



It Happened In Paris

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Description: A steamy alpha CEO romance with a captivating secret baby twist, sizzling chemistry, and a love story that comes full circle in the most romantic city in the world.

My mother taught me never to accept defeat—whether in business, in life, or when pursuing something... or someone I want. Like Vivian Kingston, to be exact.

The stunning, troubled woman turned my world upside down during one unforgettable night in Paris, only to disappear by dawn. Fast forward seven years, and I find her running a small-town bakery, acting like the past meant nothing.

But clearly, it meant something when I meet her child. She has my blue eyes, my dark hair, and my insatiable curiosity to explore the world.

I thought I had it all—until the truth is finally revealed that she's my daughter. It's the wake-up call I need to leave my playboy ways behind.

Now, I'd give up everything for them—my millions, my heart, my soul.

But Vivian keeps me at arm's length, afraid to trust again thanks to her devious ex. I won't let that stop me. I'm a Buchanan. We always get what we want.

And what do I want? My daughter. Her mother. And forever. I'll stop at nothing to win.

For readers who love a swoon-worthy wealthy hero, an independent single-mother heroine, and a second-chance romance brimming with passion, tension, and heart.

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PROLOGUE

“You’re beautiful, Viv. Adrien’s a fool. If I had a woman like you, I would—” He stopped short.

“You’d what? Marry me? Whisk me away to your castle?” I teased the suave billionaire who had been a good listener and easy to talk with. He proved exactly who I needed as I left Adrien behind at the club. Besides, I didn’t see Adrien following us. No texts or calls either. I broke up with him and it was as if I suddenly ceased to exist to him.

Well, screw that bastard.

“Yes. All of it. We’d have the best of everything. I’d ensure you led a charmed life. You’d have whatever you wanted. If you were mine.” Richard’s words were unbelievable, that a man like him would offer me, well, basically the world. This was crazy, like living a dream tonight walking through Paris with him. “Only the best for you, Viv. I promise.”

As he finished, the lights of the tower lit up above us, and we laughed at the magical moment, as if the tower knew, right then, to bless us.

He picked me up and swung me around, and when my feet hit the ground, it was more like I landed in the clouds as his lips found mine. Soft, brushing, testing at first, then ending in a tangle of tongues and passion. Richard knew how to take a woman’s breath away...

TRUSTING INSTINCTS

RICHARD BUCHANAN

About Seven Years Ago

Something about this deal with Club Aces didn't feel right as I reviewed every detail in my phone. I drew up a long list of pros and cons in my head, running like a lengthy bar tab.

My newest investment opportunity—outside of Buchanan Energy—had led me to Paris, the City of Love. The Bardeaux's had been family friends with my parents, though I hadn't spent much time with their youngest son, Adrien, the majority owner in this exclusive club serving Europe's young elite.

My team had thoroughly vetted his plan to expand the club into Germany, London, Rome, and Madrid. On paper, the proposal looked attractive. Unfortunately, I wasn't fond of Adrien. Throughout our lengthy negotiations, he came off as an arrogant son of a bitch—a big talker running a business desperate for a boost. It struck me as weak, leaving my decision about the deal hanging in limbo.

So I had arrived early, ahead of the party he was throwing in my honor this evening, only to sit back, observe, and get a true feel for the place; I'd see how my gut reacted.

Patrick Buchanan had always urged me to trust my instinct, convinced it was almost always right. I couldn't have wished for a better father and mentor, and I missed him every single day.

As I'd taken over the role of CEO for our family energy company, I applied

everything he had instilled in me over the years when I'd eagerly followed him to the office, and my work ethic paid off. People no longer called me "Patrick's boy," but by my name instead—Richard Buchanan—finally, I had earned significant respect in select New York circles.

Yet the taste for more persisted. Not more Macallan in my lead-crystal glass as I sat at the gold and marble bar of Club Aces in the heart of Paris, scrutinizing the club's operations—but a deeper craving.

I hungered for the rush of closing another deal, for the exhilaration of winning a negotiation—and I didn't give a damn about those preachy win-win ideals. The exchange of money left me intoxicated. Ruling the business world had become akin to a drug, and I the most consummate workaholic.

"Un autre? Another?" The bartender asked with a thick French accent, holding the bottle of Macallan at the ready to top off my glass. I nodded, then pivoted on my barstool to survey the crowd and soak in the club's ambiance.

My father used to say that a quiet observer could learn a lot, and by the time the party kicked off, I expected to have decided. I'd either return home tomorrow with a sealed deal with Adrien or walk away with my losses.

Then a stunning woman approached, her eyes flicked first to me, then to the bartender behind me.

"Where is he?" she demanded as she leaned onto the stool beside mine. An American, it seemed—long legs, pouty red lips—and her eyes burned like blue flames.

"You should not be here, Viv. Allez. Go home," the bartender lowered his voice, his thick French accent hissing his words.

“Oh, no? Why? So I can’t see that cheating man of mine with another woman?” she snapped.

“Don’t cause a scene.Pas ce soir.Not tonight. He won’t like it,” he warned.

“I don’t think I care anymore. Now give me a shot of tequila,” she commanded, taking over the stool like a woman ready to ignite the night.

“Non. Allez,” he replied.

“Give the woman a drink. Now,” I ordered, my tone serious.

He relented and reached for the cheap bottle.

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“No. Give her the Don Julio 1942. I’m buying.” I pointed at the tall, dark bottle. With a resigned shake of his head, he complied.

