covered.”

I glanced at the various mountains of papers dubiously. “That’s a lot to do,” I said, and he nodded.

“It is, but I’m used to it. You weren’t the only one who caught a cold either. That is my paperwork and two others. Now if there’s nothing else?”

That was a dismissal and, after one last look at the mountain of paperwork, I nodded. “That’s it. Just let me know if you change your mind. I’m happy to help.”

He waved and I left, mind a buzz over the new information I’d gained from that talk. He didn’t seem to understand why I’d thanked him, and something about that sat wrong with me. Hadn’t anyone thanked him for things like that before?

If not, that might explain why he was so harsh on everyone.

Shelving that for later consideration, I sat back down at my desk and offered a hand to Kelly. “I can take some of your work if you want?”

She heaved a sigh of relief and handed a chunk over, “Thank you so much. I was just wondering how I’d get all of it done.”

Considering I could barely see her behind the stacks, that wasn’t surprising.

Focusing on the paper, I threw my attention onto it and nothing else, not even noticing the eyes on me from the head office.

Putting the last of the papers to the side hours later, I stretched both arms above my head and grinned at Kelly. “All done and with a bit of time to spare too.”

She beamed back, offering a hand for a high five that I happily took. One of the papers caught my attention and I skimmed it.

It needed the boss’s signature and after a quick glance toward his door, I gestured for Kelly to head out. “If this is the last thing you have for today, I’ll handle it. I know you were talking about date night, and you wouldn’t want to be late for that.”

The lightest flush worked over her cheeks, and she cleared her throat. “No, I definitely wouldn’t. He wouldn’t hold it against me of course, but still.” Squeezing my hand, she nodded. “Thanks for all the help. If you need anything in the future let me know, and I’ll do my best.”

I didn’t have a chance to tell her it wasn’t necessary before she’d zipped off, leaving me shaking my head at her energy. Bringing the paper to the head office, I knocked on the wood and waved the paper when he glanced up at me with curious eyes.

“I just need your signature on this, and I’m headed home.”

He took it deftly, reading over it for a beat then nodding and putting down his signature. After he handed it back, though, he raised a brow. “I thought you finished early today?”

I shrugged. “I did, so I helped Kelly with her work.”

His mouth pulled into a thin line and the confusion I’d seen before came back. “You could have just left early, though.” There was a question there, even if he didn’t word it like one, and I answered it.

“I could have, but why? I have a job to work, not to go home early. Besides, now Kelly and I both get to go home at a decent time. I even still have time leftover after that.”

I looked at his smaller but still there stack of papers pointedly. “You sure you don’t have anything you need help with?”

He stared me down, things I couldn’t name swirling behind his eyes, before he finally shook his head. “I’m almost done, but...thank you for offering.” He spoke the words as if they were foreign, and it twisted warmth through my stomach.

“You’re welcome,” I said and after a final wave, I left, his gaze like a weight against my back.

Once I safely grabbed my things and headed to pick up Jasmine, I considered his odd behavior. The more I interacted with him, the more confused I got.

He didn’t seem averse to thanking me though it’d definitely sounded new to him. Had no one ever told him to thank people who did nice things, or had it just never occurred to him in a work setting?

I’d been taught that so early on that I couldn’t even remember what age I’d been when Mom explained it to me. Had his parents just never done that?

What kind of parents were they if that was the case?

The mystery that was Ludwig tugged at my mind the entire drive to get Jasmine and even after we got home. He was a paradox, and I wanted to know what made him tick.

Logic screamed to the forefront like a siren before I could get far into that train of thought.

He’s my boss, and I have no business thinking about him outside of work.

I didn’t want him finding out about Jasmine and the best way to ensure that was to *not* get chatty. Yes, he was confusing, but he wasn’t a puzzle I needed to solve. He was a decent boss, and that’s all I needed to know.

Forcing the topic to the side for now, I started dinner. I needed to make sure Jasmine’s homework was done, not to

mention call Mom and update her on the whole 'situation' as she dubbed it.

I didn't have time to mope or brood, I never did.

Chapter 6

The office was buzzing with energy as I put yet another client's file to the side. I'd never expected being a financial advisor to be *this* busy, but at least I was never bored.

Risking a glance around the room, I took in everyone's hurried steps and chatter. We'd been hit with a sudden influx of clients, and everyone was scrambling to keep up. I'd finished early and usually that would mean I would grab someone else's excess work and start on it, but not today.

Jasmine's school was hosting a play and she'd been all but vibrating with excitement for it. I had to be there, and nothing was stopping me.

Just as I went to walk away from my desk though, a stack of papers was dropped on it. Spinning to face the culprit, I pulled up short at the familiar face of Ludwig. Today his hair wasn't quite as neatly styled, probably from him running his hand through it, and his sleeves were rolled to his elbows for better movability.

It was a devastating look on him, but I forced my attention to his face and the confused scowl that rested there.

"You look as if you're leaving." He said, another question that wasn't a question, and I groaned internally. We hadn't butted heads since I was sick, and I hoped to keep that up. Apparently it was not to be.

Straightening, I nodded. "I am. I finished my work and there's something I have to do today."

Kelly brightened, chipping in. "Oh! Is today Jasmine's play at school?"

I dipped my head, hiding the spike of fear worming through me. I knew I shouldn't have mentioned her to Kelly,

but it was too late now. It didn't matter if he knew I had a daughter, as long as he didn't make the connection between her age and our one-night stand.

"It is, and I need to hurry or I'll be late."

I went to move away, but Ludwig shifted just enough to block my path, his face still set in that confused mask. "I didn't know you had a daughter."

Biting back a sigh, I nodded. "I do, and I need to go, or she'll be hurt that I didn't show up for her play."

He swept a look around the room, then locked eyes on me again, his infamous scowl coming back in force. "We've never been this busy before, but you're going to leave early for a child's play?"

He said it as if it was incomprehensible to him and I instinctively bristled. "Of course I am. She's been excited for this play for months. I can't just *not* go."

His frown didn't budge. "There will be other plays; we need all hands on deck here."

Was he seriously going to choose *now* to dig his heels in? He all but forced me to go home when I was sick, but he didn't understand why I needed to be at Jasmine's school play?

None of this made sense, but I also didn't have time to puzzle it out.

"I understand that, but I already made a plan, and I can't stand my daughter up on it. She's expecting me there, so that's where I'll be." I said, tone a touch icy now. This was more like the man I'd gotten used to while working here, the one I *didn't* want near Jasmine.

What if she got attached to him and he never showed up for any of her school events? It would crush her, and he wouldn't even bat an eye at it.

No, I'd made the right decision in not telling him about her, and this just proved it.

His lips thinned, but something about his eyes didn't match the severe expression on his face. There was confusion, yes, but something deeper...

Something old and painful.

It didn't matter, I reminded myself. What did matter was Jasmine, and she was waiting for me.

When he didn't look ready to move out of my way, I bit out. "The best I can offer is coming back to work after her play is finished, but then I'll have to bring her with me."

And I sincerely doubted he'd be okay with that. *I* wasn't okay with that, but for completely different reasons. Jasmine looked, for the most part, like me, but how long would it take someone to see the similarity between her and Ludwig?

The odds were slim, but never zero.

Whatever I'd seen in his eyes vanished behind the stone wall he always kept around his emotions, then he nodded. "That's fine. As long as she's old enough to stay out of trouble without a babysitter."

Whatever, Jasmine was well-behaved, and she'd just have to stay nearby while I worked. Grinding my jaw to not show my irritation, I gave a clipped nod.

"Then I'm leaving, I'll be back in a few hours."

Before he could open his mouth to say anything that would doubtlessly frustrate me further, I brushed by him, snagging my things on the way to the door. All eyes were on me, but this time I didn't care. Let them stare.

I was willing to help where it was needed, but I had plans, and I refused to disappoint Jasmine. I caught Kelly's approving smile from the corner of my eye before the door shut behind me and I headed for the parking lot. The dim glow of the lights nearby would have been soothing, if I wasn't steaming mad.

I'd been right about not including him in her life, with the whole 'sick day' thing and his confusion around thanking

people, I'd *almost* told him about her, just so he knew, but now I could only be relieved I hadn't.

Mom's words chimed back through me but I shelved them, not letting the guilt sink in. I had to do what was best for Jasmine and as long as he showed these colors, he was *not* that.

Forcing the entire topic to the side, I got into the car and drove, already dreading what could happen later when I came back.

Chapter 7

Jasmine all but vibrated against her seat, her costume still on and offering a bit of color to the otherwise dreary car interior.

She'd been a flower, like the rest of her class. The petals were brilliant blue and the shade complimented her eyes. I'd gotten enough pictures for Mom to fill a small photo album, as promised.

She watched through the window, her mouth stretched in a wide smile as she gushed. "I can't wait to see your work! Can I meet Kelly? You made her sound super nice!"

I offered a tense smile and a nod in return. "Of course, but I'll have to work, and you'll need to be on your best behavior. Okay?"

She hummed, only half paying attention as we pulled up to the building. "We're here?" She asked and I nodded, ignoring the sour feeling taking over my stomach.

I'd promised to come back and help out, I couldn't stand them up now.

Taking one of her hands, I led her inside, waving at a few of the others as we went. Doing a quick sweep of each floor as we passed, I heaved a sigh of relief when Ludwig was nowhere in sight.

One less thing to worry about.

Finally we got to my desk, and Kelly set her stack of papers to the side and beamed at Jasmine. "You must be the infamous Jasmine we hear so much about."

Considering I didn't talk about Jasmine a lot for fear of Ludwig hearing...

Still, Jasmine beamed, a pink flush covering her cheeks, so I didn't bother correcting that. Instead, I nodded, putting a hand on her back and gently nudging her toward one of the seats nearby.

"Yup, this is my girl. Now remember the rules, okay? I'm going to have to do a lot of work but once it's over, if you behave, we'll go and get ice cream." I said and she bobbed her head, looking at every little thing as if it would disappear and she needed to take it all in now.

I shook my head at her but didn't comment. Instead, I took my seat and pulled the first pile of papers toward me.

Sneaking a glance sideways to the head office, I asked, just loud enough for Kelly to hear. "I take it the boss is brooding in his office?"

She snorted, barely managing to choke the sound back enough for it not to be heard by others. Once she had that under control, she nodded. "Yeah, after you left he grabbed a chunk of the paperwork and squirreled away. At least you don't have to worry about him getting snippy with Jasmine, right?"

I nodded, but my relief was over a lot more than that. If he stayed holed up, he wouldn't even meet Jasmine. It was the perfect solution, and I sent up a prayer of gratitude for it.

I would take every easy win I could get.

"Job or no, if he'd started in on her after all but twisting my arm to be here when my shift was over, I wouldn't tolerate it." I growled and Kelly nodded, eyes on her paperwork as she talked from the corner of her mouth.

"Same here. Though he seems to be in a fouler-than-usual mood today. He's never had any issues with us leaving for kids' events before."

A scowl carved across my lips, and I scoffed. "Lucky me then." How ironic was it that the only child's event he'd ever taken issue with was his own daughters? Not that he knew that or ever would.

Reaffirming my decision to never tell him, I focused on my papers, letting everything else fade to black. The sooner I finished them, the quicker we could get out of here.

Chapter 8

Ludwig

A sharp throbbing shoved behind my eyes as I set yet another stack of papers to the side. I'd gone through all of them, and they were perfect to the letter, as usual.

Unfortunately, there were plenty more where they came from, and it'd take me all night to get them done. Not that pulling all-nighters was anything new, but it'd be nice to get home at a decent time for once.

Shaking aside the foul mood, I pulled my next pile of papers closer, resolutely ignoring my phone and the missed call it showed. It was my father, and I already knew what he'd want. A status update. If he'd called yesterday I would have picked up instantly and given him a glowing report of how things were going, but today was the opposite.

I hadn't expected the sudden influx of clients, so we were scrambling to get everything finished. The profits for today would look great, but only after we got the paperwork squared away. Until then, I couldn't answer that call.

He'd probably be displeased with how long it took me to respond, but that was acceptable. If nothing else, it was better than the scorn and disappointment he'd doubtlessly heap on if he knew it was this late and all the work wasn't finished.

Stopping long enough to rub between my eyes, I took a deep breath and tried to just *breathe* through it. At least most of the employees had agreed to stay late.

Images of one in particular came against my will.

A set of dark, flashing eyes and a fierceness I hadn't seen on her until today painted behind my lids. Thalia had been ready and willing to force me to move out of her way if I hadn't, and while it was frustrating that the play *had* to fall during this mess, I couldn't help but...admire that.

Had my parents shown up for even one of my school events?

Thinking back, I grimaced. No, they hadn't, and they certainly wouldn't have glared down at their boss to do so, even if they'd managed to make it to one or two. As long as I could remember, work was their life.

Sweeping a glance around at the papers still stacked high around me, I scoffed. And now work was *my* life.

Ignoring the pang twisting deep inside my chest, I forced the thoughts away and started on the newest round of paperwork.

There was no use in sulking, better to just power through and repeat it all tomorrow.

When I was halfway through my stack of paperwork, the door creaked open, the sharp sound driving a spike through my pounding head. Looking up, I massaged my forehead and growled. "What?"

Only to freeze at the small frame hovering in the doorway.

A girl I'd never seen before half hid behind the wood now, watching me warily, and immediately I knew who she was. Thalia's daughter. I hadn't thought I'd meet her, since I was doubtlessly going to be busy in here for the rest of the night, but apparently she'd wandered away from her mother.

Usually that would irritate me, but now I could only take in the features that were so eerily similar to Thalia that it was haunting.

There was almost no trace of her father in her, and not for the first time, I wondered about that. Thalia never

mentioned a father being in the picture, and today she hadn't had anyone to leave the girl with.

Had the father abandoned them after he'd learned of the pregnancy?

Fiery anger burned low at the thought. If that was the case, Thalia deserved more. I'd only had one night to see the real her, but what I'd seen had been stunning.

Sitting next to her on that bar stool and feeling *alive* for the first time in years, just from hearing her laugh, had shifted something in me. Then she'd lit my blood on fire in a way I'd never felt.

But it'd only been one night and when I woke up, she was gone.

It was for the best, I reminded myself. Women like Thalia needed and deserved more than I could give. She would want time from me, and most days I just didn't have that. Forcing away the disappointment the thought came with, I focused on the girl.

"Are you lost?" I asked and she hesitated a beat, still not moving from behind the doorway. The obvious fear tugged at something in my chest, and Thalia's words from before came screaming back.

With how you act with all of us, I figured you'd be irritated with my not getting my work done more than my coming in while sick.

She'd never answered my question about just 'how' I acted. Yes, I had high standards for my employees to meet, but they were never impossible, and I made sure everyone received their proper raises when they worked hard.

The words had gnawed on me then, and they still did now.

Focusing back on the girl that hadn't made a move to leave the doorway or answer my question, I sighed. "I'm sorry

for snapping before, I have a headache, and it's making my temper short."

I softened my tone as much as I could, hoping to wipe away the unease in her expression. I'd never done well with children, never connected with them or been able to converse easily when they addressed me, but for some reason, I didn't want her to be afraid of me.

I half expected her to run back to her mother with stories of how I was mean, which would be the cherry on top of my day, but to my surprise she lost her wariness and inched further into the room, her mouth pulled into a sympathetic frown.

"Mom gets headaches too, she tries to hide them from me, but I know." Her voice was low and she stopped a few feet in front of my desk, wide eyes locked on me. "Do you have medicine? Mom takes medicine and they get better."

The genuine concern dragged a corner of my lips up and I nodded. "I already took it, but it doesn't seem to be helping."

She looked down. "Oh." A beat passed, then she recovered, still keeping her voice down as she asked. "What do you do here? Mom said she helps people decide what to do with their money."

A decent enough explanation for what a financial advisor was, considering the girl's age. Still, she asked me a question, and I wasn't about to ignore her.

"I run the company here."

She tipped her head, curiosity clear as she rounded my desk and plopped to sit with her back against it, still able to see me from her new vantage point. "What does that mean, though? What do you do?" She looked at the paperwork and wrinkled her nose. "Looks like what Mom does."

A chuckle dragged from me and I shrugged. "It is, to a point. We both do paperwork, but the contents are different. Your mother helps people decide what to do with their money. I set the schedule for people like your mother who come in to

work. I do some work with clients, arranging in-person meetings, and I deal with paperwork relating to the company.”

She considered that for a long beat, then nodded. “Sounds boring. Do you like doing it?”

This time a tired laugh came. “Not really, but it’s my job. I doubt anyone truly enjoys paperwork.”

Her nose wrinkled again. “I don’t like homework. Is that the same thing?”

I hummed, amused by her reactions. “For a child’s equivalent, yes.”

That expression stayed on her face for a minute, then it slid into something sadder. “I don’t like homework, it’s confusing, and I have to ask Mom for help with it. She’s always busy, though, and I don’t want to bother her with it.”

This time it was my curiosity that rose and before I could stop myself, I asked.

“What about your father?”

Immediately I wished I could suck the words back in. This was a severe breach of Thalia’s privacy, and it was *wrong*. Children would answer any question you asked, even if it wasn’t their information to give away.

Besides, it was none of my business who Thalia was with or not with. I had my night with her and I’d made the choice not to try to contact her afterward.

The girl’s voice snapped me back to the present before I could tell her not to answer that.

“I don’t have one.” She stared intently at her shoes, eyes darker with something I couldn’t name. “I asked Mom a few times, but she always got this sad look. I didn’t want her to be sad..” She finally looked up at me. “You know?”

I nodded, watching as she curled tighter into herself and continued. “I don’t want her to be sad, so I stopped asking. I think...” She trailed off, the pain becoming more prominent.

“I think he left because of me. A friend of mine at school said that’s what her dad did, and her mom gets the same look that mine does when someone mentions him.”

She ducked her head into her knees now. “I didn’t want to make him leave.” The words were a painful whisper, and I couldn’t even pretend to be paying attention to my paperwork now.

I didn’t know this girl, but seeing her like this was tearing at something in my chest. I could examine why that was later, but now I needed to help.

Pressing my chair back, I shifted to face her and spoke; putting every ounce of certainty I could into my tone while hoping the words came out right.

“You didn’t make him leave.”

She blinked, breaking from her sadness long enough to watch me with open confusion and the tiniest bit of hope. “How do you know?” She asked.

Choosing my words carefully, I answered. “People like that will always leave for one reason or another. Even if you hadn’t come along, he would have left further down the line when things got hard... Or maybe he didn’t know about you, or didn’t want to leave.”

I was running off the assumption that her father had purposefully left, but for all I knew he was a soldier who passed while overseas. I didn’t want to potentially slander a good man, but I needed to get that sadness out of her eyes...

She perked up a bit, her hope growing. “You think so?”

I nodded and a smile stretched across her face, the sight pulling away the unease that’d slid under my skin the second I’d seen her frown.

“Thank you. Mom told me once that he was never going to be here, but I think I’m okay with that. I have her, after all, and my Mommy is amazing.”

I nodded. “She is, indeed. Though I just realized I never introduced myself.” Holding out a hand, I continued. “My name is Ludwig, and you are?”

She straightened, taking on a serious mask as she took my hand and shook it, just as grim as any of the businessmen I met as she did.

“I’m Jasmine, and it’s nice to meet you.”

I didn’t have a chance to say anything else before Kelly walked in, her arms full of papers that immediately made the ache behind my eyes flare up.

She offered a sympathetic smile my way before setting them on a clear corner of my desk. “They all need your signature.” She said and I nodded tiredly, waving her away.

When she caught sight of Jasmine though, she froze. “Oh! I didn’t even realize you’d wandered off. I’m sorry, Mr. Evans!” She went as if to corral Jasmine away, and I grunted.

“She was just asking questions, and I’m sure the office isn’t the most entertaining place for a child. She isn’t causing a ruckus or distracting people from their work, so it’s fine. I need to stretch anyway. I’ll bring her back to Thalia in just a moment.”

Kelly blinked, taken aback by that for some reason, then she nodded with a smile. “Okay.” Then she looked down to Jasmine and paused, her eyes widening a hair before she shook herself.

“You know, it’s kind of eery, having two sets of your eyes staring at me.” She muttered, then before I could comment, she left.

Jasmine looked at me, the bright colors of her costume—a flower?—contrasting with her dark hair, but only now did I actually *look* at her eyes. They were the exact same color as mine. That was a rarity, since I’d yet to meet anyone with even a similar shade that was close to mine-

Wait.

Doing some quick mental math, my heart stopped in my chest as a suspicion began to form.

My throat went painfully dry and I had to swallow around it several times before I could speak. “Jasmine, how old are you?”

Please, let her say anything other than-

“Seven. How old are you?” She asked, and my heart went from frozen to racing in the span of a blink. Seven years old, adding nine months that almost perfectly lined up with the night Thalia and I...

The world tilted on its axis, and my stomach rolled.

She could have slept with someone else after or before me. We’d had a one night stand so it was entirely plausible she’d had others—she was a healthy and beautiful woman after all—but Jasmine’s *eyes*.

Something settled in my chest, gripping tightly to my heart as instincts screamed that she was mine.

No, that she was *ours*.

If I hadn’t already been sitting, I would have dropped from how weak my knees went. And before I could absorb that, Thalia herself ran in, a few strands of her hair in disarray and her eyes wide with worry.

When she locked those eyes on us, that worry increased.

It was only when she met my gaze head-on that I saw the dawning realization and *fear* that it hit me.

She’d known from the start that Jasmine was mine, and she hadn’t said anything.

Hurt blitzed to the forefront, tearing through my shock. Why hadn’t she told me? This wasn’t something to keep a secret. If I’d known, I would have...done *something!*

Flashes to my childhood came roaring back, memories of both my parents backs as they left without so much as a

backwards glance at me. If I'd known she was mine I never would have left Thalia to raise her alone.

But would I have really made a good parent?

The poisonous voice chipped in, dripping its doubts over my still racing heart. I'd never done well with children, I had no good role model to take after when it came to caring paternal figures, and more often than not, I was buried in work.

Was that why Thalia hadn't told me? Did she sense that too?

Without thinking, I asked, my tone cracking in a way I'd never heard before.

"Thalia, is she?" I couldn't even finish the question, but the way her eyes shut tight told me all I needed to know.

Jasmine *was* mine.

Chapter 9

Thalia

Damn it all!

I'd looked away from her for what felt like one minute, and she'd done the exact thing I'd needed her not to. She'd found Ludwig and somehow, he knew.

And there wasn't a doubt in my mind that he didn't know, the way he was staring at me, as if he'd seen a ghost, confirmed that.

There was no shoving this back into its bag, he knew, and now it was time to fess up.

Jasmine looked between us, confusion growing more by the minute and I fought the urge to just break down and cry. There was nowhere I could send her, no one who could watch her so I could have this conversation in private.

The pressure of being her only parent pushed down on me, not for the first or the last time, and I fought through the frustration. Forcing a smile for her benefit, I nodded back toward the office.

"Honey, can you go and sit at my desk for a bit? I have to talk to Mr. Evans."

Jasmine pouted but got up dutifully. "Can I come back afterward? I wasn't done asking him things."

That was probably what'd gotten me into this mess, knowing my daughter's curiosity. Keeping the smile plastered to my lips, I gestured toward the door. "We'll talk about it afterward."

She left, Ludwig's eyes following her as if he couldn't look away. Once she was out of sight though, that gaze riveted to me, and was that...hurt I saw?

He straightened, still looking as if he'd been bowled over, but now somewhat more composed as he asked. "Thalia, I need a straight answer, and I need it *now*." His tone hardened, and I instinctively bristled.

He shouldn't be demanding answers from me, he had no right. I'd tried to contact him when I'd first found out. It wasn't my fault he'd been smoke in the wind.

No, but you could have told him after you started working under him.

The voice came, and it sounded suspiciously like my mother.

Yes, I could have, but just today he'd brushed off her play as being something inconsequential. Didn't that prove more than anything that he shouldn't be in her life, in *either* of our lives?

Conflict blazed through me, but seeing the set to his jaw, I shoved it all down. I could puzzle all that mess out later; I had a man to deal with before I could even begin to work out that particular issue.

Straightening, I crossed my arms and nodded. "Yes, she's the product of that night. Apparently the condom broke, and neither of us knew it."

He heaved out a breath, one of his hands running through his hair until it was a mess, the careful style I was used to seeing on him long gone. Then he spoke, and my attention swiveled away from his hair.

"Why didn't you tell me? Back then, I could understand. You only had a first name to go off of, and I left to run this company the day after. But why not now?"

The hurt I thought I'd seen before burned brighter and leaked into his tone, guilt inching up to choke me even as I

looked away.

“Because...” I said, trying to find the right words that didn’t come down to ‘I didn’t want you in our lives.’ When they didn’t come, I gave him the next best thing.

“Because I didn’t want to complicate things.”

That was the wrong answer.

He shook his head, finally standing from his desk to come around in front of me. His arms crossed over his chest and he scowled, the familiar expression edged with some new and sharp.

“So what, you were just going to *not* tell me I have a daughter? Forever?”

That hurt was becoming more prominent and I gritted my teeth against the anger fighting to come to the surface. It wouldn’t help anything right now. The cat was out of the bag, and I had two options. I could flat-out demand he stay out of our lives and potentially risk a custody battle, *or* I could try to work with him.

He looked genuinely hurt that I hadn’t told him about her; that was at least a step in the right direction. If nothing else it proved he wasn’t the icicle I thought he was.

Doubts rose, raking their nails down my back even as I made my decision. “That was the plan, yes,” I said, but before he could say anything, I continued. “Can you really blame me though? This entire situation has the potential to destroy everything I care about.”

He lurched back as if I’d slapped him. “How so?” He asked, still stunned, but recovering fast.

Mirroring him and running a hand through my hair, I sighed. “You’re well off. Obviously. You could probably fight me for custody and win. I’ve seen those cases before and dreaded them happening to me. I tried to find you when I first learned I was pregnant, but I couldn’t; now you all but dropped into my lap, but I *work* for you.”

I wavered between us. “It’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

And that’s not even getting into my doubts about you as a person.

I didn’t say that bit, instead focusing on him as his brow furrowed and a different kind of pain inched into his expression.

“I want to make one thing clear. Above all else, I will *never* try to take her from you. Whatever we decide from here, she is your daughter just as much as she’s mine. More so, since you’ve spent the past seven years raising her.”

He stared right into my eyes as he said it, and despite the doubts all but screaming through me, I believed him. Something told me he wouldn’t lie about this.

He could still hurt Jasmine by leaving later down the line, but at least I didn’t have to worry about a custody battle. Hurt could be soothed and reassured, but that?

A chill worked down my spine and I took a deep breath to disperse it.

That may have cleared one of my biggest fears but we were far from done here, as he proved when he continued.

“That being said, I want to...be there for her. I would have been from the start if I’d known. I don’t want to be a shadow or someone she doesn’t know. Someone she thinks left because of her.”

That snapped my attention upward and I asked, voice sharp. “Is that what she thinks? I never told her that!”

He shook his head, a flash of guilt coming forward. “No, you didn’t, but she told me she asked about her father and you looked sad when she did. One of her friends at school’s father *did* leave when the mother learned she was pregnant, and Jasmine...”

Made a connection that wasn’t there. Good God, how long had she been stewing over that?

Sick worry twisted and writhed in my stomach, the urge to run to her and tell her immediately that wasn't the case nearly overwhelming me, but I held it back. At least for now. Ludwig first, *then* Jasmine.

Forcing that subject to the side for now, I looked back at him and asked, doing my best to keep my tone gentle. "You want to be there for what though? To what extent do you want to be involved?"

He sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know. What all is there to be involved in? What would you be okay with me being there for?"

He was just as lost as I was on this as I was, and somehow that soothed me. He always seemed to know what he was doing, just what to say to get his way, but now he seemed more...human.

Putting that aside for now, I thought about it. "Well, first, we'd have to *tell* her. I don't want her thinking for a minute longer than necessary that she grew up without a father for any reason other than I couldn't find you."

He nodded. "Agreed, but what then?"

Staring at the closed door, I answered. "Maybe we let her choose? Knowing Jasmine, she'll want to know you, ask you thousands of questions, probably drag you into our various 'family day' things..." I hesitated, eyeing the sheer amount of paperwork piled on his desk. "Are you sure you want to sign up for that?"

He looked at the papers, too, his face twisting into a grimace that only deepened when his phone rang. Shooting a short but no less pointed glare at the machine, he ignored it, putting his back to the paperwork.

"I don't mind the thought of any of that. I'll be upfront and say that I am busy most of the time. I'm not sure how much I'll be able to do, but I want to try."

I couldn't ask more of him than that, no matter how much I wished I could.

Though there was one thing I could do to hopefully lessen the potential pain for Jasmine...

Meeting his eyes, I spoke. "Alright, but if you can't make it to something or don't want to, *say so upfront*. Don't lie and tell Jasmine that you'll try, or that you'll think about it. If you can make it, you're welcome to be there. If you can't, don't lead her along. I don't want to have to soothe my crying daughter because you said you would be somewhere, and then you don't come."

I hardened my tone to diamond, making sure he understood how dead serious I was about this. He winced, but to his credit, nodded.

"That's fair. I wouldn't want to let her down so I would have done that anyway."

The tight knot of nerves in my chest abated a bit. "Okay, so...how do you want to do this? I can bring her home and tell her there alone, or if you want, I can wait until you're there to tell her." I glanced at his desk again, his phone sounding off for the second time.

"It looks like whatever we decide, it won't be tonight, though."

He grimaced. "No, I still have to finish all the work before I can leave, but how about tomorrow, if that works for you? I want to be there for this."

His eyes were set in his decision, and I agreed. "Alright, tomorrow then." And I could only hope this wasn't going to bite me in the ass...

Chapter 10

Ludwig

I watched Thalia's back as she moved toward her desk again, only looking away when she was completely out of sight.

Once she was, I slumped back in my chair and heaved in a shuddering breath, my heart slamming against my ribs loud enough that she must have been able to hear it.

I'd just agreed to be a father, not a mystery man that Jasmine would never know, but a *father*. A chill rolled down my spine at the thought and my phone rang again, as if sensing my unease. I didn't have to look at the caller ID to know who that was.

I couldn't ignore it anymore.

Pushing past the sick swirling in my gut, I answered. "Evans Financial Services." I could at least pretend I hadn't known it was him.

Father's voice was ice cold when he spoke, "How kind of you to finally pick up. I suppose the office is busy today?"

Straightening in my chair, I braced for whatever he was about to say and agreed. "It is. We're having a record-breaking day for profit, and I'm handling clients nearly back to back."

Thankfully no meetings yet; those were all scheduled for next week, so I could get the paperwork situated beforehand.

He hummed lowly, dispassionately. "I would assume so, since it took you so long to answer your phone. At least it was

due to clients though; it would have been the height of rudeness to answer me while in a meeting.”

I held my tongue, knowing when not to speak. A few beats passed, then he continued as I knew he would.

“I won’t waste your time with idle chatter. I sent some papers over for a dozen new clients that my contacts rounded up. Make sure they’re treated well.”

I moved to my computer, shifting through my emails until I found his and opened it. It would take me even longer to finish work now, but I didn’t say that. Instead, I marked the new clients as priority and answered.

“I have them here and will start on getting their paperwork straightened immediately.”

He made a noise that was the closest I’d ever heard to approval from him; then his tone turned cold again. “I have to go. Be sure to pick up sooner than the *third* call next time.”

I didn’t have a chance to respond before he’d hung up, leaving me to stare at my phone with the familiar hollowness that always came from talking to him. Not that talking to my mother was any better...

Briefly I considered calling him back to inform him about Jasmine, but quickly decided against it. For one, Thalia may not be comfortable with that yet, and for two...My father would *absolutely* use that against me if he knew.

It didn’t matter that I had no idea before today or that we’d used protection. He would still hold it against me.

I didn’t need to give him any more ammunition over thinking I couldn’t uphold the company without him here. He already not so subtly hinted at that anytime he visited for his regular checks and inspections. No, if I told him about Jasmine, it would be *after* I had a handle on how to be a parent.

Putting the thoughts to the side before I could brood over them, I faced my computer and the new work that’s been

dropped in my lap. I didn't have time to brood.

It took the better part of an hour to get all the clients situated with meetings set, but when I pushed my chair back, satisfaction welled.

Father's expectations were impossible to meet, but that didn't mean I couldn't be proud of what I managed.

"You may not do it for gratitude, but there's nothing wrong with showing appreciation when someone does something nice or well."

Thalia's words echoed back through me, and I allowed myself a moment to soak them in. I'd never heard that before, from anyone, and it almost seemed too foreign to contemplate. She made it look so easy, appreciating the small things people did.

Maybe later I would ask her how she did it.

Focusing back on the paperwork, I put my phone to the side and got back to work. My father wasn't going to be happy if he learned there was this much leftover at the end of the day, and the last thing I needed was him barging in to critique every little thing I'd done since the last time he came.

I'd have to deal with that later, but hopefully I could stave it off a bit.

Flashes of his scowl and the disapproving glare that never seemed to leave his face blurred behind my eyelids every time I blinked, further souring my mood.

Didn't Thalia say that I always walked around with a scowl?

A chill worked up my spine, and an icy fist gripped my stomach at the comparison. Surely I wasn't as bad as him?

The thoughts dug their heels in and refused to budge, spreading poison outward until I could hardly think through them. A knock on the door yanked me back to the present and I looked up to see Kelly, her fist still resting on the door with palpable hesitation.

Whatever was on my face made that hesitance worse, and I instinctively shifted my expression back into its usual mask.

“How can I help you?” I asked, and she took a step into the office.

“I just wanted to let you know I’m headed home.”

I nodded, eyeing the clock and grimacing at the sheer amount of time it would take me to get the rest done. Before I could calculate the amount and further darken my mood, my previous worries came back, and I asked.

“Do I scowl often?”

She blinked, clearly surprised, but before I could take it back she made a gesture with her hand. “Kind of? It gets worse when you’re stressed.”

Apparently Thalia had been right on that. The pit in my stomach deepened, and I nodded again. “Thank you, you’re free to go.”

She left, sparing a confused glance over her shoulder at me before she did. Once I was alone in the office, I pressed both palms to my eyes and groaned quietly.

Did I at least not constantly glare at people with disapproval like he did?

No matter how hard I tried to think back, I couldn’t pinpoint a time I truly took out my displeasure on an employee, not unless they’d done something catastrophic to earn it.

The sick feeling didn’t abate and I sighed, knowing it wouldn’t be leaving anytime soon. Maybe tomorrow I could talk to Thalia about it and ask for her opinion. She wasn’t afraid to give me a brutally honest answer and right now, I needed that.

I didn’t want to be *him*...

Shelving that for tomorrow, I pulled over another stack of paper and focused on it. For now, this was what I needed to deal with. The rest could come later.

Chapter 11

Thalia

Jasmine all but vibrated out of her skin as she bounced around the kitchen at the speed of light. Her excited chattering only added to my pounding headache, but I kept my smile firmly in place.

Today was the day.

I hadn't told her anything other than the fact that Ludwig was coming over, but that'd been enough to send her into hyperdrive. Even now she was listing out which stuffed animals she'd be introducing him to.

Hopefully she'd take the news well.

Forcing down my nerves with a deep breath, I tugged her to a stop and reminded. "Easy, Jasmine. He should be here soon, and then you can ask as many questions as you want, but we have to talk first, remember?"

She had no idea what that talk entailed, but she knew she would be involved. She beamed up at me, nodding with all the seriousness she could muster.

"I'm going to be part of an *adult* talk!" She crowed, squirming in place, and I chuckled weakly.

"Yeah, you will be."

A knock sounded on the door, pulling me back to the present, and before I could make a move for it, Jasmine was across the house. "I've got it!" She called, and I turned the corner just in time to watch her swing the door open to a bewildered Ludwig.

He stared down at her in equal parts shock and amusement, but that expression disappeared in the next second when Jasmine latched to his waist in one of her typical death-grip hugs.

His eyes widened to hilarious proportions and he swung to stare at me, both his hands in the air as if he'd never gotten a hug before. I couldn't help it, I chuckled.

That look was too perfect on the usually put-together man and, after a second of thought, I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture.

He blinked, obviously taken by surprise, then his scowl came back with a force. It didn't quite have the same impact with his arms still in the air, but the message was clear.

Stop taking pictures and help me.

I put my phone away and spoke. "You're either going to have to hug back or tell her to let you go." Jasmine understood 'no,' but I wanted *him* to be the one to tell her that. If he wasn't comfortable, he needed to be okay with saying so.

I wouldn't always be right here to back Jasmine off, and he had to be okay doing it himself.

Instead of politely requesting her to release him, as I expected, Ludwig's face shifted into a mask of conflict. Then, after a long beat, his hands settled on her back. He patted it, not pulling her against him but not pushing away either.

Without a doubt, it was the most awkward hug I'd ever seen, but the fact he even did it despite not being comfortable...

Something wiggled in my chest, warmth shooting out in waves as he patted her one last time, then gently pulled away. Jasmine let him, that beaming smile still firmly in place as she bounced around his legs.

"I've been so excited for you to be here! I have a bunch of stuffed animals to introduce you to." I cleared my throat pointedly when she looked ready to lead him to her room.

She pouted, remembering the talk. “After we talk.” She recovered quickly, smiling again as she puffed up. “I get to have an adult talk.”

He blinked, clearly not sure what to say to that, but before I could come to his rescue, he did something I’d never seen before, at least not since the one night we’d shared.

The hard line of his jaw softened and he smiled, just a small one, but the impact it left was nearly a hammer to my chest. Even years later, I remembered that smile, and seeing it now, pointed down at Jasmine, sent my heart into a series of spins.

His smile stayed as he nodded. “That you do.”

Then he looked at me, the uncertainty coming back as he waited for me to take the lead. Shaking aside the warm and floppy emotions, I gestured for him to take a seat in the living room, my other hand corralling Jasmine in.

Once we were all seated, Jasmine on the cushion between us, I started.

“Honey, I know you’ve wanted to ask about your father for a long time...”

Her smile fell into a nervous frown, her eyes darting to Ludwig with open betrayal. Before she could be hurt that he’d spilled her secret, I cut in. “He had a good reason for telling me. Do you want to hear it?”

She still pouted, not happy that he’d revealed that bit of information to me, but she nodded, and I took one of her hands.

“He told me because he was worried about you, and...” I trailed off, bracing for this next part. “Because he wants to be here. As your father.”

It took a few seconds for the meaning to sink in, but when it did her head whipped around to face him, eyes wide now with surprise and the tiniest flicker of hope.

“You do!?”

He didn't have a chance to do more than nod before she looked back at me with a confused frown. "But I thought you said if I had a Daddy it would be because you were dating someone?" She looked between us, eyes narrowed. "You are boyfriend and girlfriend, right?"

Smart girl.

I couldn't help but smile just a bit as I ran a hand through her hair. "We're not, and usually, yes, that would be how it works. But our situation is special."

Picking my next words very carefully, I continued. "I never told you about your father, but that wasn't because of you." I paused, tucking a finger under her chin to make sure she was looking at me. "He didn't even know you were here with me."

Her shoulders eased a bit, but the confusion stayed. "You didn't tell him?" She asked and I sighed, trying to figure out how to word this to avoid the birds and the bees.

"I didn't know at first. Remember when your friend Maria's mother was having a baby? And the baby grew in her belly?"

She nodded, and I continued. "I didn't know I was pregnant with you, and by the time I found out, I couldn't get in touch with him." I could all but feel Ludwig's eyes on me now, drilling in and I sighed, looking up to meet his gaze.

There was a quiet kind of pain there that I understood and I spoke, this time to him. "I tried asking around, but no one knew him, and the hotel he stayed at wouldn't give me any information. So I gave up and raised you alone."

He dipped his head the slightest bit, letting me know he understood. Turning back to Jasmine, I finished. "Your father didn't know you existed, but now he does...and if you'd be okay with it, he wants to be here."

It took her a few seconds to understand what I meant, but when she did, she spun to face him and pointed. "The lady said we had the same eyes!"

He jerked at the sudden volume, but nodded. “We do. I didn’t even realize until she mentioned it. That’s what I was talking to your mother about when you left. I wanted to be sure I was right.”

Jasmine bit her lip, excited but uncertain as well. “So, you want to stay?”

His throat bobbed on his next swallow, the same nerves I felt rolling just behind his eyes as he nodded. “Yes, although you’ll have to be patient with me. I’m not used to...any of this. Can you do that?”

She nodded, her sunny smile coming back with force now. “Of course! Mom says being patient is important. She’s super patient with me when we have to do math.” She stuck her tongue out. “Math is confusing and I don’t like it, but Mom helps me understand. I can do that for you!”

Ludwig took it in stride, that small smile coming back. “Sounds perfect.” Then he looked at me. “I’ll need your patience as well, and quite a bit of advice. I’m not used to children, but I’ve always been a fast learner.”

Reaching around Jasmine, I hesitated for a second, then patted his shoulder soothingly. “I didn’t know either when I first started. It’s normal. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

Mom had been my saving grace when I’d been pregnant and at a loss for what to expect or do, she’d walked me through every bit of it, and I would never stop being grateful to her for that.

Ludwig blinked, surprised. “It’s normal?” His head tipped sideways a bit, and I laughed, nodding.

“To an extent, yeah. Unless you grew up with siblings, you generally don’t have experience with kids until you have them.”

It’d been one of the biggest shifts of my life, incorporating Jasmine, but I would never regret it. Hooking an

arm around her, I squeezed. “Thankfully, I just happened to have the best little girl to learn with me as I went.”

Jasmine squirmed, laughing at my grip. Once she’d wiggled around to face me, she threw her arms around my neck and flung herself into my lap.

“And I have the best Mom!”

My heart melted and when I glanced up at Ludwig, I nearly did a double-take at the soft look to his eyes. Then he caught my gaze and froze, the uncertainty from before coming back.

He cleared his throat. “I doubt I’ll be that good.”

Jasmine pulled away and huffed. “Mom says no one is good at everything to start.”

Pride puffed up my chest and I nodded, nudging him soothingly. “She’s right. I wasn’t great to start either, and at least you don’t have to worry about dirty diapers and two-hour feedings.”

Those had been harrowing while I was working toward my degree, but with my family, I’d made it through.

He jerked, eyes widening a hair before leveling on me. “Two-hour feedings?”

I nodded. “Yup, when babies are first born it’s every two hours, then as they get older you space it further apart.”

The surprise faded from his features, then guilt took its place. “And you dealt with that alone.” He muttered, eyes trailing down to his hands that were clenched into fists in his lap.

It was endearing that it bothered him, but there was no point in brooding over the past. “I did, to a point, but there was nothing you or I could have done to change that. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

Under his breath, he grumbled. “I could have given you my last name or my number.”

Before he could get far into that, I rolled my eyes. “And I could have done the same, but we didn’t. We can play the blame game, or we can move on.”

He flicked a quick glance to Jasmine, then back to me with a sigh. “I wish I could have been here from the start.”

Genuine longing twinged his tone, and it tugged at my heart. How many times had I stayed up late, staring at my ceiling while wishing I’d had someone to share all the little moments with?

Too many to count.

Reaching for him again, I took his hand and squeezed. “So do I.” Seeing how he was reacting to Jasmine now, it was almost like a completely different person from who he was at work.

He was like the man I’d met in that bar years ago, the one with an easy smile and eyes that lit up when I laughed.

Until now I’d written that man off as a figment of my imagination or long dead, but now...

Now I wasn’t so sure.

Taking my hand back after a minute, I watched as Jasmine perked up, seeming to realize something. “I’m going to have a dance recital soon. Will you be there? Pretty please?”

Her eyes expanded and her lip stuck out. Ludwig froze at the expression, looking to me with open uncertainty.

“When is it?”

Some of my previous happiness drained from the look in his eyes. He’d been busy last night, and something told me that he wasn’t going to be available for this.

There was no better time to start introducing Jasmine to this, I supposed.

Bracing for her disappointment, I answered. “This coming up Monday at noon.”

I could practically see the numbers flying behind his eyes as he thought about his schedule, then he grimaced, shaking his head. “I can’t. I have meetings stacked all throughout the day thanks to the uptick we had yesterday.”

Genuine regret lingered in his tone, and Jasmine’s face fell. “Oh, okay.” She didn’t do it on purpose, but I could all but see how her disappointment hit him like a brick.

He raised a hand, not sure what to do. “I wish I could go, if that helps any. The meetings are long and boring. Watching you would be infinitely more enjoyable.”

Jasmine perked up a little bit, taking the hand he’d raised and nodding. “They sound boring.” Then the proverbial light bulb flashed above her head and she turned to me, eyes sparking with hope. “You always record it, right?”

Already seeing where this was going, I nodded. “Yup. I have all your recitals, plays, and ceremonies on picture or video.”

Ludwig jerked to stare at me, eyes wide with shock. “*All* of them?”

I’d never heard him sound so thunderstruck, and I hummed. “Yeah, we can watch some of them later if you’d like?”

His eyes softened again, and he nodded. “I would like that.” Then he asked. “If you could do a live stream on social media, I could probably catch at least a few minutes of it between meetings, then watch the full video with you when I finish with work?”

Jasmine all but vibrated from happiness and seeing that, I agreed. “That sounds fine. Mom is usually there too, so she can do the regular recording while I manage the live.”

No one but him would be watching it, since I never talked with the rest of my family, but even the thought that he *wanted* to was enough to spread fluttery warmth through me.

I never thought he'd try this hard to be a part of her life, and he'd even made a point of telling her he couldn't come like I'd asked! I'd misjudged him by hilarious proportions, and I could only hope he kept it up. I'd never been happier to be wrong before, and in this case, I didn't want to be right.

Jasmine may not have ever strictly said it out loud, but she wanted a father, and if *this* was the real Ludwig, the one hidden under all the layers of grump, then I wanted him in our life for more than just Jasmine's sake.

The best we'd have would be friendship and co-parenting, but that was more than I'd ever thought to have with him after our one night.

It would have to be enough.

Ludwig straightened, nerves coming back now as he cleared his throat. "Ah, your mother probably won't be all that happy to hear about me."

Jasmine tipped her head, confusion clear. "Why wouldn't she be?"

I patted her hair, soothing him in the same motion. "Actually, I don't think she'll be all that against you. She understands the circumstances and how determined you are to be here will actually work in your favor."

Considering she'd wanted me to tell him about Jasmine, it wasn't a stretch of the imagination to say she wanted to at least give him a chance.

Some of his worry cleared and Jasmine took the opportunity to chime in again, her eyes all but glowing. "Since he can't make it to the recital, can we plan a family day with him?"