“Thanks, but I was fine with the cheap stuff,” she scoffed and mumbled, “I don’t know how a small town girl like me ever thought I could fit in with all of this, anyway.”

As the bartender set the shot with lime and salt before her, she struck me as fitting in nicely. I had initially pegged her as an elegant Parisian—her strapless black dress accentuated her curves, the tops of her breasts rounded above the neckline, and blonde ringlets cascaded down her back. The tasteful diamond earrings and a bracelet embellished her look.

“Want my advice?” I offered, even though I knew I shouldn’t meddle, yet she was too captivating to ignore.

She crossed her legs, nearly brushing mine, and paused with the salt shaker in hand. “Where are you from?”

“New York. Manhattan, to be precise. And you?”

“Upstate. Imagine that. Two New Yorkers sitting at a bar in Paris. One about to cause a scene and break up with her unfaithful boyfriend. And the other?” She arched an eyebrow at me.

“Trying to decide if I should make a deal or not.”

“What does your gut tell you to do?” Her tongue darted out, licking the back of her hand as if tasting her next move. She shook the salt on the damp spot and waited expectantly.

Our eyes met. I didn’t know who the dickhead was who pissed her off, but if she were mine, I’d fight for her—she deserved someone better than the man she had.

A man like me? According to my mother, it was time for me to think about settling down; she and the board members of Buchanan Energy preferred a family man at the helm rather than a playboy, so she claimed.

After a long draw from my drink, I replied, “My gut says this deal is all wrong. I should walk away.”

“Then you should,” she agreed, raising her shot glass as if to toast the idea.

I leaned closer. “It also whispers that I ought to take you away from here, show you a good time, remind you that you deserve better than some asshole who cheats and leaves you drinking tequila alone.”

Her lips curved. “Is that your advice?”

I gave her a sly smile. “Yes. So what do you say? Make my night. Let’s walk away together.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“Richard.”

Her eyes pierced me, mixed with raw anguish masked by anger, so vulnerable—until they darted to something behind me. Her jaw dropped, shoulders slumped, and her

cheeks flushed.

I turned and saw Adrien entering the club, arm in arm with a woman, practically joined at the hip.

Was he the cheating man she despised?

Something my father always said hit me. Who you do business with says more about you than it does them. In that second, I made my decision about the deal.

“That asshole!” she shouted.

“Viv, don’t do this. Pas ce soir,” the bartender warned once more.

Defiantly, she licked the salt, downed the tequila, grimaced at the flavor, then sucked the lime wedge. I drained the rest of my Macallan as well.

She stood, placing a hand on my shoulder—a jolt of electricity passing between us. I half-expected her to say something like, “Let’s get out of here, my handsome savior.”

Instead, she chose her original intention. “Thanks for the advice. But my instinct tells me to ruin his night.”

Like a woman scorned, she strode away. I watched her go, squinting through the club’s hazy light. She marched right up to Adrien, and though I couldn’t catch her words, they clearly were venom-filled based on his response. He released the other woman and seized Viv by the elbow, dragging her into the throng of partygoers.

Admiring her boldness yet worried for her safety, I trailed after them. The crowd thickened as I pushed further, making me wonder if it was a fire hazard—another sign to scrap the deal.

I staggered forward as if intoxicated, and my mind suddenly grew a little foggy. A couple of glasses of Macallan wouldn't normally have me in this state. Had the bartender slipped something into my drink? I wouldn't put it past Adrien to be colluding with him, only to stupefy me into signing this deal.

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I rounded a corner and caught sight of Adrien and Viv in a secluded spot, locked in a heated argument. My mind a fog, I rubbed my palms into my eyes in disbelief, hoping the scene I came upon wasn't real. Adrien had her pinned against the wall, one hand clutching her throat while the other hovered menacingly in the air, ready to strike.

"You'll let her go if you value your life," I growled, intercepting his hand before it could hit her.

His face twisted in anger as he snapped, "Mind your own business."

"This is my business. I won't stand by and watch this. Consider our deal over," I retorted, and shoved him hard enough to make him release her.

"Fuck you, Adrien. We're done. Over. Do you understand?" Viv cried out, holding her throat, her departure punctuated by Adrien slewing a string of French curses.

I left him behind and rushed after her, my legs heavy. About a block away, I finally reached her as she stopped for breath and wiped away tears.

"Are you okay? He had no right to treat you like that," I said, inhaling the cool night air deeply in a bid to clear my muddled head.

She faced me, voice trembling. "I—I can't believe it. He was really going to hit me?"

"You deserve so much better," I murmured softly, wrapping an arm around her shoulder in comfort as she broke down crying.

A pounding in my head jolted me awake from a bizarre dream. Or was it real?

The fragments of memories were so vivid. I recalled spending the night with a beautiful woman—strolling along the Seine, marveling at the Eiffel Tower... even making love in my bed. When I reached over, the recently occupied space and duvet still held some warmth.

It took every bit of strength to open my eyes, and a wave of relief washed over me. I was in my suite at the Four Seasons Hotel George V. I scanned the room for any sign of her. The cream and blue hues of old-world French elegance contrasted with one note of black—the sight of a woman in a black dress, tiptoeing toward the door in stilettos clicking softly.

“Hey... uh, wait,” I croaked, my voice rasping as I struggled to sit up, every muscle protesting.

She hesitated, hand on the doorknob, then turned back to me with a shy walk-of-shame type of smile. “Thank you, Richard, for saving me last night. I’ll never forget you.”

And with that, she was gone. I tumbled out of bed, trying to follow her. What was happening to me?

The Macallan, the bartender, Adrien—it all came crashing back. I crawled along the floor, fumbling for my pants and my phone, determined to call my family doctor to arrange for my blood to be tested. Someone had to have drugged me last night.

I instantly regretted coming to Paris for this deal. It was a humbling experience, perhaps exactly what my swollen ego needed. Yet the mysterious woman—what was her name again?

What did it matter? I massaged my forehead to piece together every detail of last night and make sense of it, but only one image remained imprinted: her piercing blue eyes, which I would never forget.

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SAVE THE CAKE

VIVIAN KINGSTON-BARDEAUX

Present Day

Just when I thought things were looking up, things got worse. “Stupid van,” I shouted and kicked the tire with my sneaker, splattering it with slushy snow and mud from the puddle I stood in. Whatever was wrong with the vehicle, the engine wouldn’t turn over. I peered in through the back window where I had neat stacks of pink and turquoise Cupcake Cottage boxes secured, containing the cake. Not just any cake, but the Buchanan wedding cake.

If I didn’t arrive at the Plaza Hotel in the city and get this multi-tiered champagne cake with raspberry filling and vanilla bean buttercream frosting set up and ready to become the main centerpiece of Rex and Chelsea’s wedding, I’d never hear the end of it from Miriam Buchanan, the matriarch of the family. And I wouldn’t receive the final payment for it, which right now I needed considering my car broke down on the way to the city.

I had no business taking on the cake contract for a big city wedding in the first place. But Chelsea was my cousin, and the closest thing I had to a sister. I’d do anything for her so when she begged me to bake the cake for her wedding, I promised to give her the grandest one possible.

After all, it wasn't every day that a small town girl from Holly Creek married a billionaire. Chelsea and Rex couldn't be more perfect for each other.

Good for them, but it'd take a lot to get me to the altar again, let alone to date. Not only did I possess a mountain of trust issues, but as a divorced single mother who owned her own business, I didn't have time for a man in my life.

I waited impatiently beside the van. Immediately when it broke down I had called Agnes, the wedding planner, and told her the news, which I hated to do, hoping word wouldn't get to Chelsea. The last thing a bride wanted to hear on their wedding day was all their plans going awry. I feared upsetting her. Not that she was a bridezilla—more like Rex's mother Miriam was the Momzilla of all mother-in-laws.

Agnes texted not long after that and said Rex would be sending his brother to pick up both me and the cakes. With any luck, I'd have the table set up by the time the reception started, and no one would know I was two hours late and at risk of not arriving at all.

Thunder rumbled north of the roadside gas station outside of Middletown, sending me back into the van. A million prayers later, my nerves frayed and at their very end, a car finally pulled up behind me.

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“This must be the hero sent to save the day,” I muttered under my breath and exited. I stood by my door as a man in a tuxedo approached and avoided slushy snow puddles in his shiny leather shoes.

“Vivian?” He called out. Only I recognized him instantly, as if time reached out and transported me to a night about seven years ago, one I never expected. We’d strolled along the river Seine, stood beneath the lights of a tour Eiffel, my favorite part of the city. We ended the night giving in to temptation in bed in his luxury suite...

“Are you Vivian?” He asked again. “I’m Richard Buchanan.”

With a slight shake of my head, I focused back on the present, and on the face I hadn’t thought about in years. He stood tall with the same commanding presence as before. His dark hair—dotted now with a few grays at the temples—perfectly complemented his charming blue eyes. I’d never forget his sultry voice that whispered into my ear while thrusting inside of me...Such a good girl for me.

Time had been good to Richard Buchanan.

Up until a few minutes ago, I only knew him by his first name and the place of our intimate night together.

Richard from Paris.

He was my savior then, rescuing me from the evil clutches of my ex. Fast forward to the present, here he was, saving the day again. Talk about the shock I didn’t expect today.

But... why was he looking at me like he didn't know me?

"Y-yes. That's me. Vivian."

"Then I'm your knight in shining armor sent here to save you," he said with a chuckle. I choked and coughed. "Are you okay? Rex told me to retrieve you and the cake. We haven't got much time. Where is it?"

Over the past several months while Chelsea planned her Christmas wedding to Rex Buchanan, I'd heard his brother's name mentioned here and there but never connected the dots until now that he was my Richard from Paris.

"You're Richard? Rex's brother?" I found my voice and asked.

"Last I checked, yes. Is the cake back here?" He pulled open the side door of the van, revealing dozens of cake boxes, a bin of things I'd need to do my job, and a suitcase. "Look, we have to go and try to beat this storm that's coming. We need to load everything into the car quickly. My helicopter is waiting at the nearby heliport."

Thunder clapped again, or was that my heart palpitating at the thought of going anywhere with Richard, especially in a flying object?

My hands gripped the seat tight. I'd never flown in a helicopter before, and never would again if I could help it. I didn't relish this powerlessness of being in the air, while also relinquishing my life into the hands of the man to my right at the controls.

The memory of Richard, of us, tangled in each other's arms in his bed had stayed with me as a symbol of the last reckless thing I did before being forced to become an adult. Once I got pregnant, life changed for me.

"It'll be about an hour's flight time. I take it you've never flown in one of these

before?” Richard’s voice blared through my headphones, startling me.

“Never. I don’t want to die.” I squeezed my eyes shut, thinking only of the one person in my life I would hate to leave behind. My daughter.

“Hey, Vivian... relax, okay? I’ve been flying choppers for years without any issues. Don’t worry, you—and the cakes—are safe with me.” All his cocky assuredness aside, his words did little to calm my nerves.