I figured she'd ask that, and while I had no problems with it, that schedule of his was going to make things interesting...

I looked at him, leaving the answer in his hands, and he pulled out his phone with a frown. "This week is booked solid,

but we could probably do something next weekend?” The offer was hesitant but genuine, and Jasmine nodded.

“I don’t have school on the weekend!” Then she paused, remembering that she had to get permission for such things, and turned to me. “Can we?”

At least she remembered eventually. Biting back a chuckle, I nodded. “That sounds fine. We can figure out what we’ll do soon. For now, I need to get everything ready for dinner.”

Sparing a glance at Ludwig, I offered. “You can stay, if you want?”

He opened his mouth, sucking in a breath to answer with a look that almost seemed hopeful, but then his phone blared to life and he grimaced. He glanced at the caller ID and his scowl deepened. His hand drifted over the phone, a war playing out across his features, before finally he shut his phone off and nodded.

“I would like that.” He said, and despite the action being small, something told me that him turning off his phone was a *big* thing to him. Heeding that instinct, I smiled, making sure he could see how much I appreciated the gesture.

“Then I’ll get started.” The grimace faded into a small smile, his face opening up into something less menacing. When I realized we’d been silently staring at one another for a minute or so, I cleared my throat and addressed Jasmine.

“Why don’t you tell him how your day went while I get dinner ready?”

She lit up, immediately clamping to his hand and tugging his attention to her. “Good idea, Mom! I made a new friend, and she’s awesome. I can’t wait for you to meet her, she likes drawing, and lions, and-.”

His eyes widened, the sudden onslaught of chatter surprising him, but to his credit he didn’t shush her. Despite being overwhelmed, he nodded along, now completely absorbed in Jasmine’s story.

I shook my head, walking to the kitchen while digesting everything that's happened today. Jasmine had taken it well, better than I thought to be honest. Was that because she'd secretly wanted a father figure?

A pinch of guilt that I hadn't noticed hit before I pushed it away. Guilt was useless, and until now, I wouldn't have been able to do anything about it anyway. It was better to focus on the present and enjoy it.

With that in mind, I started making dinner, keeping an ear out to make sure Jasmine wasn't giving him too hard of a time. So far he was keeping up admirably and when I peeked out to check on them during a quiet lull, my heart twisted.

Jasmine had turned on her cartoons and was now happily watching, half curled against Ludwig. The man was the picture of awkward, his frame tense to a painful degree, but he didn't look unhappy to be there despite the child's cartoons he was watching.

Familiar warm and squishy feelings swept through me at the sight, ones I'd felt for him only one night years ago, and when they stayed after a minute, I slammed cold reality down on top of them.

He was willing to be here as a father to Jasmine, but that didn't mean we were picking up where we left off. We hadn't even had a relationship back then, so the best we'd be was friends with benefits, and I didn't want to complicate things here.

No, co-parenting would be all we'd ever be, and that was *fine*.

No matter how much my hormones said otherwise.

Flashing back to how he'd point-blank told Jasmine that he couldn't make it to the recital, I shifted mental topics with years of practice.

He'd kept his promise not to get her hopes up, and I appreciated that. I wouldn't fault him for having a job that kept

him busy, that was life, and as long as Jasmine wasn't hurt in the crossfire then everything was perfect.

Maybe things would work out after all.

Chapter 12

Jasmine was back to bounding off the walls as she pulled on her recital outfit, her eyes sparkling like jewels as she tugged on the pieces haphazardly until she was dressed in all but the shoes.

“Do you really think he’ll watch?” She asked as I picked up her shoes, pointedly handing them to her with a frown before answering.

“He said he would, so I’m sure he will. But you can’t go to the recital until you put on your shoes.”

She pouted but thankfully didn’t fight me. Focusing on getting myself ready, I grabbed my purse and did a final once-over in the mirror. I’d gone for one of my nice blouses and black slacks. Not too dressy but definitely nice enough for a school event.

Knowing Ludwig, if he *had* been able to make it, he probably would have gone full formal.

The mental image curved a smile over my lips before I shook it to the side. There’d be time to picture Ludwig in a suit later; I had other things to worry about now, like getting the door.

The knock sounded throughout the house, and immediately I knew who it was just from the familiar rhythm. So did Thalia, who perked up and raced for it.

She whipped open the door and beamed up at Mom. “Grandma!” She threw herself against Mom’s stomach, locking her death grip as was usual.

Mom took it in stride, holding her just as tightly before looking at me with a smile. Her hair was graying, pulled back into a bun, and she wore a nice blue dress that was perfect for

the heat. “It’s good to see you two! Unfortunately, Grandpa couldn’t make it, but he promised to make the next one.”

I pulled her into a hug, the tiniest shard of worry weaseling into my chest. “Is he not feeling well?” They were both getting up there in age, and anytime either of them got sick, it put me on edge.

She waved me off, her smile not slipping. “He’s fine, he even had a doctor’s appointment last week and everything came back clear. He’s just been working hard lately and it took its toll. Trust me, he’s not happy about being left behind, but I promised I’d record the recital for him.”

Then she pulled something out from behind her back. It was a plush sunflower and she handed it to Jasmine. “Here you go; since he couldn’t make it he wanted to make sure you knew he was thinking of you.”

Jasmine beamed, hugging the stuffed flower close. “I knew he was anyway, but I love it! Can I call him after the recital to tell him thank you?” She asked, tipping her head in my direction, and I nodded, gently guiding her out the door.

“Of course you can, but let’s go. We don’t want to be late for the recital, do we?”

She shook her head, racing to the car and leaving Mom and me to amble behind. Mom snuck a curious look my way, before asking.

“Is Ludwig not coming?”

I hadn’t told her that bit yet, only that he’d chosen to be in Jasmine’s life. She’d been happy about that, but this, she might not be.

Dropping my voice so only she could hear, I shook my head. “He isn’t. Last week we had a boom in clients and he planned all the meetings for this week, so he’s too busy.”

I held up my phone. “But I’ll be doing a live stream of the recital so he can see it between meetings. I know you’re videotaping it for Dad, so I’ll have a free phone.”

She raised a brow, her expression carefully neutral. “I would have gotten the video either way, but do you think he’ll actually watch the live stream? While I’m glad he’s determined to be in Jasmine’s life, he seems the workaholic sort.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong.

“He’s the one who suggested it, so I think he’ll make it. Maybe not for more than a minute here or there, but I want to at least give him a chance to see parts of it.” I said, and she nodded.

“I’m sure he’ll make it then. I didn’t know he was the one who brought up the idea.” A beat passed, then she prodded. “How are you taking all of this, Thalia?”

I shrugged, “Fairly well, all things considered. We have a family day planned next week that he’ll be coming to, and so far the sky isn’t falling. It’s a change, but not necessarily a bad one.”

She bobbed her head, then slyly asked. “So, do you think you two will be getting closer as well?”

I should have seen this coming.

Biting back a groan, I shook my head. “As *friends*, yes. Please don’t start on that, Mom. Things are going well and I don’t want to complicate it anymore than it already is.”

She backed off easily. “Of course, but try to keep an open mind, dear. You never know what can come from it.”

Maybe, but I knew that a lot of pain, disappointment and rejection could come from it and that was enough to make me *not* want to even try.

Shelving the thoughts for later, I focused on driving as Jasmine chattered happily to Mom. Not having her attention on me meant I was free to think. Would Ludwig ever manage to make it to these kinds of things? Yes, the live stream was a good idea, but eventually it would start to disappoint Jasmine.

Before I could sink fully into my doubts, we pulled up to the school, and everything blurred into a whirl of getting ready and taking our seats. It was only after I'd started the live stream, about fifteen minutes after Jasmine walked out on stage, that I saw the little indicator that someone was watching.

Ludwig's name lit up under the little dot, and my stomach flipped when it stayed lit for five minutes before flashing out again. The dot came back periodically throughout the recital, and by the time it ended, he'd been here and gone over ten times.

Mom hummed, pulling me back to the present as we waited for Jasmine to come out from the back. Her mouth was curled into a knowing smile and she chuckled. "You already look half in love with the man."

I choked on saliva, but before I could argue that I did *not* look like that, Jasmine came bounding out, latching onto my hand with a steady buzz of excitement rolling off her.

"We did awesome! How did it look from the seats?"

I shoved the previous topic into a box for later and smiled down at her. "It looked perfect." Mom nodded, and then Jasmine's eyes landed on my phone. She bit her lip, toeing the ground with a shyness that wasn't like her, then she asked.

"Did Ludwig watch too?"

My heart did a little twist and I nodded, stroking a hand through her hair. "Yup, I saw him watching ten different times during the recital."

Looking down at my phone, I considered it for a minute. I'd made a special group for Ludwig and me for the live stream and while the video had stopped, the chat feature was active. It still showed Ludwig's indicator as being active.

After a second of thought, I offered my phone to her. "It says he's still there if you want to send a quick message." She lit up, but before she could grab the phone, I reminded her

firmly. “A *quick* message, Jasmine. He’s still at work, and he can get in trouble for being on his phone.”

Not really, he owned the company after all, but I didn’t want her chatting his ear off and potentially irritating him.

She nodded, snagging the phone and typing at the speed of light. I almost didn’t expect him to reply, but my phone dinged nearly immediately and Jasmine lit up, showing me the phone.

“He said I looked great!”

I read the short line of messages.

Hi! This is Jasmine, Mom let me use her phone. She said I can send you a quick message. What did you think of the recital?

There were emojis sprinkled throughout the message and Ludwig’s response was far less...colorful, though the words sank liquid heat through me.

You all did a good job. I’ve seen world-class dancers who wouldn’t be able to compete. I certainly couldn’t do any of that.

He’d probably seen people who did leaps and bounds better, but the fact he’d made a point of complimenting her made me smile.

Jasmine redirected her attention to Mom, thus giving me the chance to respond to him in private.

Hey, Thalia here. Thanks, she’s really happy you enjoyed it.

I hesitated, glancing at the others before asking. “Jasmine, what do you think of me inviting Ludwig over for dinner?”

She snapped around, eyes twinkling as she nodded. “Definitely!”

Before she could get her hopes up or start plotting, I cut in. “He might not be able to make it, remember? I’m just

offering it to him in case he can.”

She deflated a bit, but nodded.

With her handled, I focused on the phone again.

If you want, you could have dinner with us?

His response took a few minutes, the bubbles moving and freezing a few times before finally the reply came through.

I can't. The meetings are running longer than I thought and someone called in today, so I need to get that paperwork done so we're not backed up tomorrow.

Disappointment pricked me before I pushed it away. I'd known that might happen, so there was no use in getting hurt by it.

Offering a sympathetic smile to Jasmine, I shook my head. “Looks like he's too busy.”

She pouted but didn't argue. Mom, on the other hand, chimed in with a raised brow.

“You could always bring him dinner at work?”

We could, yes, but Ludwig and I hadn't discussed how he felt about Jasmine visiting at work. I knew to keep things professional, but she wouldn't. When I said as much, Jasmine herself chipped in.

“I can be professional too! Please, Mom?” She pulled out her best begging eyes, and my will started crumbling. When I looked back at Ludwig's first message and the compliment he'd given Jasmine, the rest disintegrated.

“Alright, but he's probably going to be busy when we get there, which means we won't be able to talk to him. Meetings are very important; if he's in one, we'll leave the food with a note for him.”

She perked up. “And if he isn't busy?”

Considering he was always busy, I sincerely doubted that would be the case, but still...

“Then we can probably chat for a bit, *but* this is work, Jasmine. You have to remember that.”

She nodded, already back to bounding around my legs, and I gave in with a sigh, typing into the chat room.

That’s fine; Jasmine and I will bring some food by. No worries if you’re too busy to talk or are in a meeting; we’ll leave it in the break room with a note.

No one would be stupid enough to take food with Ludwig’s name on it.

This time the reply was almost immediate.

You don’t have to do that. I’m used to ordering in on late nights.

How often were those, though? Something told me the answer was ‘more often than not.’

Biting my lip, I chose my words carefully.

I know we don’t have to, and if you don’t want us to we won’t, but otherwise I really don’t mind. Besides, Jasmine is excited about it.

I was as well, to a lesser extent, but I wouldn’t be adding that.

This time it took a few minutes before the bubbles moved, and my nerves ground hard during every second of it. Just as I was going to try to take it back or smooth the offer over, he answered.

If you’re sure, then I appreciate it. I’ll try to get my meetings done quickly so I’ll have time to eat with you two.

And the fluttery warmth was back. Not bothering to douse it, I nodded to Jasmine, who watched me with wide, expectant eyes. “Looks like we’re heading into work.”

She cheered and Mom laughed, patting my back. “It’s good to see she still has her usual energy. I’m calling a cab and heading for the hotel. I have a flight out tomorrow, but maybe I’ll get to meet that man of yours before then.”

I didn't have a chance to remind her yet again that he wasn't mine before she was out the door after one last round of hugs. Shaking my head at her, I put a hand on Jasmine's back and gestured toward the door.

"Come on, let's go get food ready so we can swing it by him."

The entire process took barely half an hour before we were standing in the main lobby of the office. Most employees were already gone for the evening, and the building almost had a haunted air to it. Shaking that to the side, I kept Jasmine's hand firmly in mine and walked to the main office.

There didn't appear to be anyone but him inside. Ludwig hunched over his desk, his hair in its usual perfect style, and the stacks of paperwork were once again partially hiding him. The shirt he'd chosen today was a crisp white one, and it accented his arms wonderfully when he shifted to grab something.

Forcing the hormone-driven thoughts aside, I knocked on the doorframe.

He looked up, a small smile curling his lips when he noticed us. "Come in, I just finished with the meetings."

Dark bags lingered under his eyes, and I fought back the urge to ask how much sleep he'd gotten last night. We were at work, I reminded myself, now was not the time.

Jasmine wrangled out of my hold and bounced over to him, her little dress adorable as she leaned on one of the few clear spots on his desk.

"We have food!" She crowed and I caught the tiny flinch he gave. He must have a headache. Sympathy welled and I gently pulled Jasmine back, putting his plate of food in front of him before shushing her lightly.

"Indoor voice, honey."

He shot me an appreciative look, then nodded to his food. "Thanks for this. It's going to be a long night, and

having homemade food is better than takeout.”

I shrugged, ignoring the fluttery feelings the simple thanks inspired. “We were already making dinner; why not add enough for you?”

Jasmine chipped in, spreading her arms wide as she spoke. “Mom made sure to make a *big* helping because she said she didn’t think you stopped to eat today.”

Heat slapped over my cheeks as Ludwig raised a brow my way. I coughed, wishing she hadn’t spilled that particular fact even as I nodded.

“I know when I get busy eating tends to slide through the cracks. I just worried you hadn’t found time to stop and snack.”

His lips quirked at one side. “You’d be right. I ate a granola bar for breakfast and that’s it.” Something in his eyes shifted, melting, but this time the look wasn’t angled at Jasmine. It was all for me, and having that softness directed at me made my heart squeeze uncomfortably.

Shaking the weird sensation to the side, I gestured to his food. “Well, now you have real food to eat. We should head out, though; it’s approaching this one’s bedtime.”

Jasmine pouted, already gearing up to argue, but I cut her off with a stern look. “Don’t. We promised you could stay up a bit later to bring him dinner with me, but that won’t be happening again if you throw a tantrum now.”

She dropped it, her pout still firmly in place. Then she looked at Ludwig. “Can I have a hug before we go?” She asked and he blinked, clearly taken aback. Poor guy had no idea how much the kid loved hugs or how many she’d be extorting from him in the near future.

He nodded and she was around the desk in a heartbeat, her arms thrown around his neck as she cuddled in. He was faster to return it this time, his grip firmer, and when Jasmine pulled away she was smiling again.

“Night!”

Then she zipped off toward the entrance, leaving me shaking my head. “I love her, but that energy is something else,” I muttered, then focused on him again.

“I already know you won’t accept help with the paperwork, but please try to get some sleep tonight. You look exhausted as it is.”

Before he could say anything to that, I turned and left, not wanting to leave Jasmine alone for too long.

It was strange, telling him to take care of himself like this, but also kind of nice. It’d been a long time since I’d had someone to worry over aside from Jasmine.

As long as he didn’t mind, I’d probably keep doing it.

Chapter 13

Jasmine raced around the nearby playground, her laughter a perfect background noise as Ludwig and I sat nearby on a bench outside the bistro we'd just eaten at. It was our 'family day', and we'd decided to leave what we did up to Jasmine.

She'd wanted to go to the playground and have ice cream, thus here we were.

There weren't any other kids out today, but she didn't let that stop her from enjoying herself. Occasionally she'd look at us before going back to her imaginary games, but for the most part Ludwig and I were happy to sit in companionable silence.

At least, that was the case until Jasmine tripped, tumbling into a roll before landing almost face-first in the grass. Ludwig snapped ramrod straight, alarm clear, and when she sat up, tears in her eyes while clutching her knee, he was off the bench and moving in a blink.

Of course once he got to her, he didn't know what to do. His hands hovered over her, not touching but clearly wanting to soothe and I followed him, patting his back when he looked ready to call an ambulance.

"Easy, big guy. Scrapes happen." I said, then turned to her, kneeling to get a better look. It wasn't even bleeding, but it probably stung all the same. Wiping away some of her tears, I kissed her knee and soothed.

"All better?"

She sniffed but nodded, letting me help her up. It only took a minute before she was back to racing around, but

Ludwig stared as if he couldn't comprehend what'd happened. Bringing him back to the bench, I chuckled.

“Kids are pretty resilient. There isn't much she does that'll keep her down for long. Sometimes a hug and a kiss solve everything.”

His confused mask stayed in place, something painful and old lingering under the surface, but that disappeared in the next minute. The air shifted, something cold sliding into place where the peace had been previously. Ludwig tensed, his voice hardly a whisper as he cursed.

“What are they doing here?”

I looked where he was, noticing an elder couple making their way toward us. They looked downright stormy, their matching heads of gray held high as they marched toward us at a steady clip. They both wore higher-end clothing I didn't associate with a park, and when they continued heading our way, I asked.

“Who are they?”

He ground his jaw and stood, all the previous happiness gone. “My parents.”

I nearly snapped my head back around to take them in again. These were his parents? I could see the resemblance in his father's nose and jaw, but nothing else matched. And the way they were looking at him as if he were an annoyance they had to deal with...

Instincts rose up, clawing at the back of my neck as they stopped a few feet in front of us. The woman spoke first, her brow arched as she looked over Ludwig.

“We heard that you scheduled today off and assumed you were out mingling with the clients we sent to you.” She stared down her nose now, disapproval clear. “Obviously, we were wrong. What even *are* you doing here?”

The sneer to her lips was grinding my nerves, and if Ludwig tensed any more, he'd break into pieces. Jasmine

ambled over, eyeing the two warily as she hid behind me. The couple didn't spare her a glance, all their focus on Ludwig as he raised his chin a notch and answered.

"I'm here enjoying the fresh air. Supposedly that's good for my health."

His tone was the same one he used at work, in control with not a hint of emotion leaking out, and the longer I watched the exchange, the more my hair stood to attention. Was this normal for them?

It must have been, because his father scoffed. "You're a perfectly fit young man, and there are better uses for your time than watching children play." Here he looked at Jasmine, who shrunk behind Ludwig. I tensed in response, ready to step in at a moment's notice. Parents or no, I'd put them in their place if they started something with Jasmine.

Ludwig put a hand on her back, tucking her closer, and while that soothed her a bit, his parents' eyes narrowed in perfect sync.

"Who exactly is this child to you?" His father asked and Ludwig shot me a look, asking permission silently. I shrugged, not taking my eyes off his parents.

"It's up to you."

He grimaced, but faced forward again, not loosening his hold on Jasmine as he answered. "She's my daughter. I didn't realize she existed until a few weeks ago, but-."

His mother reeled back as if he'd struck her, eyes going wide as she sputtered. "Daughter?! When did you even have a relationship?"

Here he shifted between his feet, distinctly uncomfortable with the turn in the conversation, and his mother caught that. "She wasn't born from a relationship. Did we not hammer the importance of *protection* into you when you were a boy?"

The way she spoke to him, as if he were in the wrong, fanned my ire and before I could think better of it, I stood at his side and glared her down.

“We did use protection. Sometimes things happen whether you use it or not.”

He jerked, surprised I’d stood up for him, but before I could get a read on his expression, his mother hummed.

“Yes, so it seems.” Turning back to him, she scowled. “You’ve known this child less than a month, and you’re already scheduling days off from work. She’s a distraction.”

Jasmine flinched, something that made my blood boil, but before I could say anything, Ludwig did it for me. His eyes narrowed, flashing with something I’d never seen before on him as he spoke in an ice cold tone.

“She’s not a distraction. All my work is finished on time, as it always is, and today there was nothing to be done around the office.”

Jasmine melted into his side, the defense soothing some of her nerves, and his father’s lips pinched into a hard line. “We’ll see. You’re not fit to be a parent, but if you insist on playing the part, then only time will tell. Don’t let your new parenthood status affect the company.”

Then the two left, their noses still shoved into the air. Once they were gone, Jasmine shuddered, tears leaking out of her eyes as she tried to burrow further into his leg.

“Am I a distraction?” She asked, voice cracking through the suppressed sobs. Ludwig froze, the exhaustion from dealing with his parents disappearing under alarm at Jasmine’s tears. I knelt, tugging her into a hug and soothing.

“No, honey. You heard him, he said you weren’t, and he wouldn’t lie, right?”

Jasmine hesitantly shook her head, then looked up to Ludwig. “If you have work, you don’t have to be here. I don’t want you getting in trouble.” Even as she said it, her little

shoulders slumped, and it cracked my heart right down the middle. Curse those awful people!

And to think, they'd raised Ludwig. It was amazing that he was well adjusted as he was...

Finally he snapped out of his stupor, kneeling to be at her level and taking out a handkerchief. "Here, use this; it's less scratchy than your shirt sleeve. I was also telling the truth that I don't have any work that needs to be done today. I finished it yesterday specifically so I would have today free to be here. They're just..."

He trailed off, trying to find the words before visibly giving up with a sigh.

"They're them, and this is how they've always been. No matter what though, you're not a distraction, okay?"

She nodded, still sniffing quietly but not as shaken as before.

Cuddling between us, she muttered. "Can we go home?"

I hated letting those two ruin the day, but after exchanging a long look with Ludwig, I nodded. We needed to talk, and obviously there'd be no rescuing this family day.

"Of course, we should have some chocolate ice cream in the freezer at home too," I said and took one of her hands. Once she was safely buckled into her seat, I spoke just low enough for Ludwig to hear.

"Are you okay?"

He blinked, taken aback by the question, then he nodded, his mask coming back in full force. "This is normal. Let's just get you guys home."

Before he could avoid the topic by walking to the driver's seat, I caught his hand and said. "Can you stay afterward? I want to talk to you about this."

He stiffened to stone but nodded.

The entire drive back was spent in tense silence, Jasmine staying quiet as if she could sense it too. When we pulled up outside the house, she went inside without complaint, Ludwig and I following at a slower pace.

Once the door shut behind us, though, she turned to Ludwig and tugged his hand. “They were really mean. Do you want a hug?”

He hesitated a second, not sure how to answer that, and Jasmine took that as her answer. Gripping tight around his waist, she snuggled in for a beat then pulled back with a determined expression.