“Knock on wood,” I murmured, lightly tapping the glossy wooden panel on the door beside me for luck. As a singlemother, I couldn’t leave anything to chance in order to survive—my daughter needed me.

“Have you ever lived in New York City?” he asked in a curious tone.

“No. Born and raised in Holly Creek.” My beloved small town, although from the moment I touched down in Paris to attend culinary school, I loved my French life, too. If only my ex hadn’t ruined it. Now back in Holly Creek, I did whatever I had to do for my daughter’s sake. “Why do you ask?”

“You’ve never lived anywhere else?” he probed further, his eyes squinting at me. When we met, my hair was blonde, and I wore tons of makeup. Now, with darker hair and no makeup, and the circles under my eyes, an extra twenty pounds, and all the signs of a tired mother, did he really not remember me?

“I was in Paris for a few years. I studied and worked under a famous pastry chef.” Come on, Richard—surely one passionate night of surrender between us in bed shouldn’t be so forgettable?

“Ah, Paris. The City of Love. One of my favorite places on earth. I’ve visited often.” He bared bright white, perfectly straight teeth, likely the work of one of New York’s

top dentists, reserved for the extremely wealthy. “Do we have that in common? Did you enjoy your time in Paris, too?”

“Yes and no,” I answered mechanically.

Paris had given me my career and the drive to open Cupcake Cottage in Holly Creek. It had also given me my daughter, the light of my life—but my ex-husband, Adrien Bardeaux, was the worst part of living there. One of the most regrettable decisions I’d ever made was marrying him.

Yet I wouldn’t change a thing, because I wouldn’t have learned these hard lessons:

Lesson one: Never fall for the first Frenchman who approaches you.

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Lesson two: Wealth doesn't guarantee happiness.

And— I stole a glance at Richard, the epitome of tall and handsome, with a fat bank account to match and, if memory served right, well-endowed in all the right places. My eyes briefly dropped to his lap before I quickly looked away because?—

Lesson three: One incredible night with a man like Richard apparently meant nothing, since he didn't remember me.

The ultimate lesson I'd learned since my daughter was born: Lesson four—rely on no one.

No man could ever care for me and my little girl the way we deserved. I believed that, and I'd rather spend the rest of my life alone than to risk my heart again.

“Sounds like you need someone to show you the best parts of Paris,” Richard persisted.

“And I suppose you could take me away on this dream vacation anytime?” I rolled my eyes.

“Hell yes, Vivian. If you're game, I have a private jet and crew at my disposal anytime I want to fly off. We'd walk along the Seine. Spend time at a spa. Dine at the best restaurants. Have the most luxurious suite at the Ritz or the Four Seasons...” He went on in a deep tone that dripped with suggestion and vibrated down my spine, as if transporting me back to the bed in his suite, with every orgasm hitting me like new again.

“Of course, only the best for you.” I flatlined, and glanced back at the boxes of cake sitting in the seats behind us, a reminder of my job at the wedding. I wasn’t the carefree girl anymore who would impulsively leave with Richard on a whim trotting the globe.

I was the cake decorator, hired by my cousin Chelsea, to deliver enough cake for five hundred guests at her reception tonight in the Grand Ballroom at the Plaza Hotel.

A skewed tier of the cake I could fix. An accidental smudge in the icing, too, an easy fix. But coming face to face with the rich man who once treated my pussy like I was the most exquisite dessert in the City of Love was something else entirely. I crossed my legs as heat rose in my cheeks—not a mutual feeling, as he clearly recalled nothing of our time together.

Had he been that drunk or high that fateful evening? I’d learned all too late how Adrien often celebrated his business deals in style, with bottles of champagne, drugs... and an endless parade of women. When I surprised him with a visit at his club that night, Richard could have been inebriated by the time he caught Adrien’s hand about to slap me during our argument.

I instinctively touched my cheek. Richard may have stopped Adrien the first time he ever dared try to hit me... but he wasn’t there for everything that followed. It didn’t take long for me to realize that Adrien’s cheating had continued and would only worsen. And that Adrien would slap me and shove me when in a heated argument. What would happen if he ever turned his anger on my daughter?

I found the courage and left him before I could find out, and I no longer believed in fairy tale rescues—like a rich man whisking me away on an unforgettable trip to Paris. I preferred a simple man, a nice one who could fix the back door of the Cupcake Cottage, who drew me a bath after long days, and loved my little girl as if she hung the moon.

I sighed, because I had no luxury to entertain these fantasies. Not with all that cake in the back and a job to complete for tonight's reception.

"I'll have to pass. I have no time for flights of fancy." I gestured toward the back.

"Right, the cake. But if you change your mind, the offer still stands, Vivian," he said, ending with a wink.

In my dreams.

3

GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

RICHARD

"Was Operation: Save the Cake successful?" Rex asked as I rushed into the church with barely minutes to spare. I joined him and his groomsmen in a waiting room before the ceremony began. Dressed in our custom tuxedos, we looked every bit the debonair, well-to-do group—some of the finest bachelors in the city, all close friends of Rex's, and by association, mine.

"I saved the day. The cake has arrived, only you didn't tell me how beautiful the woman was that I'd be playing hero to." I grinned. Vivian had turned down my Paris trip, but that didn't kill my desire to pursue her if another chance arose. "Tell me everything you know about her."