“I’m getting my stuffed animals for you. They always make me feel better.” Then, before he or I could cut her off, she was racing back to her room.

Shaking my head at the typical Jasmine response to seeing someone hurting, I nudged his arm and nodded to the kitchen. “That’s going to take her a while; let’s sit down.”

He followed woodenly, taking the seat across from me, and after a second, I couldn’t stop myself from asking again. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

His hand came up to run through his hair and he sighed, then nodded. “Yes, like I said, this is normal. It doesn’t surprise me that he doesn’t think I’m parent material, though.”

To be honest, I’d all but forgotten about that until now...

Doubts all but drifted around him like gnats and when he went on, my heart twisted for him.

“I have to wonder if he’s right. I froze solid when Jasmine tripped earlier, and that’s hardly a good response.”

Okay, no. We’re not doing that.

Not letting myself second guess it, I took his hand and squeezed.

“That’s a normal response for someone who isn’t used to dealing with tears. I used to react like that too. It fades with time, and the longer you keep at it, the easier it gets.” He eased a bit and I tacked on. “If there’s anything you need help with, ask, and I’ll do my best to explain. I know it’s scary to start, but once you get the hang of it, it becomes easy as breathing.”

Usually. There were still days she decided she was going to make everything difficult, but we weren’t getting into that right now.

He glanced at his phone, the doubts quiet now but uncertainty taking their place. “Maybe I should head to work, just to get some extra things done.”

It burned to think his father could rip him apart like this and plant that uncertainty. I couldn’t do much to help either. Shifting to be more in his line of sight, I asked.

“Why don’t you delegate some of the work? Most company heads do that.”

He grimaced, looking away and letting the silence speak for itself. After a beat, I sighed. “It has something to do with your father, doesn’t it?”

The frown deepened but he nodded, finally answering. “My father handled the company for years without help. I’m expected to do the same.”

Flashing back to just how much happened at the office in one day, I pinched my lips together and asked. “But how much bigger is the company today than it was when he was running it?”

Ludwig blinked, clearly surprised, but after a second he tipped his head in thought. “A few extra branches have been added; I also roughly doubled the workforce to better handle the amount of clients we were getting.”

I nodded. “Exactly. Your father handled it alone when it was a smaller company, but you expanded it. No one can do everything alone, not when you’re making the company bigger. There’s no shame in delegating tasks.”

He stared at our hands, mulling that over, before finally he hummed. "I'll consider that."

Then his phone blared, cutting through the almost peaceful atmosphere. He only glanced at it once before he grimaced.

"It's him, isn't it?" I asked and he nodded, making no move for the phone.

"Undoubtedly calling to tell me how disappointed he is." When his hand twitched toward it with clear reluctance, I squeezed harder and shook my head.

"Then don't answer it. You deserve better than to be torn down like that. They're not healthy for you if they're constantly pushing you to work yourself into an early grave."

He offered a tired but appreciative smile. "Thank you, but I can't ignore the call. It'll only make it worse later." He carefully took back his hand and walked into the other room, answering.

Even from here, I could hear the venom in his father's voice and I ground my teeth. I don't know when I'd gotten protective of Ludwig, but hearing him be treated so abysmally when he already put so much effort into his job...

It burned me from the inside out.

By the time he came back he was slouched just the tiniest bit, and his eyes were heavy with exhaustion. When he reached for his coat, I stopped him, taking his hand again and trying one last time to dissuade him.

"You don't have to do this. You can stay here, relax with us, and tomorrow I'll help you with whatever paperwork didn't get done today. You need time to rest, though."

His eyes locked onto me, a war waging behind them before he finally asked. "Do you want me to stay?"

So much more lingered under the question and I nodded, swallowing around the lump in my throat. "Yes, I

don't like seeing them tear into you, and I really don't like how tired you always look."

His lips twisted up the tiniest bit and he nodded. "Then I'll stay."

Relief hit in waves and I leaned a hair closer, happy he wouldn't be going back to the office. I didn't realize how close I was until I pulled in a breath, and the scent of his cologne hit. It was heady, the same one that'd originally caught my attention all those years ago at the bar, and something low in me stirred in response.

His mouth opened, eyes intent on me as tension crackled through the air between us. When he started leaning in though, Jasmine came running with her stuffed animals at the ready. "Sorry, I had to rescue one from under my bed, so it took a while."

She leaned against his leg, pushing him toward the living room since her arms were full and she couldn't tug on him. I jerked back, heat scalding my cheeks as I realized just what had almost happened. A matching flush dusted Ludwig's cheeks, and he spared me a glance before hastily looking away.

He went without complaint, sitting on the couch as she turned to me and asked. "Can we watch a movie? That always makes me feel better."

I nodded, watching in amusement as she plopped her favorite stuffed animal in his lap before racing to choose a movie. Shaking my head, I chuckled. "Hope you're ready for animated classics." My tone was only a little strained, which I'd take as a win since my thoughts were whipping around at the speed of light in my head.

He glanced over, something soft and warm in his eyes as he shrugged. "There are worse things to watch, and there's nowhere I'd rather be than here."

To the core of my being, I knew he meant that, and my heart did a spin in my chest.

Once I sat next to him, a few feet of space between us on the couch, and the movie started, I finally let my thoughts wander to the almost kiss.

What was I *thinking*?

Trick question, I hadn't been. The only thoughts that'd been drifting through had been how nice he smelled and that smile of his.

Taking a deep breath, I caught another whiff of him and fought back the instinctual shiver that trailed down my spine. I'd ask what brand he used at some point, but for now I needed to focus on dragging my hormones under control.

Things weren't the same as when we met all those years ago, no matter how much his smile reminded me of back then. He was my boss, and just because there was some lingering attraction on my part didn't mean I'd be jumping into anything more.

At least, that's what I told myself, but when he trailed a hand between us to brush mine, jitters of stomach fluttering warmth followed. I didn't pull away, letting my fingers gently rest next to his despite the logic all but screaming through me.

I should pull away. It seemed like he was actually open to more than just friends, and that spelled trouble for me. What if we got closer and then broke up later? It'd be awful and awkward. Then we couldn't avoid each other either, because Jasmine.

What we had now wasn't perfect, but it worked.

Besides, while he'd been showing a more 'human' side lately, I'd also seen the ice-cold one, and I didn't want that angled at me.

How would it even work with us only a few desks away at the office? I sincerely doubted he'd be open with affection or want anyone to know-.

Why was I even considering this?

Shaking all of it to the side, I forced my hand into my lap despite the waves of disappointment working through me. From the corner of my eye, I caught Ludwig's confused and hesitant gaze.

After a beat, he shifted a tiny bit closer and left his hand between us, eyes not once leaving mine. There was an entire unsaid conversation happening now, and I looked down at his hand, my willpower faltering already.

I wanted to take it, it'd be a lie to even pretend otherwise, but what would happen after?

There were too many potential consequences that could disrupt more than just my life here...

Right?

The more I thought about my reasons for *not* taking it, the less sure I felt, and when he looked away, disappointment curling through those ocean-blue eyes, guilt pinched my chest.

I'd been the first to lean in back there, I was giving him mixed messages and it wasn't okay. No matter how much I didn't want to talk about this, we needed to.

Before he could pull his hand away, I took it, ignoring the little voice that shouted at the back of my mind that this was a bad idea.

It wasn't. I wasn't promising anything by holding his hand. I just...didn't want to see that look on his face anymore. After the movie, we'd talk about what almost happened and get it cleared up. This was just comfort and enjoying someone's touch.

I was allowed to do that, and friends did it all the time.

Keeping that in mind, I focused solely on the movie, not letting myself think about the man at my side until the credits rolled. When I glanced down to find Jasmine solidly crashed out in a pile of stuffed animals—not an uncommon thing after a movie—I finally turned to him.

The same unspoken questions floated behind his eyes, and I sighed, nodding to my room. “We need to talk.”

He grimaced, whether from my word choice or the exhausted tone I delivered them in, I wasn’t sure. Still, he followed without complaint. Once we were safely tucked away, I started.

“I’m sorry about earlier, I don’t know what came over me, and it was wrong to invade your space like that.”

He blinked, surprise cleaving through that impenetrable mask of his, before it disappeared and he shook his head. “You say that as if I didn’t lean in too. If Jasmine hadn’t walked in...” He trailed off, choosing his words carefully. “What would you have done?”

My mouth went dry, and I flicked a glance down to his lips. He wet them, his tongue sliding out and snapping up my attention. Swallowing hard around the new lump in my throat, I answered.

“You already know the answer to that, and it can’t happen.”

His frown intensified. “Why can’t it?”

He couldn’t be serious?

Examining his face, I nearly groaned when I realized he was. Rubbing the bridge of my nose, I answered. “Because we *work* together, you’re my boss. That never ends well, and what happens later down the line if we break up? We won’t be able to avoid each other thanks to Jasmine, and it could ruin everything we have now.”

It all seemed obvious to me, but he shook his head, countering. “Work is work, and so far we’ve managed to keep things professional. I doubt it’ll be that much harder if we change our dynamic a bit. As for the latter, we’re both adults. If things don’t work out, we can go back to this. It may be awkward to start, but not unmanageable.”

His stare was heavy, all but boring into me, and my stomach knotted in response. He wanted this. It was painfully clear in his eyes that he did.

And I'd be lying if I said I didn't, but doubts still gnawed away at my stomach. Trying to buy time for me to think it all through, I asked. "Why do you suddenly want this? You weren't interested in a relationship back when we first met, you said as much yourself. 'It takes too much time to keep going.'" I quoted his exact words back to him from years ago and he shut his eyes, heaving a quiet sigh.

"I did say that, and back then I thought I didn't need or want anything more. I had my work, and that's all I needed, but things are different now." Here he hesitated before visibly shaking himself and finishing. "After years of going home to an empty bed and having nothing but work to keep me company, I'm tired of it."

He glanced back at me. "You both make me feel things I never have before. You remind me that there's more to life outside of my office, like fresh air, parks, and ice cream. I want more of that."

Coming from him, that was major, but what do I do with that?

Biting my lip, I asked. "You still have your insane workload. I would never fault you for it, work is work, after all, but relationships take time, you weren't wrong on that. I'm not the sort to demand your every minute, but I would like some time with you where I could actually be with *you*. Not my boss, *you*."

The man I'd been unable to get out of my head since the day we slept together.

That steady stare faltered and he straightened, his lips curling down into a frown as he asked. "I understand that, and I'm willing to try. I would insist that work stays a professional space, but we could plan things outside of it." Then he went on, more hesitant now. "Do you not want something more with

me? You don't need to worry about your job or custody of Jasmine when answering, either. I'm a grown adult, and if you don't want anything like that, then I'll accept the rejection and move on. Nothing will change."

I hadn't considered for even one minute that he would fire me or try to take Jasmine, even with what little of him I truly knew, I knew without a doubt he would never do that.

Though this was a convenient out for me. One lie, that's all it would take. I could lie, tell him that I wasn't interested in more, and the entire conversation would be buried.

But when I opened my mouth to say the words, I caught his eyes and the hope there stopped me short. Had I ever seen him like this; open and vulnerable?

Yes, I had and it was years ago on our one night together. The longer I spent with him, the more hints of that man came to the surface. An ache started in my chest, all but reaching outward for him, and all the years of lonely nights hit at once.

How many times had I wanted a chance to see where things would go between us? How many times had I stared at my ceiling, wondering how different things would have been if he'd been open to more between us?

Here was my chance, and while I could lie and walk away without any complications, I didn't want that. I wanted to see where this would go, and with that in mind, I spoke.

"I do want this." My voice was rough, my hand drifting to his against my better judgment as I continued. "I've wanted this since the day I woke up next to you in that hotel room."

His eyes softened, the lines on his face losing their hard edges as he squeezed my hand and nodded. "So did I, though I told myself it was better to focus on my work. There was always a part of me that wondered what would have happened if I left you my number."

I swallowed and asked. "So what now? We're both interested in more, but what do we do with that?"

My hormones had some ideas, and with Jasmine solidly out for at least another hour I was tempted to listen. There'd been no one else since him and having him so close—with that damn cologne all but wrapping around me—was hell on my resistance.

He glanced down, eyes freezing on my chest and the nipples that'd perked with my thoughts. His tongue flicked out again, pupils expanding as molten heat poured through his gaze. Taking a deep breath, he forced his eyes back up to mine and asked, voice rougher now.

“That entirely depends on what you want. If you want to take things slow, we can do that, or if you want...more, we can do that too.” His hand trailed up my arm and throat, stopping at my cheek and stroking lightly. The touch swept tingles out from it, and he hummed. “It's up to you, but you need to decide quickly, because being this close to you is a hazard to my ability to think.”

Seeing the arousal all but sparking off him—a perfect match to mine—nearly made my decision then and there. Was there a reason to take things slow? We'd already slept together, the proof of that slept soundly in the next room over, and obviously, neither of us wanted to wait.

Fighting past the jittery nerves, I reached out, curling my fingers into his shirt and tugging until he bent. When less than an inch of air lingered between us, I answered. “Let's start here, and see where it goes.”

Then I closed the distance, warmth shooting through my veins as his arm curled around my back and pressed me closer. He tipped his head, tongue sliding out to trail along my lips. I opened, nearly moaning when he wasted no time.

Shifting to press me against the wall, he loomed, twining our tongues and sucking until a pulse of heat settled between my legs.

I remembered what that tongue could do. Even years later, my body hadn't forgotten, and now it wanted an encore.

Without thought, I bucked into him, grinding in a search of friction.

Ludwig cracked an eye, pulling back for air as his hand worked open my pants and slid inside. Nudging aside my underwear, two fingers dipped in and I arched into him, needing more. His lips quirked, and he hummed lowly.

“If you want me to slow down, you’ll need to say so, because otherwise I’m going to throw you back on that bed, and I’m not stopping until I feel you clamped around me.”

The words all but throbbed with promise and I bucked on his hand, one word choking out of me with the last of my rational thoughts. “Condom.”

Not that it’d really done any good last time...

He hesitated and I could all but see the thought moving across his face too. Before he could worry about it, I added. “I’m on the pill too, but obviously, we shouldn’t leave anything to chance.”

He nodded, removing his hand—much to the reluctance of my hormones—and pulled out his wallet. Just like years ago, the foil sat neatly tucked into the fold and he removed it. Setting it onto the nightstand for now, he trailed his hands to the hem of my shirt and tugged it upward.

It hit the floor, my pants following shortly after until I leaned against the wall in nothing but my underwear. Vulnerability struck, and I shifted to partially cover the old scars and stretch marks from pregnancy.

When he noticed that, he scowled, shaking his head with a growl. “Don’t hide from me.”

Then he dropped, kissing my thigh where more stretch marks rested—those not from Jasmine—before making a path upward. He slid over every little scar, his tongue flicking out as if he could taste them, and once he reached my stomach he paused there.

Looking up at me, he spoke, tone steady and certain. “You’re gorgeous, not in spite of these marks, but because of them. They’re a part of you, and that makes them beautiful.”

The words stroked along every insecurity I had, soothing them as I shivered. I’d burned to hear something like that over the years, but actually *hearing* it was something else.

Swallowing around my dry throat, I reached for him, tugging at the hem of his shirt until it pulled out of his pants. “You are too,” I said, watching as his eyes melted a bit more. Some of the heat banked, making room for something else, something intense.

I didn’t have a name for it, but seeing it angled at me made my heart flip in my chest. Putting that aside to consider later, I worked his shirt off and rested a hand on the buckle of his pants. The fabric tented, and my fingers itched to trail lower even as I held them in line.

Trailing my thumb along the line of hair leading down, I tugged pointedly at his pants. “I want to see all of you too,” I said and he nodded, kicking off the pants after I undid his belt. Once we were equally naked, I took him in.

He wasn’t covered in muscle, but there was a slight tone there. My fingers trailed over every dip and hollow, marking them into my memory. When I drifted down to the thick length hovering between us, he sucked in a breath and leaned harder on the wall.

“Careful, Thalia. It’s been a long time, and we don’t want this to be over before it’s even started.” He said, voice choked and all but vibrating with need. I heeded the warning and left his length alone, pressing my palm against his chest instead.

Pulling him into another kiss, I melted against him, letting the rest of the world fade away. His frame pressing me into the wall was all that I cared about, and when his fingers dipped between my thighs again, pulling the underwear off for better access, everything dissolved into fireworks.

Two fingers sank nearly all the way, scissoring out as he groaned. No words came from him, but I didn't need them. I knew that groan.

Sliding out, he tightened his arm around my waist and lifted me. Instinctively, my legs wrapped around his waist, and he carried me to the bed. Once he set me down, soft blankets much preferred to hard walls, he shifted to lean over me with a hum.

“I didn't savor you how I should have last time. I'll fix that now.”

He didn't give me time to piece together what he meant. In a heartbeat he was between my thighs, tongue reacquainting itself with molten skin. The first lick arched my back off the bed, the second I rocked into his mouth, and the third had my thighs curling around his head to hold him there.

He hummed his approval, the vibrations dragging a cry from me as my hands found their way into his hair. He pulled back long enough to say, “Don't hold back. I want to feel you,” then he continued, my mind whitening out when he rolled the bundle of nerves at my entrance.

I teetered on the knife's edge in no time at all, and I tugged at his hair in warning. He nodded, pulling away and reaching for the condom. “I'll come back to that later, but for now I need this.”

He rolled it down his length, then positioned himself. Hesitating a second, he leaned his head on mine and locked eyes with me. Not looking away, he slowly pressed in. The first inch sank in with no resistance, the familiar stretch nearly rolling my eyes back.

When he'd halfway pressed in, he slowed, giving small thrusts back and forth as he inched his way down. It was maddening, every buck grinding against sensitive walls until I all but writhed under him, needing more.

He shook his head, jaw grit in determination. “If I go any faster, it'll hurt.”

Maybe a little, but right now that was worth it.

Snaking my legs around his hips, I tightened them and snapped up against him. He froze, a choked off hiss sounding through the room as he sank to the base. I felt every pulse and twitch he gave, rolling my hips to drag just a few more, and he huffed.

“Impatient.”

His tone was strained, though, and his hips gave tiny bucks, his resistance failing more by the second. Good, I didn't want his ironclad control right now, I wanted the near frenzy he'd had the last time we were in bed together.

With that in mind, I wrapped my arms around his neck and thrust upward, nipping his ear and whispering. “Yes, now stop holding back.”

Shifting to his neck, I bit down gently, sucking until a bruise was sure to form. It was just low enough that his usual shirts would cover it, but I'd know it was there tomorrow. That's what mattered.

His resistance shattered and he gripped my hips, drilling hard as he abandoned all attempts at control. I threw my head back, relishing in it as I bit my palm to muffle any sounds that might have come otherwise.

He swiveled hard, nailing something deep and swollen inside, and his hand rolled the nub at my entrance in perfect sync. Everything exploded, and I toppled over the edge, riding it out as his choked groaning rang in my ears.

He managed a few more thrusts, then stilled, panting with me as we recovered from it. He shuddered, limbs struggling to hold his weight, and I tugged him down. Wrapping my arms around him, I kissed his chest and revealed in the fact that I could *do that* now.

Last time I'd had to restrain myself, unsure what all he'd be okay with contact-wise, but now it was different. I didn't have to leave after this, and that fact swept waves of happiness through me.

Smiling against his skin, I soaked in the relief and peace floating through the air. After a minute, he pulled back, dragging the blankets over us. When he'd settled on his side, nose inches away from mine, he hesitated.

“Do you want me to stay or go?” He asked and before he could even twitch toward the door, I gripped him closer.

“Stay.”

He relaxed, all but melting into the sheets with a nod. “Okay.”

Cuddling up into his throat, I ignored the doubts still nipping away at my heels. We were going to do this, and I wasn't letting them stop me now. If things went belly up, I would at least be able to say I'd given it my best.

His hand shifted to my back, tracing circles as he spoke. “I should probably head home soon. I don't have clothes to change into, and we have work tomorrow.”

The urge to argue lunged to the surface, my grip on him tightening instinctively even as I knew our cuddle time was going to be far shorter lived than I wanted.

Before I could let him go though, he continued. “I *could* go home and get a change of clothes, then come back...if you wanted?”

The hesitance there grated against me and I nodded, soothing it. “Of course...but will that cause problems with you tomorrow with work?” I hated reminding him of that while we were still curled together like this, but he only smiled.

“No, I leave earlier than you do, so it doesn't change anything.”

Then he frowned. “Though that means I'll be leaving before you get up. Do you want me to wake you or not?”

The hesitance was creeping in again, and I kissed his chest. “I'll probably wake up automatically. I've always been a light sleeper so...” I trailed off, and he nodded.

“Alright.” Getting out of bed with palpable reluctance, he grabbed his pants. “I’ll head home and grab an extra set of work clothes as well.” He dressed, my eyes following every movement, and before he could leave, I got up and kissed his cheek.

“I should probably have asked earlier how affectionate you’re comfortable with me being, because as you can see, I’ve always been heavier with it.” I said, heat climbing my cheeks. He smiled, returning the kiss a tad more hesitantly than I did.

“I like it, though don’t take offense if I freeze when you do it unexpectedly. I’m not used to touching out of the blue, but I definitely don’t mind.”

I’d remember that.

He smiled one last time, then left, the soft shutting of the front door announcing his departure.

Waves of happiness hit and I flopped back onto the bed, all but swimming in it. I’d ached to see this side of him that morning where I had to leave him, and actually getting to have this was heady.

And if how he was talking before was any indication, I’d get to have it often. Waking up with him would be a vast improvement to the empty bed I was used to dealing with.

Before I could contemplate getting up, my phone rang, dragging me back to the present. Rifling through my clothes until I found it, I caught Naomi’s name and smiled.

Answering, I listened to her usual greeting.

“Hey! How is everything with you?”

For half a second I thought about not telling her, but I discarded the thought as quickly as it came. Naomi had always been in my corner, and I wanted to celebrate this with her.

“Well, considering I’m naked in bed after being ravished by my boss...I’d say I’m doing well.”

A beat passed, then she choked. “Wow, woman! Last we talked you were dead set against this happening. What changed?”

I still hadn’t told her about Ludwig being Jasmine’s father and there was no better time than now. Settling into the sheets, I started.

“First off, there’s something I didn’t tell you before about Ludwig. He’s the man I had the one-night stand with that produced Jasmine.”

I caught her inward suck of breath and raced on. “I didn’t tell you because I was still reeling from it all; then of course he found out and wanted to be involved in her life.”

She cut in with a grunt. “As he should.”

I hummed, continuing before she could get us sidetracked. “And today things kind of...escalated. At first, I didn’t want things to go anywhere because of what could happen. I mean, he’s still my boss *and* what if we break up later down the line? It would make this whole co-parenting thing awkward...”

Speaking the doubts out loud was bringing them back again, and Naomi must have sensed that because she jumped in seamlessly.

“Just keep stuff professional at work, not a hardship for you since you prefer it that way anyway. As for the latter, you’d have the same issue with anyone you dated, Thalia.”

I paused, taken aback by that. “I would?” I asked, and she continued.

“Yeah. Jasmine would probably have gotten attached to them, and then when you broke up, you still would have had to deal with being around each other because of her. Are you happy?”

I nodded, forgetting for a minute that she couldn’t see, then I answered verbally. “Yes, but-.”

She cut in again. “Nope, no buts. If you’re happy and he’s genuinely interested in being in both of your lives, then I say go for it.”

Just like I’d hoped, her words wiped away the doubts, and I relaxed fully onto the sheets again. “Thanks, I was already mostly in agreement with that but you know that sometimes I just need someone else to confirm what I already know.”

She hummed. “Of course, now tell me how it was! I want the details!”

I snorted, eyeing the door he’d left out of not that long ago. “I sincerely doubt a private person like him is going to appreciate me telling you those details, so you’ll just have to live with the basics.”

She grumbled but didn’t argue, so I continued. “I’m still pleasantly buzzing, and he’s getting pajamas and work clothes for tomorrow, so he can stay the night.”

And I couldn’t wait to finally go to sleep with someone wrapped around me. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted that until it was within reach.

A low noise brought me back to the present and she cooed. “You two sound so cute. He’s already staying the night, and I’m ecstatic for you! I know you’ve wanted what Robby and I have for years.”

I winced, clearing my throat. “Was I that obvious?” I asked and she sighed.

“A bit, yeah, but that’s okay. We knew you’d find someone eventually; you’re too amazing not to.”

The words squeezed my heart and I smiled. “Thanks, I’m glad you have him too. You two fit perfectly and always have.” I was happy for them, I always had been, but until now there’s also been that shard of envy.

For the first time in years, that shard disappeared, and Naomi beamed.

“Thanks! Maybe we can plan our fair day with him too?”

Oh, to be honest, with everything else going on, I’d completely forgotten about that. A bite of guilt hit, and I hesitated, remembering how busy he always was.

“I’m not sure if he’ll have time to join us. He works an insane amount of hours.” All because of those parents of his.

My happy mood soured at the memory, and I scowled. What kind of parents encouraged their son to work himself *that* much? He deserved to have time to relax and unwind like anyone else!

I couldn’t step in, though. I could only be here to help when the exhaustion I’d seen became too much. It didn’t feel like nearly enough, but it would have to be.

Maybe Jasmine and I could coerce him into coming here for dinner; then it’d be easier to show him that his life didn’t have to be all work and no play.

“Ah, that’s understandable. Poor Robby has been run ragged lately from his work too. Well, if he can make it, then all the better. I’m going to head out and leave you to your eye candy. Have *fun*.” She sang the last word before hanging up, and I shook my head.

Typical Naomi.

Sneaking a glance at the clock, I settled further into the bed and sighed blissfully. I could only hope things stayed this nice, at least for a while.

Chapter 14

Ludwig

I'd heard the term 'walking on air' thrown around before, but never had I come close to feeling it. Until now.

My skin still tingled everywhere Thalia had brushed, blood rushing just a bit faster through my veins as the lonely ache I'd dealt with over the years finally eased.

Just like back in that bar all those years ago, I felt alive, and now I'd get to feel it regularly.

Giddy excitement flashed through me and I bit back a smile, gathering my clothes absentmindedly. The cold and sterile house didn't bother me as much as usual, my attention was too focused on the women now in my life.

I'd have to make time in my schedule for Thalia and Jasmine, not an easy task at all, but they were worth it.

They deserved better than never seeing me, so I'd have to find a way to be there. I still wouldn't make it to the majority of Jasmine's school events—why they always had them on weekdays was beyond me—but at least I could plan ahead and spend time with them in other ways.

“You're not fit to be a parent, but if you insist on playing the part, then only time will tell. Don't let your new parenthood status affect the company”.

Father's words rang back, my stomach souring as doubts rose. It was ironic, him of all people criticizing someone else's ability to parent when he and Mother *hadn't* parented me. They'd hired nannies, leaving my raising and

care to others while never acknowledging me past how my grades were doing.

Father was a successful businessman so I'd value his opinion when it came to the company, but as a parent? No, I couldn't let him tear me down. I would do better than both him and Mother combined.

I wouldn't disappoint Jasmine or Thalia.

Throwing the doubts to the side, I left after one last cursory sweep to be sure I got everything I needed. The plain walls and bland furniture stared back at me, no knickknacks or souvenirs in sight. It was cold, and everyone who'd seen my house assumed I'd moved in recently.

I'd lived here for years and the longer time marched on, the more the house's emptiness bothered me. Maybe I could ask Jasmine for some drawings to put on the fridge. I'd seen some of those at Thalia's house, and they added life to her kitchen.

Shelving that to ask later, I shut and locked the door behind me.

Just as I got into the car, my phone lit up with Father's number.

Sneaking a glance at the clock, I scowled. He never called this late...unless it was work-related. Biting back a groan, I answered, pulling on the stone-faced mask I'd grown accustomed to while dealing with him.

"Father."

I didn't say anything else, knowing he'd go on without prodding, and sure enough, he jumped right in.

"Ludwig, I sent over a new list of clients I found. I want them in the system with meetings set by tonight."

My hand froze over the gear shift, disbelief hitting in a wave as I looked at the already darkening sky. "Tonight?" I asked, frustration burning to the surface.

He almost sounded smug when he spoke next. “Yes, that won’t be a problem, right? You’ve done it dozens of times in the past, and you said those two wouldn’t affect the company.”

Ice dropped down my spine and anger blitzed right behind it. He was doing this on purpose, trying to add more to my workload so I would buckle. He’d done it in the past as well when I’d first taken over the company.

I’d passed his awful tests and last minute workloads with flying colors so far, I would do the same now. I’d have to take my computer with me to Thalia’s but that was better than going to sleep in an empty bed.

Solidifying my determination, I answered. “They won’t, and I’ll have the clients’ information filed in a few hours.” Then, before he could say anything else that would doubtlessly light my blood on fire, I hung up. He’d probably have words with me over that later, but being the one to hang up on *him* swept satisfaction through me.

It was well worth the lecture I’d get.

Getting out of the car, I moved back into the house and grabbed my computer bag. Usually it wasn’t used since the one at the office was more convenient, but this one was portable and met my needs now.

Putting it in the passenger seat, I started back toward Thalia’s apartment, trying to shake the sour mood Father’s call put me in. This wasn’t anything surprising. To be honest I probably should have expected it, but this was fine. I had something far better planned for my night and I wasn’t letting him ruin it.

Smiling, I pulled into the driveway and grabbed my things. I’d barely made it two steps up to the door before it swung open and Jasmine’s wide smile greeted me. Her hair was a mess from sleeping and she had her favorite stuffed animal clutched to her chest, both signs that she’d woken up recently.

When she saw me, she bounced on her toes. “You’re back! I thought you left and didn’t say goodbye.” Here she pouted, clearly unhappy with the thought.

Shutting the door behind me, I knelt to be at her level. “If it bothers you, then I can be sure to say goodbye each time before I leave?”

She beamed. “Thank you” Then she looked at my pajamas, hope lighting her eyes. “Are you staying the night?” She asked and I nodded, wholly unprepared for when she threw her arms around my neck in response.

This was yet another thing I’d have to adjust to, sudden hugs. My parents had never been ones for hugging, sudden or otherwise, but I distinctly remembered the disappointment and hurt when they turned away.

I wouldn’t do that to Jasmine.

Tucking her in tight, I squeezed until she wiggled to be released. Her smile was firmly in place as she skipped off to the living room, calling as she did.

“Mom, Ludwig is back, and he’s staying the night!”

Excitement all but oozed from her voice and I rose, smiling at her back. Had anyone ever been so happy to see me?

I doubted it.

From further down the hall, a door opened and out walked Thalia. She’d pulled on a set of silk pajamas and the shorts—while not indecent—were distracting.

Long, toned legs caught and held my attention, memories of them wrapped around my waist and head sending twinges of heat southward. Dragging my eyes up to hers, I caught the knowing look she sent me and smiled, shrugging.

“If you didn’t want me to stare, choosing those pajamas is counter-productive to that,” I said, watching the corners of her eyes crinkle as I continued. “You’re beautiful no matter what you wear, but that in particular, is breathtaking.”

The crinkles turned into a full smile and she walked over, brushing her hand against my cheek. Warmth seeped through the touch and I closed my eyes, soaking it in. After a second, she pulled me down into a kiss, stepping away just as my lungs started to burn.

“You can use my room to change if you want?”

She nudged my pajamas, then caught sight of my computer bag. Some of her happiness melted away, replaced with confusion as she raised a brow.

A smattering of nerves arched through me before I buried them, answering the unsaid question. “Father sent a list of clients that I need to get in the system tonight.”

The last of her smile disappeared, a fiery scowl taking its place as she huffed. “He shouldn’t do that to you, especially not this late. It’s not fair. You need rest and time to yourself like anyone else.”

Her defense warmed me and I dipped to kiss her head on instinct, hovering there to answer. “This is how he’s always been, and nothing is going to change that. Besides, at least with this I can do the work while still being here with you and Jasmine. It’s worlds better than sitting at the office or alone at home.”

She let it go with a sigh, nodding. “I still say you deserve better than that, but I’m glad you enjoy our company.” Then she gestured back to her room. “If you want, I can set up your computer in the living room while you’re getting dressed?”

I handed over the bag even as I shook my head. “I’ve got it, just set the bag somewhere it won’t get damaged. My computer is password protected and thanks to the information we gather on our clients and its confidential nature, I can’t give anyone the password.”

She didn’t bat an eye, taking the bag with a nod. I’d half expected her to be hurt that I didn’t trust her with that, but to my surprise she kissed my cheek and walked to the living

room. “It’ll be on the coffee table when you’re ready,” she said, before disappearing into the other room.

I shook myself, rubbing the still-tingling spot on my cheek. I’d never get tired of the easy affection she offered.

Hurrying through dressing, I walked back out, putting my shoes next to hers at the front door. The sight that met me when I walked into the living room tugged a smile across my lips.

Jasmine had several blankets on the ground as well as most of the couch cushions, all of them fashioned into a nest. Both she and Thalia sat in it, a movie already playing in the background. The only couch cushion that hadn’t been commandeered for the nest sat in front of the coffee table where my computer was, a clear sign.

I sat there, smiling at them as I plugged in the computer and booted it up. “Another movie?” I asked, and Jasmine nodded.

“Yup, since you’re staying over, I asked Mom if we could sleep out here tonight.”

Thalia offered an apologetic look to that, saying just low enough that I could hear. “You don’t have to sleep on the floor with her, she usually crashes after a bit, and then I go back to my room.”

I nodded, happy not to have the neck pain that would have come from sleeping on the cushions.

If Jasmine asked, I would have, but sitting at my desk tomorrow would have been painful if I had.

Once the computer loaded, I started on the list of clients, the soft chatter of Jasmine and Thalia keeping me company as I plowed through the work. It took a bit longer, my attention shifting to the girls more often than not, but by the time I pushed the computer away—all work done—I felt happier than I ever did finishing paperwork.

It'd only taken me a bit longer than normal, and the task had been almost enjoyable this way. I'd have to see about repeating this in the future.

As if hearing the thought, Thalia shifted up onto the couch next to me, squeezing onto the only cushion until we were pressed side to side. Letting her head rest on my shoulder, she hummed.

“No pressure, but if you want to have dinner with us whenever you're able, you're more than welcome to.”

Flashes of the dinner they'd brought me at the office came back. No one had ever done that before, and having homemade food while I was stuck at work had been a treasure.

Maybe I could bring work with me and do this more often?

Biting my lip, I offered. “I'd love to, but would you mind me bringing,” I gestured to the computer, “this with me? To make it in time for dinner, I'll have to bring work home with me, and I'm not afraid to admit it's nicer doing it here with you two.”

She didn't bat an eye, sliding a hand over to take one of mine. “Of course, I doubt Jasmine would mind.”

To punctuate how much she didn't mind, the girl threw herself at us, nearly knocking us clear off the couch in her excitement as she nodded.

“That would be so cool! We could have sleepovers all the time then, Mom!” Her eyes were sparkling at the thought and Thalia nodded, smiling my way.

“We could, but you'll still have to go to sleep at the usual time. You still have school in the morning, and I won't have a cranky munchkin to deal with.” She tacked on a hard stare to the end, and the girl pouted.

“But Mom...” She stretched out the last word, but Thalia didn't budge.

“Nope, bedtime stays the same... unless it’s a weekend. *If you behave the rest of the week, then we can set up special bedtimes for the weekends.*”

Jasmine perked up, “Okay!” Then she went back to the movie, Thalia’s attention shifting to me as her smile came back.

“You don’t *have* to come here if you don’t want to, by the way. If you’re tired after work or would just prefer some solitude, I understand. Just come over when you want to.”

I appreciated that she thought to add that, but I sincerely doubted there’d be a time I didn’t want to be here instead of at my house. Leaning my chin on her head, I hummed.

“Thank you, but trust me, being here is much preferable to being at home. I’ve been told by a handful of people that it’s bland and empty. They aren’t wrong, and I like your place more.”

Mine often reminded me of the furniture stores’ display areas. Not a hair out of place, and everything was picture perfect.

It didn’t feel lived in, but Thalia’s?

It was the exact opposite, and it fit her perfectly.

Remembering my earlier consideration, I asked. “Jasmine, would you mind drawing a few things for me to put on my fridge?”

Thalia blinked, taken by surprise, and Jasmine whipped around so fast I briefly worried about her injuring herself. She was at my side in a blink, eyes wide and smile stretching from cheek to cheek.

“Of course! What do you like? I can draw really cute cats! And dogs, and horses, and *lions*.” She sucked in a breath, then rambled about the various animals she could draw. When she didn’t seem ready to stop and breathe anytime soon, I cut in.

“Anything you want to draw. I’m sure it’ll be great no matter what.”

She beamed, running to her room while calling over her shoulder. “I’ll be right back. I need to get paper and pencils!”

Once it was just Thalia and I, she faced me with a look I’d never seen before. It was soft and warm, all but melting my heart in my chest, and she tugged me into a kiss.

Pulling back, she leaned on my side and hummed. “You just made her night.”

I shrugged, sinking into the contentment the moment brought. “I’ll appreciate having her drawings at home, it’ll make it feel less like a furniture magazine. My house growing up had the same feel to it and while it’s bothered me for years, seeing how different your house is...it hits home just how much I’m tired of mine.”

She nodded, twining our fingers and squeezing. “It’s been a while since I’ve crocheted, but I can make you a blanket if you want?” She tugged at the light blue one draped across the back of the couch. “I made this one.”

I traced my fingers over the wool, enjoying the soft texture. “If you wouldn’t mind, I would love that.” I said, already envisioning a blue blanket over the back of my white couch.

It would add some much-needed color to the place, and I couldn’t wait to see it.

Shutting down my computer, I put it away and relaxed into the couch as Jasmine came running with her drawing supplies. The rest of the night passed quickly, and when I fell asleep with Thalia draped over my chest and Jasmine’s steady breathing nearby, a layer of contentment settled over me.

If this was what having a family was, then it was well worth carving out time from work for.

Chapter 15

Thalia

“I need these done by the end of the day,” Ludwig said, setting down a stack of papers on the corner of my desk. He didn’t spare me a glance otherwise, his gaze firmly locked on the single paper he was reading now, but I didn’t take it personally.

This was work after all, I didn’t think he’d be affectionate here. The man was the epitome of ‘proper’ and PDA, especially in the workplace, was a hard no for him.

That was fine. As long as he went back to being affectionate when we were home, I’d be alright with that. He was already doing a lot of things that were outside of his comfort zone, the least I could do was not push him on this.

“Sure thing. Are there any others before I get started?” I asked and he hesitated, then shook his head.

“Those are some leftovers from yesterday that don’t require my signature. Thanks to how backlogged we were, I split up some of the simpler paperwork and distributed it between this floor’s employees.”

I blinked, surprised he’d actually *delegated* work for once, but when I looked around I could see similar stacks on everyone else’s desks as well. Pride warmed me and I smiled up at him, barely holding myself back from telling him right there how proud I was.

That could come later, when we didn’t have so many eyes on us. Apparently my smile said more than enough though, because a light flush inched across his nose, and he cleared his throat.

“Thank you for your help with this. With your and the others’ aid, we should be finished with the work in time for dinner.”

He didn’t specify about that, but I knew what he meant. That was his way of saying he was making it to *our house* for dinner. I beamed, nodding.

“We help each other all the time here; why shouldn’t that extend to you?” I asked, not really expecting an answer. He nodded, then stiffly moved back to his office, but just as he was going to disappear into it, he added on. “Can I talk with you briefly?”

I got up in answer, following him into his office. Once the door shut, he started. “You seem...okay with how things are—my distance while here—but I wanted to make sure you were actually okay with it.”

Oh. Bubbles of happiness floated through me and I nodded, crossing my arms to stop myself from reaching for him.

“I appreciate that, thank you, and I’m fine. I know that work is work; it’s not the place for relationship things, so I didn’t expect you to act differently. Besides, as long as you go back to being how you were before when we’re alone, then I’m happy. Okay?”

He relaxed, nodding. “Of course. There’s no need to be professional when we’re alone, so you have nothing to fear on that front.” Then he shook his head. “That’s all I had to ask.”

Humming, I went to leave, only to pull up short and throw over my shoulder. “By the way, I’m proud of you for delegating that work. I know it goes against what you’re used to, what you were taught, and that it took effort for you to do that.”

The light flush from before darkened, and he nodded. “Thank you. I had the option of delegating some of it, or staying until nearly dawn to get it done. I could have brought

my computer with me and left to have dinner with you, but I *would* like to have some nights without the stacks of papers.”

“More than understandable. You know I’m always ready to help when I’m able, and the others are too. You’ve never made us work late because it was bad for our health. You should show yourself the same courtesy.”

Realizing that I was lecturing him, I winced. “Sorry, you’re my boss so I really shouldn’t be saying things like that.” Before I could leave though, he cut in with a shake of his head.

“No, you’re not wrong, and I encourage all of my employees to speak their minds. Just like I take their advice into account, I’ll take yours too.”

Then he gestured for me to leave and I did, still soaking in the warmth from before.

He may be colder at work, but that right there proved that he was still the Ludwig I liked under the ice mask. He didn’t have to pull me to the side to check if I was okay with this, but he did, because he cared.

As long as that stayed true, I could deal with the professional mask at work.

Sitting back down at my computer, I dove into the papers with renewed vigor. The extra stack he’d added would make me a bit later than normal to finish, but that was fine, I always made sure to have thirty extra minutes before I had to pick up Jasmine just for that reason.

Hours passed easily and in what felt like a blink, I’d finished the last of the paperwork. Most of the others had already gone home, the building having an almost haunted vibe as I stood. Moving to the main office, I knocked on the door frame and smiled when Ludwig glanced up.

His desk was mostly clear too, and when he saw me, he smiled though not with his usual freeness.

I didn't dwell on it, instead, I offered. "I'm about to head out and pick up Jasmine. If you'd like to come with?"

He'd all but jumped on any opportunities so far to see her until this point, and now was no different. His smile eased and he nodded, putting the last paper in its appropriate file before making his way toward me.

"I would enjoy that, thank you."

It was only after we were out of the building with all its security systems in place that he took my hand. I watched as the mask fell away, his shoulders relaxed, and his smile finally shifted into the full one I'd seen more and more often lately.

Leaning against him, I stopped at our cars and just soaked in the atmosphere. When my watch beeped, alerting me that I needed to get moving, I sighed and separated.

"You can follow behind me," I said, and at his hum of agreement, I got into my car. Once I was sure he was following, I drove to Jasmine's school, giddiness squirming in my chest. She'd be so excited he showed up, I couldn't wait to see her face.

When we pulled up outside, it was just in time for the bell to ring and I got out, looking through the crowds for Jasmine. It took a minute, Ludwig coming to stand next to me as he waited, but the second I saw her I waved.

She waved back, her smile firmly in place, but when she looked to the side and saw Ludwig, she froze. He tensed, uncertainty drifting to the surface as he cleared his throat. "Is she not happy I came with you?"

I patted his arm. "Breathe, she's just surprised. She should be snapping out of it in three, two-."

Just as I hit one, Jasmine jerked, her mouth stretching into the widest smile I'd seen all week before she rocketed through the crowd. Ludwig barely had time to blink before she slammed into his waist, both her arms winding around him as she cuddled in.

A soft ‘oof’ pushed from him, then he shook his head with an amused snort. “Guess that answers that question.”

He patted her back, his smile melting into the one that was specifically for Jasmine. After a minute, she pulled away and bounced around us.

“I didn’t think you’d be here, but it’s so cool!”

Before she could get into the car, I gently stopped her. “Easy, Jasmine. We’re going home in different cars, but once we’re there, you can chat his ear off.”

She pouted but gave in with a nod. “Okay.” Then she ran over, getting one more hug before vaulting into the car. Shaking my head at her, I shut the door.

Getting into the car, I waited for him again, then started on the way home. Jasmine’s excited chatter filled the car, and I reveled in it. This was our new normal, and I loved every minute of it. He probably wouldn’t be able to do things like this all the time, but I could enjoy them when they happened.

Chapter 16

Ludwig and I sat at the kitchen table, Jasmine happily running around in the background as she gushed about the fair we'd be going to. Naomi was due to arrive anytime now and, to my surprise, when I'd told Ludwig about our plans last week, he'd cleared his schedule to make it.

I still went a little gooey when I thought of that.

He'd made good strides in delegating his work when it was necessary, and now he went home with us more often than not, something he'd said time and time again that he much preferred.

Jasmine and I definitely liked this better, at least. Having him here for dinners meant more time together, and we'd never turn that down.

Sneaking a look down his frame, I bit back a shiver. This was the first time I'd seen him in jeans, and *wow* did it do nice things to his butt. They weren't skin tight—Ludwig would never be comfortable with that—but they were just snug enough to paint a gorgeous picture, and my fingers itched to squeeze a cheek anytime he stood in front of me.

His lips quirked, amusement clear as he raised a brow. “You *really* enjoy these pants, don't you?” He asked, and heat slapped across my cheeks.

I nodded all the same. “Yeah, I like you in any clothes of course, but the jeans in particular are nice.”

He reached across the table, taking my hand with a chuckle. “I'll keep that in mind for future reference. To be honest, they were the only thing I owned that wasn't business or formal.” He rolled his eyes. “Even I know not to bring those to a fair.”

Before I could come up with something to say, a familiar knock sounded on the front door and Jasmine raced for it. In hardly a second, her voice rang out. “Naomi!”

Ludwig got up, offering me a hand. “It appears we’re all here now.” He said and I nodded, taking his hand and leading us toward the front door.

Naomi had Jasmine wrapped into a hug, a smile stretching her lips that perfectly matched Jasmine’s. Her long brown hair hung in waves, and when she pulled back, she dragged me into a hug next.

“It’s so good to see you guys again!” She said, then turned to Ludwig, her smile not fading. “So you’re the Ludwig that Jasmine never stops talking about?”

He straightened, a trace of tension sliding along his back as he nodded, offering a hand. “I guess so, and you’re Naomi. Thalia’s told me a lot about you.”

She took the hand and shook, shooting me a sly look. “All bad things, I’m sure. But joking aside, I’m glad you two worked things out.” She gestured to the empty spot at her side.

“Robby would have been here, but work calls, you know how it is.” The last bit was angled to me and I nodded.

“Tell him we said hi.”

She nodded, then hefted her purse higher on her shoulder. “Of course, now let’s get this show on the road! I’ll take my car.” Then she pulled me to the side, whispering just loud enough for both me and Ludwig to hear.

“I’ll take the munchkin afterward so you two can have some ‘adult’ time.” She ended it with a wink, and a blush burned through my cheeks. Ludwig cleared his throat, not sure how to respond, so I did it for both of us with a smile.