"She's Chelsea's cousin and I knew she'd be your type. She's single and staying in a suite at the Plaza tonight. And she has the cutest little girl?—"

"What?" My hand shot up immediately. "Stop right there. I enjoy women, but I make

a particular rule to avoid single mothers.” Well, shit. Any hope for a bit of fun with the alluring Vivian dashed away. Since my ex broke my heart and I cancelled our wedding, I’d sworn off commitment—I wasn’t about to get tied down with a mother and child and jeopardize my rich rogue lifestyle I’d worked so hard to achieve.

“Come on. Don’t you think you’ve kept that wall of yours up long enough? Tear it down and start fresh with someone new. It might amaze you to find something really special, and Vivian is an incredible woman.” Jesus, Rex sounded like he’d joined ranks with our matchmaking mother.

“Thanks for the pep talk,” I snidely retorted. Lifting my glass of Macallan, I declared, “Here’s to my brother. About to make the stupidest decision of his life.” The men laughed, but Rex appeared ready to knock the glass right out of my hand. “Just kidding. Don’t turn all red on us now. It’s not a good look for the groom. But honestly, if you want the truth, Chelsea is one lucky woman, because she’s getting you. And I know she must be amazing because she’s putting up with your ass.”

Rex pretended he’d hit me, only to switch and pull me in for a hug instead. “Brace yourself, Richard. Miriam’s about to transfer the full pressure on you to get married next, brother.”

Great. That wasn’t exactly what I needed to hear.

After a joyful ceremony and a million photos in Central Park, the reception got underway. For most of the cocktail hour, I dodged Mother and her tireless introductions to her circle of friends, many of whom had eligible daughters. There’d be no avoiding her over dinner either, as the seating chart showed me positioned right by her side.

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Oddly, I couldn't find Vivian's name on the chart. As a cousin to the bride, she ought to have been there somewhere. But why was I even hunting for the single mother in the first place?

After dinner, I drifted through the ballroom, my eyes on constant alert for her when they shouldn't be. A sea of five-hundred people in a room full of red roses, gold, and china, all the holiday wedding finery the Buchanan's could afford, made it a chore.

I was in one of those moods—my signature scowl probably deterred everyone from approaching, which suited me fine since these high-society acquaintances meant nothing to me unless they were useful in my business ventures. Eventually, I bumped into Brooks and Archer Bellamy.

“There's the investor of the year,” Archer joked, offering a handshake.

Brooks slapped my back. “According to Investment Today, you're the one to watch.” The fraternal twins, who ran one of the most coveted architecture firms in the city, had been friends of Rex's and mine for years.

“Thanks. That's also what she said,” I laughed with them. “Do you think I could use the award to pick up ladies?”

Not exactly one for basking in the spotlight, I did relish the accolades. Since stepping away from my CEO role at Buchanan Energy, I'd been globetrotting, carefully investing in businesses and people, and my reputation had grown along with padding my bank account and investments nicely. That recent feature on me was just—the icing on the cake.

Speaking of... I finally glimpsed Vivian emerging through the service doors by the cake table, and suddenly the world around me faded away.

Damn. If she weren't a mother, I'd be all in, especially with this feeling like we'd known each other in another life. I sensed it in the helicopter ride. The way she'd swept her hair over her shoulder, the slight tilt of her face in my direction, and the lilt in her voice... all so achingly familiar.

Had we met before? Perhaps we'd often crossed paths at a quaint Paris café? I would have noticed her. Rarely did I not approach a woman like her and shoot my shot, but if we had met, she'd probably have brushed me aside, just like in our helicopter ride to the city where she turned down my invitation to Paris.

This was new—a woman not falling at my feet for a chance to tie down Richard Buchanan. The society papers were responsible for that, on constant watch for the next female on my arm at the various galas I attended. The speculation about my relationship status proved good fodder for newspaper sales, according to Mother, who could very well be the society page writer's best source fueling that fire for all I knew.

Noticeably, Vivian had changed into a simple black dress, demure yet elegant. Her chestnut hair swept up to reveal a graceful neckline. Curvaceous and captivating, she drew the admiring gazes of many men around her. Especially mine.

I had a suspicion Brooks' eyes were more on Maisy, though, Chelsea's sister, who stood by the table speaking to Vivian.

"Go over to her and talk," I suggested to him, wishing someone would give me the go ahead to do the same with Vivian.

"Not sure there's any point. She won't return my texts. Besides, I just got an offer to

teach architecture in history over in London on a fellowship for a year. We're like two ships heading in different directions, literally," he explained, and smirked when the date at his side huffed about his talk of another woman.

"But you'll be passing on the offer because I refuse to let you leave our business for a year, correct?" Archer eyed him sternly.

I left them arguing over it, while their dates feigned boredom. Little did they all know, my eyes tracked Vivian's every move. My feet, too, had carried me directly toward her until she slipped behind a service door once again. Miriam's hand on my shoulder suddenly stopped me from following any further.

"Isn't this grand, Richard? Look at the ballroom. So beautiful. The wedding I'd always dreamed of." A tear sprang to her eye as she spoke like this event belonged solely to her, not to Rex and Chelsea.

Dear God. If I ever married again, hopefully he'd spare me from this torture with her. When I suffered through wedding planning with my ex, Miriam made the experience hellish. Once was enough for one lifetime.

If—and this was a very strongly worded if—I ever married again, I'd elope, and then I'd ask my mother for forgiveness after.

"Yes. The entire soirée is splendid—especially the open bar. Excuse me," I mumbled and moved away, but she kept pace, linking her arm with mine.