“Thanks, that’d be much appreciated.”

She waved the thanks to the side and faced Jasmine. “Guess what sport? I get to take you after the fair, and we’re having the best sleepover ever!”

Jasmine froze, her mouth hanging open, then she lunged at Naomi with a jubilant cry. With her distracted, I inched closer to Ludwig and offered.

“Sorry, Naomi can be a lot, but I promise she’s well-meaning.”

He shook himself, the surprise and discomfort sliding away. “It’s fine, it’s obvious that she cares for both of you, and while I’m not comfortable with how easily she talks about our...intimate life, I can understand that it’s just who she is.”

Then his voice dropped into a growl. “Besides, she’s taking Jasmine so I can enjoy your full attention. I won’t complain about that.”

A shiver trailed up my back at the promise lingering behind his tone and I took one of his hands, squeezing. “I didn’t think you would.”

Forcing the hormones to the side, I nudged Jasmine and Naomi toward the door. “Alright, come on, you two. If we stay here too long, we’ll miss some of the shows.”

That’s all I had to say. Jasmine was out the door and jumping into the car at record speed, Naomi moving to her car with a shake of her head. After we got in, checking to be sure everyone was ready, I started the engine and headed out.

Ludwig’s hand found mine on the gear shift, the weight comforting and warm. Jasmine happily talked enough for all three of us, Ludwig giving the occasional hum of acknowledgement as I focused on the road.

The drive to the fair was a bit lengthy, thanks to it being a town over, but it was worth it. I was curious how Ludwig would handle the extended time of Jasmine’s talking. He seemed to be fine with it at home, but in the car there was no escape.

When we pulled up to the fairgrounds, I was pleasantly surprised to see that Ludwig was just as at ease and happy as he’d been when we first left. He helped unbuckle Jasmine, then stood to the side, watching everything with curiosity.

Naomi pulled up beside us, getting out and making her way to the head of the pack with a wave. “Come on, I’m covering today since you did our last date.”

I didn’t bother arguing, knowing she would win. Instead, I took one of Jasmine’s hands and one of Ludwig’s before following. The entry booth was fast and painless, hardly taking a few minutes before we were all outfitted in the wristbands the park used to identify those who’d already paid to get in.

Naomi nudged me playfully, nodding to the Ferris wheel. “Want to go for a romantic ride while I bring Jasmine on one of the faster ones?”

Ludwig tilted his head, confusion clear, and I cleared my throat. “I don’t handle the faster rides well, and Naomi knows that Jasmine loves them. Whenever we go to the fair, I usually sit out while they hit those.”

He hummed, eyeing the wheel now. “How is it romantic, if you don’t mind my asking?”

I waved at Naomi and Jasmine before they disappeared in the crowd, my focus shifting back to him as I answered. “Well, once you’re up in the air there’s no one but you, and if you don’t mind heights, it’s a nice view.”

He stared for another minute, then nodded, twining our fingers and moving for it. Once we were settled in the box, he looked around, taking in everything as if for the first time.

When he stared out the window like Jasmine had when she’d first ridden this, I couldn’t help but ask. “Have you ever been to a fair before?”

He shook his head, gaze sliding back to me now. “No. As I’m sure you can guess, my parents were never interested in such things, and they saw sending me there with a nanny as a waste of time and money. In their opinion, I should have been studying, not playing.”

The statement ended with a shrug as if he didn’t care either way, but I could see the flash of old hurt hiding behind

his eyes. He'd never admit it, but he'd wanted to go back then, as any kid would.

Squeezing his hand, I soothed. "Well, I'm glad we got to be here with you for the first time then. There's a lot we can show you, and this is just the start. If you like fast rides, you'll have to go with Naomi or Jasmine though."

My stomach rolled at the thought and the box jerked, rising into the air. Focusing on that and *not* the thought of other, faster rides, I leaned against his side and looked out the window.

"It's even prettier at night. The lights stand out more, and it makes everything glow." I said, watching the tiny shifts in his features as he took everything in. After a minute of staring out the window, he looked down at me, the intense stare heavy with something I couldn't name.

He leaned in, mouth sliding against mine in a chaste kiss. Hovering there for a moment, he hummed. "I can see why it's romantic now."

I smiled, not saying a word as we soaked in the peaceful atmosphere. While we were in the air there was no one else. No Jasmine to worry about, no work to pacify, just *us*.

It was bliss, and when we stopped at the top of the wheel, the people below looking like ants, I cuddled into his shoulder and sighed. "I wish we could do this more often."

He nodded, arm sliding around me and mouth brushing a light kiss against my head. "Agreed, but only having it rarely makes it more valuable, doesn't it?"

Nuzzling closer, I hummed, giving him that even as the wheel started heading down, the ride almost over. Once we were on stable ground again, my head on his shoulder as we moved through the crowds, I swept the people for Naomi.

It didn't take long to find her.

She stood on a bench, waving at us with Jasmine doing the same. Seeing them, I snorted. "I love those two, but

really?”

Ludwig looked in the direction I was and chuckled. “Well, they managed to get our attention.”

Yeah, they had.

Moving to them, I nearly groaned when the first thing out of Jasmine’s mouth was, “Can we go on that one, Mom?” She pointed to the ride that brought you up into the air and dropped you, the suspension cables zipping you back and forth.

My stomach soured at the thought, and I shook my head. “I’ll sit down here while you ride with Naomi if you want?”

Naomi made a noise, waving her hand with a sheepish smile. “Ah, actually, I’m still feeling a bit off from the last ride, so I should probably take a break.”

Jasmine’s begging eyes landed on me, and I cringed. Before I could agree—despite knowing how much my stomach was going to pay for it—Ludwig stepped forward.

“I can go with you.” He offered, and Jasmine’s eyes sparkled. She latched onto his hand and beamed.

“Okay! See you in a bit, Mom!” She bounded over to the ride, Ludwig following while eyeing it curiously. With them occupied, I turned to Naomi with a raised brow.

“So, you want to tell me what the stomach issues are about? Because I’ve seen you ride the most gut-wrenching things for hours on end without any issues.” I snuck a look down at her flat stomach, a suspicion niggling away at me. “Are you pregnant?”

She barked a laugh, waving her hands. “No, I’m still firm on my ‘no kids’ stance, and so is Robby. I just said that because it was painfully obvious that she wanted to ride a few with Ludwig. You got your special time with him, now it’s her turn.”

Looking after the two as they got on the ride, I bit my lip. “I didn’t even consider that, though maybe I should have.”

Jasmine was getting closer to him by the day, just like I was, and it made sense she’d want to be around him more. Seeing how she cuddled against him melted my heart, and I smiled.

“I’m glad they’re getting along so well. I wasn’t sure how it’d go at first, and I was nervous.”

She nodded, watching them too, until an impish grin curled her lips, and she nudged my side. “So, are you excited for your *extra* special time you’ll be getting with him later?”

Heat inched over my cheeks and I let it, not bothering to fight the familiar blush. “You know I am, and before you ask, that’s all the information you’re getting. He’s an intensely private person and he wouldn’t be comfortable with me telling you more.”

Thinking back to his earlier confession of unease, I added on. “And while I don’t mind you teasing me, can you ease back on him when it comes to our private life? He’d never tell you, but it really doesn’t sit well with him.”

He’d done a lot of adjusting and moving out of his comfort zone for Jasmine and I; if possible, I’d prefer not to throw that on him too.

Naomi nodded easily, leaning back to watch the ride zip into the air. “Sure thing. I wasn’t going to go crazy with him either way. He seems to be trying his best, and that deserves a break from me.”

Relaxing now that we’d talked about it, I enjoyed the companionable silence. This was one thing I loved about Naomi, we could just...sit there. We didn’t need a distraction or noise to fill the silence, we could just be.

The silence stayed until Ludwig and Jasmine came back, both wearing smiles as the latter cheered. “That was awesome! Can we ride more?” She asked, tipping her head up at Ludwig. He hesitated, looking my way, and I waved him on.

“I don’t mind. Besides, she’ll want to do the calmer ones when her stomach starts bothering her, and then I’ll join you.” With that, he nodded, letting himself be dragged to the next, and the next, and the next.

By the time Jasmine was finished with the thrill rides, the sky was getting darker, and I gently put a hand on her shoulder. “We have enough time for one more ride; which do you want to do?”

She looked around, stopping at the carousel and pointing excitedly. “That one!” Then she snagged my *and* Ludwig’s hands, looking up at him imploringly. “You’ll ride it too, right?”

He hesitated, eyeing the pastel, rainbow-painted ride. “I’m not sure if that’s...” He trailed off, glancing down to Jasmine’s pleading eyes. I could all but see his will crumble and he nodded. “Alright.”

I barely bit back a laugh at how easily he folded. Eventually we’d have to work on that, since he couldn’t spoil her anytime she gave him those eyes, but for now I could enjoy it.

Jasmine tugged both of us over to it, zipping up and onto the platform with a wide smile. Pointing to the unicorn, her typical choice, she asked. “Can you help me up on this one?”

Before I could do that, Ludwig stepped forward, easily placing her in the seat. Jasmine beamed, throwing her arms around him in a hug before situating herself. Then she looked at the empty mounts around us and asked.

“Which ones are you two riding?”

Ludwig shifted in place, coughing. “Do I have to?”

Jasmine tilted her head, confused. “No, but why wouldn’t you want to? It’s fun!”

Taking pity on him, I slid onto the black stallion next to them, cutting in before she could continue. “Jasmine, just

because it's fun to us doesn't mean it's fun to someone else. Remember? If he doesn't want to ride one, then he doesn't have to."

She nodded, not fighting that, and I turned to him and offered under my breath. "It's up to you, but if you're worried about image, trust me when I say no one here will care. See, look." I gestured behind him to where a man was seated on a bright pink pony, shaking his head fondly at the child who'd inevitably pulled him onto it.

Ludwig looked at the little family, then, after a beat, he haltingly moved to the white horse on Jasmine's other side. She grinned in triumph, and I shot him a smile when he looked my way. A light flush worked over his nose and he gave one back.

Once the ride started, Jasmine began making racing noises, as was usual, and Ludwig watched with an amused mask. From the crowd, I caught Naomi's camera flashing a mile a minute, and I chuckled. Typical Naomi, she knew I'd want pictures of this.

Ludwig noticed, too, and grimaced. "Please don't send those to anyone." He muttered, and I nodded.

"I wasn't going to, at least not the ones with you in them. I know that with your company, image is important."

He relaxed again, content to let the ride play out. It only lasted a few minutes, and then we were getting off and heading for Naomi. Jasmine led the way, bouncing around her now as she asked.

"Are we going to start the sleepover soon?"

Naomi nodded, winking my way. "Yup, and I even bought you some cute new pajamas to change into. It's a matching set with mine. Are you ready to go?"

Jasmine nodded, then froze, spinning to face Ludwig and I before bolting back to us. I wasn't braced for the tackle hug and nearly toppled when she latched onto our waists. Burying her head between us, she smiled.

“Thanks for the awesome day. I love you guys.”

My heart squeezed, and I nodded. “I love you too.”

Glancing at Ludwig, I paused, taking in the shocked look on his face as Jasmine raced back to Naomi. He looked as if he’d been struck with lightning, his eyes wide and mouth open just a hair. When he didn’t snap out of it after a minute, I took his hand and asked.

“Hey, you okay over there?”

He jerked, sucking in a deep breath and nodding. “Yes, I am. I just...I never expected to hear that from her so soon, and it took me off guard.”

Leaning against him, I nodded. “She’s a very open kid. Once she decides she likes you, it doesn’t take long. Are you alright with that?”

He bobbed his head, clearing his throat before he spoke. “More than.” Then he shook himself, his arm tightening around my waist as he visibly changed the subject. “Now then, I believe we have something at home waiting for us?”

The look from before melted into something heavy with promise, and my skin hummed in response. Taking his hand, I led us toward the exit while muttering under my breath.

“Oh, we definitely do...”

Chapter 17

The entire drive to the house was silent, his hand in mine making focusing on the road exceptionally difficult. His thumb flicked out, tracing over the back of my hand occasionally, and every touch seemed to wake something up inside me.

By the time we pulled into the driveway, I was keyed up in a way I'd never been before, and all from one innocent touch. The knowledge of what waited once we reached my room only added to the tension as we walked inside, shutting the door firmly behind us.

He didn't start moving deeper into the house like I expected. Instead, he trailed a hand up to my cheek and let it rest there. The touch was solid, warmth seeping into my skin as he leaned down and kissed me.

It carried thousands of unspoken words, and by the time he pulled away, his forehead resting on mine, the air crackled with a different kind of tension. His free hand trailed down, two fingers tucking into the waistband of my pants as he traced them along the sensitive skin.

They stopped just a few inches above where I wanted them the most, and he smiled knowingly. "If I were to slide my hand in your underwear and press your thighs apart, what would I find?" He asked, voice low and stroking over my nerves like satin.

Swallowing around my dry throat, I answered, feeling every brush of his fingers as if I couldn't focus on anything else.

"That I'm wet."

He bit his lip, finally unbuttoning my pants to have better access. Leaning me against the door, he tugged them down around my ankles, along with my underwear, and waited for me to kick them off.

The shirt followed shortly and I shivered, relishing in the hungry stare he swept over me.

“Perfect.” He said, fingers pressing between my thighs and opening them wider. They slid in without any restraint and when he sank to the knuckle, twisting and scissoring, he groaned.

“I don’t even need to prepare you. I could just,” he paused, jerking his hips against me until I felt the hard grind of his length, “start right away. Would you like that?”

I nodded, brain cells scrambling as his hand picked up its pace, my knees dropping out from under me when he stroked something swollen. He didn’t hesitate, scooping me up at the knees and moving us to my room.

Gently setting me on the bed, he stripped, his usual grace gone as he raced through the process. The last piece of clothing hit the floor and he shifted over me, length hard between us. One hand drifted down, lining him up, and the other palmed my chest.

Locking eyes with me, he pressed the head in, only to freeze and rip himself away with a curse. I barely bit back the whine of disappointment, watching as he snatched up his jeans and took the wallet out. It was only after I saw the condom that I realized what we almost forgot.

He ripped it open, sliding it down his length before shifting back over me with a shake of his head. “You’re bad for any kind of ability to think for me...”

Considering I hadn’t even thought about it, the same could be said of him for me.

Snaking my arms up and around his neck, I laughed breathily. “Good, I want to watch that brain of yours completely shut down and lose all trains of thought.”

Shifting between my thighs, his length once again pressed against me, he snorted. “You’ll have that in just a minute.” Then he sank in, leaning over me as he buried himself halfway in one thrust. My back arched, nails digging into his shoulders as I moaned.

He took that as his go-ahead, hands tightening on my hips and pulling out until just the tip remained. His hand found mine, twining our fingers above my head as he slammed forward.

This time he slid to the base, freezing there as I hissed.

“You okay?” He asked through gritted teeth, hips shivering from holding back. In answer, I hooked my legs around him and ground hard.

He choked in time with my groan, his restraint snapping. The next thrust was hard and deep, sliding me up the bed as he let go of my hand to grip my hip instead. Yanking me into him, he buried himself, rutting with the single-mindedness of an animal.

Arching into each new thrust, I trailed a hand down to the bundle of nerves at my entrance. But just as I pressed my fingers to it though, he covered my hand with his and shook his head.

“That’s my job.” He said, gently nudging my hand to the side to give him better access. He rolled it, pressing in time with every thrust as my vision whited out and a scream reverberated around my throat.

Through the buzzing taking over my ears, I heard him. “Let it out, there’s no one here but us, and I want to hear you scream.”

I did as told when he swiveled his hips to nail something deeper, my eyes rolling back in time as I sucked in a breath and cried out. His pace picked up in response, bitten off words and noises coming from me now as he focused on that spot without mercy.

The band in my lower stomach tightened, warning of what was to come, and I twisted a hand into his hair, tugging. He must have gotten the wordless message because he kept at it, grinding down on every thrust until, with a clever flick of his fingers, I toppled over the edge.

Locking around him, I rode out the waves as slowly, sensations and sound came back. He kept it up, his face a mask of concentration as he hovered just on the edge of his own climax. Reaching between us, I cupped his base and squeezed, feeling as he stuttered to a stop and moaned.

Tiny thrusts followed as I tightened and loosened my grip in turns, watching in satisfaction as he collapsed on top of me. The weight was comforting, and I trailed a hand through his hair, enjoying the soft locks and the feel of them twinning with my fingers.

The only sound was our breathing as slowly we both recuperated. After a long beat, he dragged his face out of my shoulder and rolled us to lie on our sides. Taking care of the condom, he tugged me against him and tucked his chin against my head.

Neither of us said anything for a long minute, then I kissed his chest, tasting the lingering tang of salt. He cracked an eye open, watching me as I trailed up his throat and landed on his lips.

This kiss was different, his tongue lazily twining with mine as we soaked in the aftermath. There was no rush to end things, no worry of Jasmine walking in on something.

At this moment, we were free to take our time, and I grabbed onto it with both hands.

Savoring him, I reveled in the slow circles he drew on my back, calloused fingers making paths before working up into my hair. Tipping my head for better access, he pulled me into a deeper kiss, the rest of the world fading away.

By the time we pulled back, my head was almost spinning from lack of oxygen, and he wore that soft, heart-

melting smile.

“I’ll never get tired of this.” He said, and I hummed my agreement, words lost in the sea of almost euphoria rolling over us. He didn’t seem to mind, his smile staying in place as we floated in the moment.

When my eyelids started shutting against my will, he chuckled. “Get some rest, things will be busy over the next few days with Jasmine’s soccer game, and you’ll need all the sleep you can get.”

Right, the game. She’d been begging him to go when she came back from school, and he hadn’t gotten a chance to answer her.

Forcing both my eyes open, I asked gently. “Do you think you’ll be able to make it?” There was not a hint of judgment in my tone, though I couldn’t help the hope that inched in. It would mean the world to Jasmine if he showed up and while I wouldn’t guilt him by saying so, I couldn’t help but hold my breath while I waited for his response.

His smile didn’t slip and, to my surprise, he nodded. “I already called the day off and have made plans for the week before it to ensure no paperwork gets backed up.”

The hope burst outward, morphing into a bubbling happiness, and I smiled. “Jasmine is going to be ecstatic.”

He nodded, determination burning through his eyes. “That’s why I’m making a point of doing this. I want to be there for as many events as I can and there’s nothing at work that should cause a conflict. If we get another boom of clients, I’ll have them handled *before* the game.”

I’d seen that look on him before and it meant no matter what, he was doing this, and my heart fluttered in response. Cuddling just a bit closer until my ear pressed to his chest, the soothing thump of his heartbeat further rocking me to sleep, I said.

“I’ll be here to help if you need it. You don’t have to do everything alone.”

Sleep pressed down on me, but just before everything faded, I heard his response.

“Yes, I’m starting to see that.”

Then I knew nothing.

Chapter 18

Kelly and I worked at a steady clip, putting the finished papers to the side as more were delivered. Today had been going at the speed of light so far and each time we almost finished the work, more would arrive.

Thankfully Ludwig had started shifting around his work because if he'd tried to do all of this alone, he wouldn't have slept all week.

Ever since I'd sat down, he'd been in meetings. I caught a few glimpses of him between them, his hair in that perfectly brushed back style without a single strand out of place. He was looking better rested since he'd started sleeping over and having dinner with Jasmine and I, something that Kelly was quick to notice as well.

When the next set of meetings passed and Ludwig came out to wave in the next, she hummed curiously. "So is it just me, or does the boss seem healthier lately? Almost like he's glowing."

I shrugged, forcing my smile to *not* show lest she figure out that I had something to do with it. "Maybe it's the full nights of rest? He's been delegating his work and heading home at the same time as us lately."

She tipped her head, acknowledging the point as he disappeared back into his office. Peaceful silence passed between us for a long minute until the intercom overhead buzzed, announcing someone at the front entrance.

Kelly frowned, getting up and waving me back down when I went to stand as well. "It's probably just another meeting that showed up early. I've got it."

Then she disappeared, leaving me with our coworkers, all of us shooting confused looks at the door. There shouldn't

be another meeting until at least an hour later, so this was... odd.

While Kelly's suggestion was possible, it was highly unlikely, and every hair on my neck was standing to attention.

When Kelly herself came back, her face ten shades paler, with a very familiar and unwelcome couple behind her, I realized why I felt that way.

Ludwig's parents had apparently decided to stop by.

Forcing a professional mask, I focused on my paperwork and listened as Kelly spoke. "Mr. Evans is currently in a meeting, as he's been all day. He doesn't have any breaks in his schedule, thanks to the boom in clients lately-."

His father cut her off rudely, his eyes sweeping the room as he did. "We don't need to talk with our son to see how he's running the company. Go back to your business."

Kelly did, but when she sat next to me, Ludwig's father's eyes followed her, stopping when they landed on me.

He froze, mouth opening a hair, before his entire face shut down in a mask of neutrality, only the cruel glint to his eyes warning of the storm headed my way. He breezed over to my desk, his mouth curling into a parody of a smile as he asked.

"I suppose I don't have to ask how you met my son. Hopefully you're *qualified* to have this job and not here as a decoration piece."

A world of accusations lingered under that sentence, and I fought back the urge to bristle. He thought I'd slept with Ludwig to get this job, as if I hadn't busted my butt to get where I was. Kelly sucked in an offended breath next to me, but I waved out of sight of the other two, telling her without words not to get involved.

Keeping my smile firmly in place, as I would for any other unpleasant boss, I spoke. "Every single employee here

has the necessary credentials to work in our positions. There were tests we had to pass, and if you'd like, I can produce my degree?"

My tone was icy, the words spoken as if to a toddler, and that didn't go over his head. His nostrils flared, eyes narrowing as his smile turned sharper.

"That won't be necessary, though, if you'll follow me, I believe a meeting is due."

It wasn't really a request so I stood, offering a soothing smile to Kelly as I went. She had no idea what was going on here, just that—for some reason—the previous owners of the company had it out for me.

With any luck, none of my coworkers would find out why that was.

Once we were tucked into a private room, his father dropped the mask and sneered. "How much do we have to pay for you to take that child of yours and *leave*?"

The question threw me off so badly I choked, raising a disbelieving brow. "Excuse me?" I asked, sure I'd imagined that because he hadn't just-

His lips curled into a scowl and he said it again, the distant sound of a door opening lost under the rushing of blood in my ears.

"How much money will it take for you to break things off with my son and leave? Twenty five thousand? Thirty?"

I nearly choked again at the amounts, not that I was actually considering the offer but that he could casually throw around that kind of money. Shaking myself back to the present, I straightened and shook my head.

"None, because I'm not leaving him for anything. This may be a foreign concept to you, but I care for him, and that means no amount of money will make me leave."

He scoffed, "Everyone has a price. If not money, then what do you want most? Say it, and it will be done. After

you're out of his life.”

Ludwig's mother stood tall, glaring down her nose at me as she spat. “Our son has been notably changing; calling days off, not using his extra time for our clients as he used to. It's unacceptable, and it's painfully obvious that you're the cause.”

So they were trying to get rid of me. Well, sucks for them because it wasn't going to be that easy.

Squaring my shoulders, I glared them down. “I'll repeat myself, since you obviously didn't hear the first time. I'm not leaving him for anything. I don't want anything from you two. Anything I want, I can earn myself. Nothing is worth losing him.”

His father's scowl was stormy, but his mother smiled, the crafty look sending tingles of fear through me. When she spoke, my stomach dropped.

“A change of tactic is in order. You don't want anything? Fine, but if you continue your relationship with our son, you won't be allowed to work here any longer.”

I should have seen that coming. These two were the peak of awful, and this was well within their capabilities. But flashes of Ludwig's sleepy smile came back, and I held strong to my decision.

There were other jobs, and for all I knew they *couldn't* fire me. They'd handed over control of the company to Ludwig after all. I wouldn't let them get under my skin.

“Then so be it. Put in the paperwork to have me fired, but I'm *not* leaving him. You both are the worst parents I've ever come across in my life, and I've met plenty. You should have supported your son in a healthy way, encouraged him to do things *other* than work, but you don't care about him. Only yourselves. I refuse to be like you two. Nothing you do or say will make me leave him, so whatever you're planning as bribes or threats, get them out of the way so I can refuse you again. I have work to do, and this is wasting valuable time.”

Her smile fell, and she sputtered. “He’ll leave eventually. He isn’t fit to be a parent, and he’ll get bored of you and the brat.”

Again, flashes of him hit, this time when he was curled up on the couch with Jasmine. The two had been in their own little world, and he’d looked *happy*.

Not letting the woman’s poison sink in, I lifted my chin. “Then he leaves, but I’m not leaving first to avoid a hypothetical situation. As for how fit he is, he’s leaps and bounds more so than you two. He cares about Jasmine, a foreign concept for you I’m sure, but that on its own makes him far more suited to parenthood than you.”

His father recovered, scowl firmly in place again. “He’ll never have time for either of you, not with his work-.”

I couldn’t help it, I barked a laugh. “And whose fault is that? You’re the one who taught him he had to do everything alone! Head of companies like this are supposed to delegate, but he’s been handling it himself because of *you*. Even without that though, I knew what I was getting into when we started dating. I’m not about to cry about it now.”

He’d also made time, calling off certain days like Jasmine’s game coming up. I wouldn’t tell them that, of course, but it just showed that he was trying. I would never be angry at him for that.

His mother opened her mouth, probably about to spit some kind of new threat she’d concocted, but the words never left her lips. The door behind us opened fully, and in walked Ludwig. His parents tensed in sync, the air of ‘busted’ almost palpable as he moved to me first.

Worry marred his face, along with a gratitude that seemed to seep straight to his soul. When I saw that, I realized. He’d heard all of that. Heat inched over my cheeks, but before I could be too embarrassed over my impassioned defense, he cupped my cheek and asked.

“Are you okay?”

His parents sputtered behind him, but he paid them no mind. I nodded, watching as some of the worry eased, a tiny smile taking its place as his thumb stroked me. “Good, and thank you. For everything you said. You’re right that I’m not going anywhere, now or in the future. You’re also *not* going to be fired, as that’s only a duty I can do, and they gave away their rights to it when they passed the company to me.”

Then his smile fell into a scowl, but this one was different than his usual. It was sharper, harsher. And when he turned to face his father, I could all but feel the anger frothing off him.

When he spoke, it rang in his voice too. “How dare you two.”

His mother tensed, waving her hand and trying to dispel the tension. “Now, son, there’s no need-.”

He cut her off, his back to me and shoulders tight. “No need?! You came to a work environment and dragged our personal lives with you. Not once have we acted anything but professional here, there has been no favoritism shown, and you can even check the records that she gets paid the same amount as any of the others in her position. And yet you came here to bribe and threaten her into leaving.”

Finally, his father jerked out of his stupor to growl. “Having her here is bad for the company!”

Ludwig faced him, shaking his head. “No, having her here doesn’t affect the company at all. All the work is getting done on time, as it was before I hired her, and I’m still expanding the company outward despite your constant fighting me on it.”

Wait, his father was roadblocking new expansions?

Confusion bit, but I shoved it to the side.

Not the time, I could ask more on that later. Right now we had another issue to deal with. Focusing back on Ludwig, I watched as his fists tightened at his sides until his knuckles turned white.

“You had no reason to do this other than wanting to interfere in my life, and I won’t tolerate it. If you try this again, if Thalia receives one more word of threat from either of you, I’ll be calling the police.”

At that, my mouth all but hung open. I appreciated the defense, but I hadn’t thought he’d go that far!

Apparently, neither had his parents, because his mother choked. “You wouldn’t, not over a woman you barely know!”

Ludwig smiled now, cold and hard. “It goes to show how little you know me, because that isn’t a threat, it’s a promise. These rooms are recorded to prevent potential workplace abuse. If you harass her again, I’ll be submitting the tapes to the police and letting them handle it.”

It wouldn’t do much, not with the kind of money his family had. They’d lawyer up and weasel out of almost anything, but I kept that to myself, watching as his parents paled.

It was his father who objected. “That kind of media attention would ruin the other operations I have in motion!”

Oh, well, that would work as a good deterrent too. Ludwig must have known that, because he nodded.

“Yes, which means it’s in your best interest to leave running this company to me, *as you planned*, and focus on your other businesses. You signed over nearly all your rights last year to make me head of the company, and you can’t undo that now.”

I believed that. If they could, they probably already would have threatened him with it. As it stood, his father shook his head, glaring daggers at me.

“All of this, for *her*? A scrap of a woman who you’ve known less than half a year?”

Ludwig nodded, mouth in a line. “Yes, because I care for her, and I won’t allow anyone to threaten her as you did. Parents or no. Now if you have no other business here, leave.”

They did, though not without another set of glares my way. Once they were gone and we were alone, Ludwig deflated, running a hand through his hair.

“Words can’t describe how sorry I am about this. I never thought they would corner you like that.”

I shook off the surprise quickly, moving around to face him and cup his jaw. I’d never seen him so exhausted before, and the fact he’d faced off with his parents for *me* wiped away any negative feelings leftover from dealing with them.

“I don’t care about them. Are you okay?” I asked, and his eyes softened, that molten affection sliding back into them as he nodded.

“Yes, I am. Better than I expected to be after something like that, to be honest. I know I should have stood up to them years ago, but there’d never been anything worth fighting them over.”

The fact that I fell into that category swept another wave of butterflies through me.

His smile eased at the edges and he dipped, kissing my head with a tired sigh. “Hopefully they’ll leave you alone now.”

Before I could come up with something to say, the door opened again, and in walked Kelly. I didn’t have time to pull away before she’d spotted us, the papers in her hands dropping as her jaw popped open.

So much for keeping our relationship out of the workplace...

Trying to come up with something to say, I sputtered. “Ah, I can explain-.”

Though I wasn’t entirely sure how. I couldn’t very well lie now that she’d walked in on that, but maybe I could bend the truth a bit, say it was just a casual sign of affection, maybe even sibling? My stomach curdled at the thought of hiding

this, of lying as if our relationship was something to be ashamed of, but I forced the unease down.

It didn't matter; Ludwig had gone above and beyond with trying to make things work lately. I could at least stay within his boundaries for this.

But just as I went to spin a lie, he spoke, cutting me off.

"It's exactly what you're thinking."

I spun to face him, bewildered now. "I thought you didn't-?" I stopped short, but he must have picked up the rest because he shook his head.

"Generally, I prefer that people's work and personal lives stay separate, myself included, but there's no point in trying to uphold that now. I'll still insist on treating you like any other employee while here, but no more hiding."

So saying, he faced Kelly, who still watched us with wide eyes.

"Thalia and I have been in a relationship for a few months now, and Jasmine is my daughter."

She choked, trying to recover. "I'm happy for you two, but what? I thought you'd never met before Thalia started working here?"

I dragged a hand through my hair and sighed. "Long story short, protection failed on a one-night stand, and I couldn't contact him afterward. The next time I saw him was my first day here."

Visibly shaking herself from her stupor, she bent to pick up the papers and mumbled. "That explains why you looked ready to throw up back then." Then she shrugged, smiling. "Well, I'm happy for you two."

Shooting me a sly look, she asked. "So, I take it this is why he's looked happier lately?" The light tease pulled a flush over my cheeks, but before I could say anything, Ludwig nodded.

“Yes, and while I don’t mind people knowing about our relationship, that doesn’t mean we’ll be shirking our duties. Do you need me to look over those papers?”

She cleared her throat, one of her hands rising to rub the back of her head. “Not really. I was worried after they left and wanted to check on her, but didn’t have a good reason to be here.”

My heart squeezed. She really was a great friend. “Thanks, but things are fine. You can head back, and I’ll follow soon.”

She did after a final head shake. Once it was just us again, I faced him. “Well, that was...surprising. I didn’t think you’d go out and say it like that after everything.”

He shrugged, moving for the door while twining our fingers. “Like I said, as long as we keep up our usual level of professionalism, I don’t care.”

Before he could pull me out the door, I tugged at our joined hands and raised a brow. “I think we need to go over what’s allowed now, because I’m lost.”

He hesitated, then nodded. “Light touch, such as this, I think will be okay. No kissing, but other than that, I think we’ll be fine.”

Then he faced the others and pulled us through the doorway, muttering as he did. “Let’s just get this part done so they can get their gossiping over with.”

Sure enough, the second we walked in, all heads turned, and dozens of eyes locked on our hands. He walked me to my desk, nodded, then left as if nothing was amiss. Taking my seat, I tried to ignore the eyes boring into me, instead focusing on my work with an internal groan.

There were so many better ways we could have done that, but I guess this works too... Kelly chuckled next to me but mercifully said nothing, giving me a chance to regroup.

As the embarrassment faded, Ludwig's words came back, and I let myself soak in the warmth. I never would have thought he'd stand up to them like that...

But I was glad he did.

Trying to ignore the dopey smile curling my lips, I focused on the paperwork in front of me. I had time to be giddy and happy later. For now, I have work to do.

Chapter 19

Jasmine's face was a mask of concentration as she slowly moved through the motions for the tenth time. Her soccer game was fast approaching, and she'd spent every waking moment practicing.

Behind her, Ludwig sat on the floor, watching. He'd done this more and more often, sitting in on her at home practice, offering encouragement whenever she slipped.

It wrapped a satin glove around my heart every time, and now was no different.

Leaving them to it for now, I sorted through the various papers and letters both Ludwig and I brought home from work. When I bumped into a heavy cardstock one, I paused. That wasn't mine, and it looked important...

Reading the addressee, Ludwig, I picked up the letter and brought it into the living room. "Hey, did you see this, or did it get mixed into everything else? It looks official."

He frowned, gently standing after a pat to Jasmine's head. "I haven't seen it yet, though I recognize the seal on the front. It's from someone I was hoping to partner with for the next branch expansion of the company."

Taking it, he opened the letter, his frown sliding into a mask of stunned disbelief. When he didn't talk after a minute, I poked his side.

"Ludwig, is it bad news?" I braced just in case, but the last thing I expected was for him to *smile*, one of the widest, most elated ones I'd seen to date.

"No, this is excellent news! They're finally open for a meeting, and not just them either. All the people I've been attempting to contact, they've all agreed to a single meeting to discuss branching out with my company."

His eyes sparkled and he picked me up, clamping me against him and spinning until the letter fell to the floor. “I thought they’d never agree without my father’s backing but-!”

He didn’t finish the sentence, but I didn’t need him to. He’d worked hard for this, and not even his father’s interference had stopped it.

I still hadn’t had a chance to ask why exactly his father was against it, but it didn’t matter how. What did was how happy he was.

“Congratulations! You deserve this and more. You certainly put in enough work for it. What day is it so I can bake you a cake?”

He flushed, shaking his head as uncharacteristic shyness came forward. “That’s not necessary.”

I rolled my eyes and cut him off. “Yes, it is. I would celebrate if Jasmine managed something like this, so of course I’m going to do the same for you.” Turning to Jasmine, who’d picked up the letter and was staring at it, I asked. “What day is it, honey?”

She bit her lip, tears building in her eyes and slamming the alarm down over my previous happiness. “Jasmine, what’s wrong?” I asked, kneeling when she still didn’t react.

Ludwig’s smile fell too and he crouched at her side, but when he tried to pull her into a hug, she flinched and spoke. “It’s the day of my soccer game.”

One sentence and the entire room’s joy disappeared.

Ludwig shook his head, gently taking the paper and reading it for himself. “But that’s not possible, I specifically told my secretary not to schedule *anything* on that day.”

After reading it though, he looked at me, a war waging behind his eyes. “Jasmine read it right.” There was so much more in that statement than just the confirmation of the date. Jasmine shrank into herself, not meeting either of our eyes, and I bit my lip.

I'd hoped to avoid her being disappointed, but I couldn't very well blame Ludwig if he *did* choose to go. He'd tried to plan his schedule around the game, but this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. One he'd worked for years for.

It wasn't fair to tell him to throw it away.

Jasmine stayed quiet, staring at her shoes before finally she spoke in a barely audible whisper. "You're...not going to my game, are you?"

Ludwig looked as if he'd been strapped to two vehicles that were driving in opposite directions, his throat bobbing on a swallow as he visibly struggled. Part of me hoped he'd deny it, but even as the thought came, I knew it wasn't going to happen.

When he didn't answer after a minute, Jasmine looked at the floor again, the wet sheen to her eyes almost spilling over now. "It's okay. Grandma can record it, and you can watch some on the live again, right?"

The disappointment was palpable, and it tore at my heart. Ludwig flinched, guilt clear as he shook his head. "I wouldn't be able to take my phone out during the meeting; it would be off and in my desk..."

Jasmine sank into herself further, the tears on the edge of overflowing, and I gently tucked her into my side, asking in a desperate attempt to find a middle ground.

"Can you ask them to move the meeting? Another day or even just a few hours later?" It was scheduled to land in the middle of the game itself, and there was no way he could make any of it.

His lips pinched into a thin line and he shook his head. "Rescheduling with that many people is almost impossible. These are all very important people with very busy schedules, so getting them all in one place at one time is a miracle in the first place."

Damn it, there was no way out of this.

Ludwig looked at Jasmine, pain burning through his eyes as he reached out and tried to soothe. “This won’t happen again. This meeting is special, different from the others, and I can’t skip it. After this, if I promise to be somewhere, I’ll be there. If meetings come up then, I’ll reschedule them, but I can’t do that with this one.”

Jasmine nodded, not moving into the offered hug. She didn’t meet his eyes either and without a doubt, I knew she didn’t believe him. It cracked my heart straight down the middle, and if the new round of pain on his face was any indication, he saw the same thing.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” He said, and finally Jasmine let him pull her into a hug. She didn’t cling on like usual and it lacked her energy, the sight painful to watch as she stepped away and sniffed, locking pleading eyes on me.

“Can I go to my room?” Tears were already crowding into her voice and I nodded, knowing she needed time to herself. Ludwig watched her go, eyes tortured before they turned to me.

“I can’t not go.” He said, and he sounded as if he were telling himself that more than me.

I nodded. “I know and just this once, I won’t hold you to your promise. This is something you’ve worked for years for.”

But *why* did it have to land on her soccer game of all days?!

And who’s to say it won’t become a habit?

The doubts that’d been blessedly silent lately rose again, gnawing at me.

He was a workaholic and had been since the day I first started working with him. Yes, he was learning to delegate some of it, but what would happen if he managed to set up this branch? Would he go back to swamping himself?

Would he miss the rest of her events and award ceremonies with similar excuses?

I never wanted her to feel this, but I couldn't stop it now that it was in motion. If he buried himself in work and this became a habit, then I would only be able to comfort Jasmine after each missed event.

I hated that thought to the core of my being.

Ludwig reached for me now, his hand curling around mine and squeezing as he assured me. "I know that look, and I'm telling you, I won't let this happen again. This meeting is a once in a lifetime thing and after I go to it, there won't be any others. All other meetings can be rescheduled and *will*."

He cupped my cheeks, lifting my chin to stare at him. "I will. You have good reason to be worried and I won't say you don't. I'm breaking my promise by doing this and I hate that, but this will be the only time."

God, I hoped so.

Nodding, I tried to paste on a smile. "Of course."

If his grimace was any indication, I'd failed on making it look believable. Gently separating from him, I said. "I'm going to check on Jasmine."

She was probably sobbing her heart out right now and while she might tell me she wanted to be alone, I had to be sure. If that was the case, I'd leave her to it until she was ready for cuddles.

He looked toward her room, swallowing hard. "I want to come too. She's crying because of me and I-." He stopped short, shaking his head. "I don't want her to cry because of me."

I believed that, the pain still clear in his eyes told me just how true that was, but I bit my lip. "I don't know if that's a good idea, at least not right now. Let me test the waters. She might not even want me there right now."

He flinched, but followed silently, stepping to the side to wait as I knocked on her door. “Honey, it’s me. Do you want me to come back later?”

A long beat passed, then I heard her. “No, I want a hug.”

My heart twisted at her voice’s congested tone, and I grabbed the handle, pausing when I remembered Ludwig waiting.

“Ludwig is here too, do you want him to come in?” I asked, already knowing the answer even before she said it.

“No.”

He deflated, but nodded. “Alright, I’ll give you space, but Jasmine...” He trailed off, fighting for words before finally settling on. “I *am* sorry, and I promise this won’t happen again. Your next recital, or sports game, or science fair, I’m going to be there with your mother cheering you on.”

She sniffed. “Okay.”

He stepped away, expression torn in hundreds of different directions. “I’m going to go sit in the living room.” He looked painfully lost, so I nodded, giving his hand a squeeze before sliding into Jasmine’s room.

The lights were out and she laid on her side on the bed, her pillow clutched to her chest as she cried into it. Sitting next to her, I ran a hand through her hair and said nothing. She had a right to be disappointed and I wasn’t about to tell her she didn’t.

It was better to let her cry it out and feel all the bad stuff than bottle it.

After a minute, she rolled over and threw her arms around my neck, burrowing her face against my shoulder. Leaning against the wall, I rocked her a bit and kissed her head.

“I love you,” I said, offering the only words that might help.

She unburied herself from my neck and looked up at me, red-rimmed eyes still watery. “Does he, though?”

And just like that, my heart shattered.

“Honey, I know this is hard for you, but I promise he loves you. He stood up to his parents when they tried to make him leave us. He wouldn’t do that if he didn’t love us, right?”

A fear I hadn’t seen until now eased a tiny bit, and she nodded. “His parents were mean.”

I winced. “Yeah, they were, but he told them he wouldn’t leave us. You know what that means?” I waited for her to meet my eyes before continuing.

“It means that he’s staying and in the future, when things like this happen, he’ll prove to you that this won’t happen again. He’ll prove it to both of us.”

At least I hoped so, because I wasn’t sure what I’d do otherwise. I couldn’t very well expect Jasmine to keep getting her hopes up if he *did* make this a habit. He said he wouldn’t, and more than anything, I wanted to believe that.

I needed to believe that because otherwise, I had to ask myself if I’d made a mistake bringing him into our little family, and I wasn’t ready for that question.

Jasmine wiped her eyes, nodding. “He promised he’d be at the next one.” She said, hope flashing to life. Scooting back, she looked at her door before hesitantly asking. “Is he still there?”

Slipping off the bed, I hummed. “He’s in the living room. He knew you needed space but wanted to be nearby.”

He hadn’t said as much, but his face had all but screamed it.

She wiped her eyes one last time and took my hand, tugging me toward the door. Leading the way to the living room, she stopped short at the doorway, both of us pausing to take in Ludwig.

His computer was open and he sat nearby, head in his hands with waves of defeat rolling off him. The sight was painful to witness, but before I could think of what to say or do, Jasmine let go of me and crawled onto the couch.

He barely had time to do more than pull his hands away before she'd pushed into his lap, her head burrowing into his shoulder. He froze, hands hovering over her just like the first time she'd hugged him.

Then he looked at me. Hope, pain, and uncertainty showed there, and I offered a smile. "She forgives quickly."

His throat bobbed on his next swallow and he curled her into him, tucking his chin onto her head with a shaky sigh. They stayed like that and I watched, the sight quieting the doubts for now.

Things weren't okay, not by a long shot, and if he didn't show up to her next game or recital they'd be a lot *less* okay, but that was a worry for the future.

For now, we'd just have to see how things played out.

Later that night, I laid next to Ludwig, both of us fully clothed. To say we weren't in the right mood for more was an understatement.

He faced me, his mouth set in a line. Over the past few hours he'd been stewing on something, and finally he spoke.

"You're still worried about me not showing up for her next game."

I winced, but before I could pull away, he caught my hand and squeezed gently. "I'm not blaming you, to be clear. The only way I'll soothe that doubt, in both you and Jasmine, is by being there for the next one and every one after that. I just wanted you to know that I'm not going back to what I was before, not for anything. I'm not my father, and after this, I'll be making sure the secretary runs *all* important meetings by me before scheduling them. This won't happen again."

The dead certainty to his tone wiped at the edges of my doubts and I nodded, relaxing into the hollow of his throat. I didn't have anything to say, but this was hopefully sufficient.

He tightened his grip around me, pulling the blankets up in a makeshift cocoon around us. Once we were tucked in, hidden from the world, I let myself drift.

Tomorrow was going to be rough for everyone, but now it was for us.

Now was okay.

Chapter 20

The air was notably somber the next day as Jasmine pulled on her soccer uniform. She'd put on a smile for Ludwig, but the second he turned away, it fell.

He'd noticed, and his lips were curled into a pained grimace. He'd chosen a dark suit and a matching briefcase, all the papers he'd need for his presentation inside it. Combined with his usual brushed-back hair style, he was devastating.

I couldn't enjoy it though, not with both of them hurting like this.

He stood by the door, waiting for us to be ready so we could go our separate ways. Jasmine hesitated on the other side of the room, reluctance clear, but after a minute she gave in and stood between us.

Ludwig offered her a tired smile, kneeling to give her a hug as he spoke. "Maybe when I finish with the meeting you can show me how to play soccer? I've never tried it before, so I'll need lots of practice."

She perked up a bit at that, returning the hug and nodding into his shoulder. "I'd like that...and can we watch the video when you get home?"

He hummed, tightening his grip around her. "Of course." Straightening, he faced me and opened his arms. I stepped in, letting myself enjoy the warm cocoon for a minute before patting his chest.

"Knock them dead out there," I said, Jasmine giving a smile that was a tad more genuine as she cheered.

"Yeah, show them who's boss!"

He chuckled, "The hope is that everyone leaves this meeting alive and happy, but I'll keep your advice noted."

Turning to the door, he hesitated and then smiled at Jasmine. “Good luck with your game; you’ll do great.”

Then he left. The sound of the engine turning over came, and once it petered off into the distance, Jasmine tugged on my hand, still keeping that forced smile on her face.

“We should go or we’ll miss Nana, right?” She asked, and I nodded, leading the way out. Mom would be waiting at the school for us, and I could use her soothing presence right now. If the way Jasmine perked up was any indicator, she could too.

Thankfully the drive over was lighter than the morning had been so far, Jasmine fiddling with the radio until she was happy. The first face we saw when we pulled into the school parking lot was Mom herself, her hair done up and cheeks stretched in a wide smile.

“Why, if it isn’t my favorite ladies!” Jasmine was out of the car and in her arms in a blink, snuggling in without an ounce of hesitation. Moving at a slower rate, I joined them, accepting my hug as Mom looked behind us, her smile falling into a confused frown.

“Where is that man of yours? I was excited to meet him.”

I’d forgotten to tell her.

Jasmine’s face fell and I winced, running a hand through her hair with an internal sigh. “His secretary scheduled a meeting today that couldn’t be moved, but it sounds like he and Jasmine were planning a personal game at home if you want to watch?”