"Don't think I'm oblivious to what you're doing—avoiding me? Fine. Enjoy your fun now, but soon, Richard, we're going to have a serious chat about your future. It's time to let go of your past and move on with your life." With that veiled threat, she slipped away before I could protest. I sulked at the bar, seated and drinking, while the good bartender kept my glass full.

When the band announced it was time for the happy couple to cut the cake, I stumbled my way over, by now fairly inebriated, and stood nearby as Vivian gracefully oversaw the whole ritual.

She handed a shared slice to Rex and Chelsea, and true to his promise to Mother, he refrained from smashing it into his bride's face. Instead, he decorated her nose with a mere dab of icing followed by a loving kiss, causing whispers of adorableness and clapping from the guests all around.

When Chelsea's turn came, she playfully threatened him with half the slice. I would have loved to see Rex's face covered in cake, but she resisted.

My jealousy surged. That moment should've been mine with Janet—a name I despised even thinking—but luckily it wasn't. Just hours before my own wedding ceremony, I'd caught her in another man's arms, scheming to marry then kill me and run off with my money—because I had loved and trusted her enough to forgo a prenup. Ouch, my stupidity still hurt now.

Until that moment, I'd believed in the institution of marriage and raising a family, and wanted my own. I had dreamed of having what my father had—success in business, an adoring wife, and two kids.

That dream left along with Janet's shit the day the movers came and hauled it all away. It'd be a cold day in hell before I ever trusted another woman to “have and to hold from this day forward.”

Now, as a wealthy, virile man, all I desired was a parade of beautiful women I could enjoy in bed for just one night before moving on. But for Vivian, I could make an exception... with a trip to Paris, and a week in my bed. I'd hire a nanny for her daughter, and my mind spun with possibilities from there as I wandered the reception, lost in my head. What was this woman doing to me?

About an hour after the cake was served, I finally spotted her again, hugging Chelsea and Rex, then heading off to the lobby. I caught up with her at the elevators, where she stood wiping her brow with the back of her hand, utterly exhausted—as if she needed a day at the best spa in France. I could arrange that in a heartbeat if only she'd say yes.

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I sidled closer, the faint scent of vanilla drifting towards me like an irresistible temptation, inviting me to feast. “Vivian. Job well done tonight.”

“Thank you,” she clipped, pressing the up arrow while keeping her eyes fixed ahead.

“The salted caramel cupcakes were my favorite. Good...So good.” I dropped my voice to the lower decibels, while my eyes trailed down the side of her body. “And was that a hint of ginger I detected?”

Aside from the grand cake, Rex had ordered tiers of every flavor of cupcakes from Vivian, too. Plus he’d arranged for a table full of pies baked by Chelsea’s mother, which made his bride happy. I understood that was the name of the game for a successful marriage.

With a warm smile softening her features, betraying her passion for baking, Vivian turned toward me. “They’re one of my specialties. I can hardly keep them in stock when I bake them at my shop.”

“I bet. With such delights, business must be booming for you in that small town.”

“I do okay.” She shrugged. “Every now and then, I even whip up somemille-feuilleortarte tatin.”

“Bringing a bit of French culture to your hometown?” I teased, raising an eyebrow as my mouth watered, dying for a taste—of the delicacies.

Her lips twitched. “Perhaps. Next time you visit, stop by. I’ll treat you to whatever

you fancy. I owe you for saving me and the cakes tonight.”

Oh, I’d definitely stop by—for a taste offer. “I rarely venture out that way; the city is more my scene.” But I could make an exception to spend more time with her. Though Rex might kill me if I toyed with Chelsea’s cousin—the temptation was just too real.

Her phone rang from her purse, and she fumbled to retrieve it. “That’s a shame. Holly Creek might not be as glamorous as Paris, but it has its own charm.”

“Speaking of Paris, the offer still stands. A week away. The finest spa treatments. Fine dining. Wine. And me...” I longed to run my fingertips down the creamy skin of her arm, and test the electricity between us, though she hardly seemed to notice, absorbed as she was in her phone.

“Oh. Excuse me. I have to take this.” She hurried off, and I frowned—did I have competition? A rival for her attention? Or was it about her daughter? After all, Rex said she was a single mother, a fact that should ward me off but strangely didn’t.

Compelled, I followed at a respectful distance to eavesdrop.

“Ramona? Is everything okay?” I heard her ask. “A fever? Oh dear. I should take her to the doctor soon. She’s had several lately. I have some children’s pain reliever in my bathroom cabinet. Could you start her on that?”

I edged even closer, intrigued.

“Yes, put her on... Hi, ma chérie. I’m sorry to hear you don’t feel well. Ramona’s going to give you some medicine, and you’ll feel better soon. I’ll leave right now and be home as soon as I can... Yes, you can watch a princess movie in my bed until I get there.”

She shifted and caught sight of me, her eyes wary, then she walked a few feet further away. “Listen, put Ramona back on. Be good and take the medicine. Mommy loves you... Hello again, Ramona. I’ll rent a car and come home. I’ll be there in a few hours... I know I’m supposed to stay the night... Yes, I know Chelsea treated me to the suite tonight and the morning massage would be Heavenly, but how can I when my daughter’s not feeling well? I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

After clicking off the call, she tucked her phone into her shoulder bag. I had somehow come within a foot behind her, drawn to her like a magnet, when she turned and collided with my chest. I caught her by the arms, staring into her face, my breath taken away by her beauty.

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

“Yes. My daughter is sick.”

“Oh. Um...”