That at least helped pick up Jasmine’s mood. She nodded, smiling up at Mom. “Yeah, I wish he could be here, but he promised to be at the next one, *and* he even asked me to show him how to play.”

Mom let out a thoughtful hum, her eyes entirely too knowing as they locked on me. “That’s good, and I’m glad he offered something else to do with you.” Those eyes bore

through me, something lingering under the surface that I couldn't name.

Then, in a blink, it was gone and Mom was all smiles.

“Well, we don't want to be late for the game, lead on!”

She hooked an arm with Jasmine and made a grand sweeping gesture, the girl laughing at it as I followed at the back. Something about the look she'd had tugged at my mind. It was almost plotting, but that made no sense.

There was nothing here to plot, unless Mom was considering taking Jasmine out for ice cream to cheer her up?

Yeah, that was probably it.

Putting the subject to the side, I kept both of them in sight as Jasmine brought us to the back of the school, where the fields were. The soccer one was primed and ready, the grass freshly mowed with new paint to mark the boundaries.

Most of the kids were already there, and a few ran over to pull Jasmine away once they saw us. She hesitated, eyes going to me, and I waved her on with a smile. Once she was out of earshot, though, Mom hummed.

“I can practically feel the worries drifting off you.”

I winced. “Yeah...” Shaking my head, I sighed. “There's nothing he could do to reschedule that meeting, and it was something he's been working toward for years. I just wish...”

I trailed off, but Mom picked up where I left off, taking one of my hands and squeezing comfortingly. “There's nothing wrong with wishing things were different sometimes. Just don't forget to enjoy the good times that *are* here.”

As if in response to that, Jasmine looked over and waved. I returned it, letting some of the melancholy go. She was right. Whatever happened in the future, we'd see about it when it came. Right now though? I had a little girl's game to record.

Taking out my phone, I set it up on the portable tripod I bought just for this purpose, only to pause when I noticed Mom taking out her phone too.

“You don’t have to do that, I’ll send the video to you and Dad afterward.” I said, but she shook her head, her smile warm.

“I know, but after I mentioned how you recorded a live for Ludwig to watch her recital, your father insisted on trying it. He wants to see everything ‘as if he were here.’” She shook her head, affection clear. “Stubborn man, but that’s one of the many things I love about him.”

That did sound like Dad.

I shrugged, “Okay.” Then I turned back to the game, shoving all thoughts of worry to the side. I was here to support Jasmine, and that’s what I’d do. With that in mind, I cheered her on with my best smile.

Chapter 21

Ludwig

The office felt even more stifling than normal and without a doubt, it was thanks to Jasmine and the game I was missing. Long, empty hallways all but echoed around me, the cream carpets and pale walls seeming sterile and unfeeling.

At least Jasmine had seemed happier with the idea of teaching me how to play soccer. I usually wasn't one for sports, but if it made her smile then it'd be well worth it. I'd have to dig out my jeans again, since slacks were decidedly *not* the proper attire for that, but it was a small price to pay.

Besides, Thalia had certainly seemed to appreciate how the jeans looked on me.

Standing outside of the meeting room, I rubbed the bridge of my nose, fighting to relieve some of the tension built there.

On the bright side, Thalia wasn't angry with me over any of this. If she had been, it would have made it even harder than it already was. Despite this being the opportunity I'd worked for years for, I didn't want to be here, and if she'd asked me to stay for the game, I probably would have.

But neither she nor Jasmine had asked, each of them seeing me off with a smile despite the meeting being what pulled me away in the first place.

Those were my girls, and I adored them more than my next breath.

My phone vibrated with a text that I ignored. It was probably Father again. He'd been persistent this morning

about contacting me, and after looking at the first message, which had mostly boiled down to asking how my ‘parenting’ role was going, I’d stopped reading them.

He always knew just when to dig his hooks into sensitive spots, and right now, I didn’t have the patience for it.

The clock struck noon, and I straightened, putting on my professional mask and shoving down all thoughts of family, both positive and negative. Walking inside, I nodded at the half a dozen people already sitting.

Five men, one woman, and every one of them carried themselves with the confidence of someone who’d been in their line of work for decades.

Fighting past the flash of nerves that always came before an important meeting, I shook each of their hands and took my seat at the head of the table.

“Thank you all for being here today. Before we get started, introductions are in order. I’m Ludwig Evans.” Each of them took their turn, and I memorized each name with ease.

Scott, John, Frank, Harry, and Georgia. Scott, John, and Frank were all tall, dark-haired, and wore much the same attire I did, the pressed suits well fitted. Harry had gone for a bit more casual route, his jacket resting over the back of his chair with his sleeves rolled up.

He was the oldest of us here, so it didn’t surprise me. One thing I’d realized about people my father’s age in this business, they’d been in the game long enough that if they wanted to do things like that, they could. No one would bat an eye at it, either.

Meanwhile if I did, heads would explode.

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes at the insanity of it all, I kept my smile firmly in place as I took in the last of the room. She was pretty, but a corner of my mind still whispered, *Not as pretty as Thalia, though.*

I was highly biased, of course.

Putting that to the side, I took my seat and gestured for them to do the same. Once we were settled, though, the last thing I expected was for Harry to speak up.

“It’s good to finally get this meeting done. I’ve been interested since you first pitched the idea, but that father of yours kept road-blocking it.” He rolled his eyes, and from the corner of my gaze I caught John’s lip twitch.

It was Georgia who spoke next, and she nodded. “Yes, I believe I speak for all of us when I say we’ve been anxiously awaiting this.”

My phone dinged and I bit back a cringe. “My apologies, I was just about to turn that off.” When I reached to do so, though, I noticed the notification. It wasn’t a text or a call from my father, it was a live notification.

The group Thalia had set up before was active, though she wasn’t the one streaming.

I didn’t recognize the name of the hosting person, but when the video opened and Jasmine’s face came through, it hit with all the force of a kick to the gut. She was smiling, but it wasn’t nearly as bright as her usual one.

Her friends were around her, and it was painfully obvious they were trying to cheer her up, the sight tugging at my heart.

“Mr. Evans, is something wrong?” Georgia said, yanking me back to the present. I hadn’t realized but I’d been staring at my phone for several minutes now and a hot blush worked over my cheeks. Clearing my throat, I nodded.

“Oh, my apologies. My daughter had a soccer game today that I was supposed to attend. That was a notification about it.” My thumb hovered over the power button on my phone, the feeling of wrongness increasing as I shut it down.

I shouldn’t be here, but there was no going back now. I had five busy people’s schedules tied into this, there was no backing out.

Forcing aside the guilt and unease, I put my phone away, only to freeze when Harry spoke up, his head tipping just a bit to the side.

“If you have something like that, why did your father insist on the meeting being today?”

The world came to a screeching halt around me, my throat went dry, and it took me two swallows before I could speak through the buzz in my ears.

“He insisted it be held today?” I asked, and all five of them exchanged confused glances.

Harry nodded. “Yes, the old codger said it was now or never. It made fitting it into my schedule hell, but I wanted this meeting to happen enough to make it work.” His brow furrowed, “Are you saying you had no idea he’d specifically asked for the meeting to be today?”

I shook my head, numbness sweeping through me in waves as the words sank in. Georgia chipped in with her two cents.

“I managed to shift my schedule to allow for it, but it was an odd request, I have to admit. He said *you* were the one who demanded that, though. Why would he say that when you didn’t even know?” Her eyes narrowed, and without a doubt, she was not a woman to be crossed.

She apparently didn’t appreciate whatever mechanisms were at work here, and I didn’t blame her one bit. I didn’t like the picture that was being painted either.

A buzz filled my ears, thoughts coming slower as her words sank in.

He’d told them it *had* to be today. That couldn’t be a coincidence. He’d known I wouldn’t call a day off work unless it was important—something to do with Thalia or Jasmine—and he’d sabotaged it on purpose.

Red leaked into my vision, and blood pounded hard in my ears until I could hardly hear anything through it. I’d told

him to stay out of this, but no, of course, he wouldn't. He wanted me to leave my family, and what he wanted, he was willing to fight dirty to get.

Flashes of Jasmine's disappointed face came back, the way she'd cried in her room only one door away while I couldn't do anything.

The way she hugged me afterward despite it being at least partially my fault that she was sad to begin with.

I shouldn't be here.

Staring around at the room, all five people now wearing matching scowls, I stood and spoke. "I'm sorry for wasting all of your time, but I can't stay."

John's brow flew to his hairline and he scoffed. "You're leaving? After we've finally gotten together for a meeting?"

Yes, and if it were even a year ago, I would be shocked at myself, but it *wasn't* a year ago. So I nodded. "Again, my most sincere apologies."

Before I could leave—if I took a few back streets I could probably make it to the soccer game before they started—Harry stepped in my way and raised a hand.

"Does this have to do with your girl's game?"

I winced, knowing just how unprofessional this was, but I nodded all the same. "Yes. I promised I'd be there and told my secretary specifically not to plan anything for today. My father..." I trailed off, shaking my head. "It doesn't matter. I'm sorry for wasting your time, but I can't let this mechanism stand."

To my surprise, Harry nodded, stepping aside and waving me on.

"Schedules and work can be shifted, but those sports games only happen once. Take the advice of an old man who missed most of his children's lives; get in on as many events as you can. Time flies, and in a blink they won't have them anymore."

I stopped long enough to nod, appreciating the advice, then I walked out of the room and away from the meeting I'd worked years for.

As I all but ran toward the parking lot, my keys in my hand, nothing had ever felt more right. John probably would never be willing to meet again, but out of all those present, he was the least important to my plans to expand.

Harry was the most senior and held sway in all the right areas. Even if no one but him would meet with me after this, it would be enough. It would be harder, of course, not having all the backing I'd planned on, but I would make it work.

Later, after I made it to Jasmine's soccer game.

Just as I reached the parking lot, the last person I wanted to see came storming over. Father's face was a thundercloud as he marched up to me and sneered.

"That meeting can't be over yet. You're leaving early, and for what? I thought you said you were keeping the company's best interest at heart?"

It'd been his mechanisms that'd caused this mess and before I could think better of it, my fist was wound into his shirt and we were nose to nose. His eyes widened, mouth gaping open as I hissed.

"I always have had the company's best interest at heart, but it's about time I take care of myself as well. I have a family now, a real one, and I nearly made the biggest mistake of my life because of you and your plotting. After today I don't want to hear a word from you unless it's strictly about the company or your share in it. My secretary will be informed not to listen to you for any of my scheduling from now on."

Letting him go, I jerked open the car door and slammed it shut in his face. Not pausing to take in his thunderstruck expression, I hit the gas. They hadn't started yet, I still had time.

Flashing back to where Jasmine's school was when I picked her up with Thalia, I set my course and reveled in the

rightness soaking through me.

Others would call me a fool for walking out of that meeting, I would have called myself one before getting to know Thalia and Jasmine, but that didn't matter.

If I'd stayed, Jasmine would have doubted me every time I said I'd be somewhere. It would have taken months to repair that trust, and I refused to see her crying again. I would call Harry later and try to reschedule, but this was far more important.

Pulling up to the school, I jumped out and followed the signs back to the soccer field. The game was just starting, and triumph blitzed through me. Scanning the crowd, I looked for the familiar head of dark hair, nearly dropping from relief when I spotted Thalia.

She sat on the grass in front, her phone out and recording. At her side was a woman I'd never seen before, her mother most likely, who was also recording and without a doubt, she'd been the one doing the live.

I'd thank her for it later. For now...

I was halfway to them when Thalia's mother glanced up, catching my eyes as a knowing smile curled her lips. She nudged Thalia, pointing my way, and when Thalia's gaze locked on me, I smiled.

Her mouth went slack, surprise taking over the concentration that'd previously painted her features, and when it dawned that I was really here, her lips spread in a wide smile that all but glowed.

Making it to her in four long strides, I barely caught her in time when she launched herself at me. Holding on tight, her face pressed into my throat, I felt more than heard her say.

"You're here!" She paused, pulling back as her smile slid into a frown. "But your meeting?"

I shook my head, leading her back to her spot on the grass before sitting down with her, ignoring the grass stains

sure to get into my suit. “It doesn’t matter. What does is that I’m here to support my daughter, as I should be. The people will understand, or they won’t, I’ll deal with it later. I can probably salvage at least one of the partners, and from there I’ll figure out the rest, but I’m not breaking a promise to my daughter, or you.”

She stared up at me as if I’d handed her every star in the sky and with that, I knew I’d made the right decision. I would have regretted it if I’d stayed at the office. Every time I thought back to this, to Jasmine’s disappointed and tear-streaked face, it would have stung.

A meeting is just a meeting, but this?

I wasn’t missing this for anything.

There’d be times in the future when I couldn’t make events, but if I promised to be there, I would be. End of discussion.

Thalia’s smile stretched impossibly wider and then, before I could react, she fisted both her hands into my shirt and dragged me forward into a kiss. She dove in as if she were trying to devour me from the contact, and by the time we pulled back my hair was a mess, both of us were breathing heavily, and only the soft clearing of a throat stopped me from pulling her closer for another.

Thalia flushed, half turning to her mother with a sheepish smile. “Ludwig, this is my mom, Penelope. Mom, this is Ludwig.”

I held out a hand, and she took it, giving a firm shake with an amused chuckle. “Good to finally meet you. I’ve heard quite a bit.”

I dipped my head to her phone. “Thank you for that.”

Thalia frowned, confused. “Wait, I thought you were setting up the live for Dad? How did you even get Ludwig’s social media?”

Penelope smiled, every bit as crafty as her granddaughter. “Your father despises all things technology and gave up on the live five minutes into my explanation of how it worked. We’ll have to walk him through it the next time we both visit, but when you told me about your man here, I knew he was just like your Daddy. Come hell or high water, he’d be here. He just needed a bit of a push.”

She wasn’t wrong.

Sliding an arm around Thalia’s waist, I nodded. “I did, and thanks again for it. I would have regretted not being here.” Facing Thalia again, I added. “My father had a hand in the secretary scheduling that meeting for today. He tried to corner me in the parking lot as I was leaving.”

She straightened, eyes flashing wider in alarm and fury. “He did it on purpose?”

I kissed her head, soothing that anger. “Yes, but I’ll be sure my secretary knows from now on not to listen to him for scheduling things. Now that he knows his plan won’t work in the future he’s less likely to try to repeat it, but better safe than sorry.”

My phone buzzed, undoubtedly my father calling to berate me for my life choices, but without missing a beat I turned it off and tossed it to the side. Anything work-related could wait until later; I wasn’t on the clock right now.

Looking back out at the field, I waited until Jasmine glanced in our direction. When she did, I waved, watching as she nearly stumbled over herself in shock. When she realized I was actually here, she unfroze, ignoring her coach telling her and the others to get ready.

She flashed across the field and slammed into me full force, sending both of us toppling with a loud *oof!*

The mild pain faded almost instantly as her voice came through, her face shoved all the way into my shoulder as she beamed. “You’re here! You said you wouldn’t be, but you’re here!”

I nodded, hugging her for a long minute, then I pulled back and smiled. “Yeah, I realized that no meeting could ever be important enough to miss this after I promised to be here. There’ll be times I can’t show up because of work, but if I promise you I’m going to be there, I’m *going* to be there. Okay?”

She laughed, nodding, before the coach calling her back broke the moment. Thankfully the man didn’t seem irritated with the interruption; he only shook his head fondly while gesturing for Jasmine to join the others.

After one more hug, she did, bounding with all the energy she *hadn’t* had this morning. Leaning back on the grass, Thalia contently curled against my side, we both watched as Jasmine played, cheering her on in turns as the game progressed.

And when she kicked the winning goal, pride warmed me from the inside out.

This was where I was supposed to be, and nothing would take me away from here.

Chapter 22

Thalia

Ludwig sat next to me on the grass, posture relaxed and open as we waited for Jasmine to finish talking with her friends. I took the opportunity to just look at him.

This man had just left a meeting that would have grown his company by leaps and bounds, all because he'd made a promise to Jasmine and me. It wrapped a satin glove around my heart and squeezed.

That happiness faded a tiny bit when I remembered what he said before. His father had planned this, but why? The man had apparently been against the expansion, but now he agreed, only to use it for this?

When the confusion didn't abate after a minute, I asked. "Why would your father do this, though? I thought he was against the meeting?"

Mom had left to get drinks, and the somewhat privacy was necessary as he grimaced, rubbing a hand through his hair. "He was, but he probably thought he would drive a wedge between us by doing this. Or maybe he planned on using group meetings to drag me away whenever I tried to take time off. I didn't stay to ask him."

Fair enough.

Leaning on his shoulder, I offered. "I'm sorry that he did this to you. You worked hard to get that meeting lined up, and now this."

He shook his head, dropping a kiss on my hair as he did. "The most senior of the people at the meeting seemed to

support my leaving, and with just his support I can still make it work. While I'm frustrated my father did this, I would still choose to be here."

I didn't have a chance to pull him into another kiss before Jasmine wedged herself between us, her arms around both our shoulders as she turned to Ludwig and asked.

"Can we still play soccer when we get home?"

He nodded. "Absolutely, though I should probably stop by the office to talk to my secretary first. It's better to be sure there will be no more scheduling mishaps sooner rather than later." He looked almost apologetic about that, but I kissed his cheek.

"That's fine. I sincerely doubt Jasmine minds stopping by the office, and I don't either." Then I noticed Mom from the corner of my eye and asked. "Can you wait at the house for us? It might take a bit."

She nodded, ruffling Jasmine's hair and giving me one last hug. "You mentioned you had a cake and ice cream ready, right? I'll get those ready in the meantime."

Ludwig got up, offering a hand to me before leading the way to the parking lot. The entire drive to the office was spent with Jasmine's excited chattering, an air of tranquility settling over us like a blanket. When we got there and walked up to our floor, though, Ludwig stopped short with a choked noise of surprise.

"You're still here?" He asked, and I peeked around him, taking in the elderly gentleman, a woman, and two men that were seated at the various empty desks. Wait, were these the people he'd planned to meet with?

Kelly all but danced in from the break room with coffee and snacks, serving them with a wink Ludwig's way. "Yup, they are. Well, aside from that one guy, but honestly, I think we're better off. He was downright rude after you left." She tutted, and Ludwig winced.

“It could be argued that I was rude first, since I wasted all of their time.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “It’s only a waste of time if we don’t get anything done. Besides, I have a son at home who refuses to sleep if I’m not there to read him a story. I get it.”

Then she looked at me and Jasmine with a smile. “Honestly, it’s nice to see someone who has their priorities straight. The world could use a few more dads who actually *care* about their kids.”

Ludwig relaxed a bit, turning to the eldest, who nodded.

“She’s right. Now how about we get this meeting started? I’m intrigued by the brief proposal you sent, and want to hear more.”

He went to step forward, then froze, looking back to Jasmine and I. We shared a look, then waved him on.

“We’ll still be here when you’re done, go wow them with your ideas.” I said and he smiled, kissing my head, then bending to hug Jasmine. Turning, he walked into the designated meeting room with the others following behind him.

...With grass stains on his suit and a smile curling his lips.

Shaking my head at the hilarity of the situation, I looked down to Jasmine and beamed. “Want to draw pictures for him while we wait?”

She nodded, all but racing for my desk as I followed at a slower pace.

Things had turned out far better than I’d expected, and I couldn’t be happier. There’d be times in the future where Jasmine would get her hopes up and inevitably be disappointed, but without a doubt, if Ludwig promised he’d be there, he would.

That was more than enough.

Epilogue

The car was quiet, only Ludwig and I in it, thanks to Jasmine being at school. I adored having her along, but it was nice to have quiet times like this too.

Sneaking a look at Ludwig, I smiled at the stern frown curving his lips, his fingers tapping the wheel irritably. We were due to meet one of his friends today. We were in fact sitting in the parking lot now, but he was late.

Squeezing his hand, I soothed. “Take a breath, he’ll be here soon.”

He grumbled in response, and I changed the subject before his mood could completely turn dark. “How is everything going with your expansion?” Thankfully his father hadn’t been able to roadblock it further and was taking Ludwig’s threat to heart because we hadn’t heard from him once since his manipulations with Jasmine’s soccer game.

Just as I figured, Ludwig perked up. “It’s going great. One of the original five people I planned to meet with opted out, but I expected that. We’re actually making great headway despite that.”

Before he could drop into a full roll on that, I got out of the car and moved to his side, tugging him out too. He followed, watching me curiously, and once I leaned against him, linking our hands as they hung by our sides, he smiled in understanding. Pressing a kiss into the hollow of his throat, I hummed.

“I’m proud of you for how far you’ve come with Jasmine *and* the company.” I’d said as much before, but with his history of no one *telling* him they were proud, I did my best to make up for it. “I see how hard you are working and still making time for both Jasmine and me. I really appreciate the effort you’re making.”

He opened his mouth, his eyes soft again, but before he could get a word out, an unfamiliar voice called from the other end of the parking lot.

“Get a room, guys!”

I turned to see a man with a huge smile on his face walking right towards us.

“I’m kidding. So you’re Thalia? It’s nice to finally meet you! I was starting to think Ludwig over there was lying about having a girlfriend.” He patted his friend on the back.

Ludwig rolled his eyes, his arm securely around my waist as he introduced, “This is my friend Oliver. Feel free to ignore him, I know I do.”

Oliver stood at the same height as Ludwig, short brown hair cut cleanly across the top and a wide smile stretching across stubble-covered cheeks. He had a hair more muscle, though and it showed when he crossed his arms and huffed.

“Rude.”

Then he turned to me and winked. “If you ever need a break from him, feel free to head on over to the gun store in the next town over. I work most days, and I’m always happy to show people how to shoot.”

Before I could ask about that, his smile fell into a grimace and he faced Ludwig again. “By the way, I’ve been feeling off lately. Is everything alright with you?”

The air grew heavy with something unspoken as Ludwig frowned, shaking his head. “There was some drama with my parents, but other than that, no. Have you checked in with your family?”

“Yeah, but nothing is wrong. It could just be paranoia, but you know how I get when something starts itching at my instincts.”

I didn’t know what he meant, but Ludwig nodded. “I do. Let me know if anything happens, but for now, we should go, or we’re going to miss our lunch reservation. Since you

insisted on going today, the least you can do is not make us late.”

Oliver held a hand over his heart in mock pain, all previous hints of melancholy or worry fading away in the span of a blink. “You’re so cold. Here I am, wanting to greet my old friend and meet his woman-.”

Ludwig turned, pulling me with him toward the entrance to the restaurant without a word.

I caught the indignant sputtering from behind us but said nothing, following as what he said before tugged at my mind. He seemed to invest a lot into his ‘feelings.’ Did he have experience with them being right?

Ludwig sure seemed to take it seriously, despite his usual no-nonsense attitude.

Leaning on Ludwig, Oliver finally coming to stand on his other side, so I set the topic to the side for now.

Hopefully, Oliver was overreacting and nothing was wrong, but even if that wasn’t the case, there was no point in worrying about it yet.

Ludwig’s hand came to rest on the base of my spine, pulling me back to the present as he guided us into the restaurant. Shelving all thoughts of strangers to the side, I smiled and watched the two interact. It was amusing, and when Ludwig shot me an exasperated look, I chuckled.

Just from that one look, I knew I would undoubtedly enjoy getting to know Oliver.

THE END OF BOOK 6

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