She smirked, cocking her head. “Guess that Paris trip is off the table for a single mother like me, huh?”

“Vivian—”

“Viv,” she sighed in frustration, as if exasperated. “Enough of this. You must not remember how we first met in Paris, Richard. I was Adrien’s girlfriend back then. My friends called me Viv.”

My head snapped back, and, this close at last, I stared with my mouth agape, squinting, taking in every detail of her face. Those expressive blue eyes broke through me—like they had long ago. “Your hair was blonder back then, wasn’t it?”

She huffed, left my arms, and returned to the elevators.

Fragments flooded back of that night long ago... The deal with Adrien for his Club Aces expansion across Europe could've made me a fortune. But I walked away from it because Adrien raised his hand to strike her—and I stepped between them to stop it.

I left the club with her, believing I had dodged a bullet. But dammit, I wished the haze of the drug that had been put into my drink that night would clear out like the sun repelling the fog. All I knew, the next morning when I awoke, Viv was dressed and headed out the door. I never saw her again.

“This is unexpected to meet once again after all these years,” I said, reaching her side, scrubbing the back of my neck. “You know, that morning you walked out on me in Paris? If you'd have stayed, I would have liked to have seen where we might have ended up.”

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She scoffed and squared off with me. “I’m not proud of this, but I ended up getting back together with Adrien, and then I found out I was pregnant. We married, but I left him within a year and we divorced,” she explained, crossing her arms.

“That asshole? How could you have gone back to him, even after he raised his hand to you?” I muttered, clenching my fists in my pockets as if he were here and I needed to protect her all over again.

“Don’t judge me for how I chose to live my life. You have no right,” she snapped, raising her voice as the elevator doors opened and she stepped inside. I didn’t follow, but I held the doors from closing.

“That was rude of me. I didn’t mean—look, I gather from the call your daughter is sick? I’ll arrange transportation back to Holly Creek as soon as you’re ready. If conditions are clear, then the chopper?—”

“You’re hardly in any condition to fly,” she cut in sharply. And she was right—I’d had too much to drink tonight.

“True, but I have a pilot and driver on call. They’ll get you home promptly and safely.” I offered sincerely, feeling compelled to help for reasons I couldn’t quite explain. “Please, let me do this for you—on behalf of the Buchanans for the fantastic cake service tonight. Besides, you’re family now. And fuck, you’re gorgeous—” I trailed off, letting the Macallan talk for me on the last few words.

Her eyes snapped to mine in an intense stare as if she weighed her options, then she nodded. “Fine. But I’ll reimburse you for any expenses.”

I let the door go, letting her go, unsure if I'd ever see her again. I stood there and closed my eyes, swaying slightly. With Vivian, I could imagine the possibilities of more, because she could set my world on fire if I let her. But where would that lead? To the altar? To the bank where I'd find she'd taken all my money? Oh, how my ex had turned me so cynical.

4

MEETING PARIS

RICHARD

After Rex and Chelsea's luxurious wedding and reception in the city, my brother coordinated a major win with a surprise small town wedding and reception for his bride on Christmas night. The crowd buzzed around the Holly Creek Hops Brewery, a craft brew house in Chelsea's small town.

Closest friends and families gathered, happy to be here for this second celebration of their nuptials—while I couldn't even pull off one wedding with Janet a few years ago. I snorted. I loved my brother and wished them well, but a part of my ego stung badly from this.

The only relief among the blur of twinkling lights and holiday cheer was Vivian at the center of it all. She worked at a long wooden table, groaning under the weight of cookies, cake, and pies, a hot cocoa bar, and enough Christmas decorations to make a department store blush. With never a faltering smile, she handed out plates of treats to the guests.

Her mouth tantalized me in cherry red with a glossy center on her bottom lip. A tight red sweater dress hugged every curve. Her hair cascaded over one shoulder. As she spoke to each person, her hands moved like she was conducting an orchestra of

pastries.

Nothing escaped my notice when it came to her.

Displaced, like a grumbly outsider in a room full of warmth and cheer, I stood in the shadows to one side, leaning against the wall with my arms crossed. Every move she made held me in a trance.

Vivian was the only reason I was here, the pull that kept me from spending the holiday in my usual solitude back in New York City or jumping on my jet bound for a sunny exotic destination somewhere in the southern hemisphere. Anything to avoid Rex's second wedding celebration with Chelsea. But Vivian was also the reason I stood on the periphery, watching instead of joining the celebration.

She had a way of unsettling me, stirring things up that I'd buried. I could not deny how I desired her, and I couldn't get my mind off of her since the city wedding, but desire was dangerous. It came with risking my heart, and I wasn't sure I could afford to take chances with that.

"Don't play with her, Richard. Since single mothers aren't your thing, then leave her be," Rex warned, appearing at my side with a stein of a local brew in hand. Dressed in a plaid shirt that made him appear more like a mountain man than a Buchanan, complete with scruff on his face, his expression contained a mix of amusement and seriousness.

I had never told him or Miriam about that fateful trip to Paris. I wouldn't start now, and shrugged indifference. "I don't play games, Rex. You know that. I make sure women know where I stand at the start. Nothing serious. Sex only. I'll steer clear of her. Doesn't mean I can't appreciate her assets from afar, though."

"Good. She's not like other women," he replied, his voice dropping to a whisper as if

the walls had ears.

“You got that right.” And that was precisely the problem. She didn’t fawn all over me as a rich eligible bachelor in the city. She was independent, strong, and it intrigued me and scared the hell out of me all at once.

“I only mean that if you break her heart, she’s family now. You’ll upset my wife, and then I’d hate to break your nose,” Rex explained.

“Right. I’d like to see you try, asshole,” I grumbled.

He chuckled, then stopped short. “Look out. Miriam alert.” He scuttled away like a coward.

Miriam’s presence loomed before me as graceful and commanding as ever. She wore a mink scarf that probably cost more than most people’s rent for a year, and her smile was the kind that held devious plots. “There you are. I was thinking you’d slipped away.”

“Not yet,” I replied, my voice flat. “But soon. I have a trip booked after the new year to New Zealand.”

“What are you going to do? Roam the globe for the rest of your life?”

“Sure. There are plenty of countries I have yet to see.”

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“You think that’s a way to live? Alone and out of a suitcase?”

“It’s what I choose,” I snapped back.

“No, it’s running away. You told me once you wanted a family. I see right through you and how you can’t move on from the past. Well, you may have stopped your wedding from happening, but Janet still has you by the balls.” She squinted and peered down her nose at me, begging me to challenge her assessment.

“I was heartbroken, Mother. Devastated. Excuse me for not getting over her fast enough for you.” I couldn’t bite back a harsh response.

Suddenly, a little girl dressed in pajamas came out of the kitchen, running into Vivian’s arms. The sight of the mother holding her daughter pierced through my shield. My eyes glued to them and followed their movement back into the kitchen, which didn’t escape Mother’s notice.

She glanced their way, then back at me with intentions as clear as the diamonds on her fingers. “She’s lovely, Richard. I’ve always admired Vivian’s pluck as I dealt with her while planning Rex’s wedding.”

I stiffened, retorting like a child. “I’m not settling down.”

She gave me a look of pity, lined with smugness. “You’re not getting any younger, either. Let me help you. I’ve spoken with a matchmaker. We can hone in on a few women who?—”

“I need some air.” I couldn’t take it any longer. The warmth of the room turned into a stifling heat that threatened to choke me.

I stepped away, loosening my tie, and leaving her and the festivities behind. Outside, the cold bit at my skin, but I welcomed it as a reminder that I was still in control, the master of my fate. At least for now.

I slowly paced the wrap-around porch of the brewery, smartly built, remodeled from a Victorian home. The snow fell quietly here in Holly Creek, admittedly beautiful and serene, versus in the city where the white drifts between the skyscrapers held less romantic appeal. The chill helped sharpen my senses.

Eventually, I made my way on the porch to the back of the building, protected by an overhang off the roofline. I paused by a row of patio heaters and chaise lounges. The glow from the brewery back door cast long shadows across the floor. Otherwise, the only light came from the moon above.

I pulled a cigar from my coat pocket and lit it, the brief flare of the match illuminating my face. Not a nasty habit, only something I did when I needed to drown my sorrows. Dad smoked cigars, too, and often when things troubled me, I lit one. I felt his calming presence while the smoke curled into the night air.

Inhale. Exhale. I leaned against the railing, letting the quiet settle around me. My mind, a mess of contradictions, tangled up in thoughts of Paris so long ago and the deal with Adrien that went sour... the one that had me tucking my tail and licking my wounds all the way back to New York.

When my blood work had come back proving my drink had indeed been tainted with something at Club Aces, I vowed to ruin Adrien, but I had no proof he had anything to do with it. With a bruised ego, I couldn’t let it go.

I had contacted friends in France with connections to the Police Nationale, spreading word of suspected drug activities at Club Aces. I'd heard they'd raided the place, and eventually the business folded. My family would be dismayed if they ever found out I had anything to do with it. My father had more honor in his business dealings than I'd displayed in the Club Aces fiasco.

I let my tie hang down and undid the top button of my shirt, the entire ordeal choking me, filling me with regret, especially considering Vivian had gone back to Adrien after our night together. She had a child with him. And now she was here—but I couldn't seem to walk away.

"Have you ever been to Egypt to see the pyramids?" a tiny voice asked behind me, startling me and breaking the silence.

I turned, scanning from the opened back door, until my eyes landed on a girl wrapped in a blanket on a chaise, a picture book in her lap. She clutched a large stuffed tiger in one arm. Huge, curious eyes peered up at me from the tiny face of a little angel. The one who moments ago was in Vivian's arms.

I quickly snuffed out the cigar. "I have," I said, crouching down to her level, intrigued by her presence and her question. "What book do you have there?"

"Santa gave it to me. It has pictures of the world." Her finger pointed from one page to the next of the slim book. A cute dark ringlet fell down her forehead as she scanned the one she was on.

"Do you know what they have at the pyramids?" I asked. She shook her head. "Camels. I rode one. Not very comfortable, but they get the job done," I said with a grin.

She giggled, a bright sound that cut through the cold like a crystal bell. "Did you

really ride a camel?”

“I did,” I replied, feeling a warmth in my heart that had nothing to do with the heaters. “It was bumpy, but I didn’t fall off. Not even once.”

“Did you ride it across the whole desert?”

“Only part of it.”

“I want to ride one.” She flipped another page in her book. “Have you seen a mummy?”

“Yes, I have.”

Her eyes grew enormous, like saucers. “Have you been inside a real pyramid? I would like to see one someday. I want to see all the world when I grow up.”

“There’s a museum in the city with mummies on display.” As patron of most of the museums and major galleries there, I had access to plenty of history and culture.

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Her smile was infectious, and I couldn't help but smile back, the connection between us unexpected. Her determination and exploring spirit echoing in ways with mine that left me momentarily speechless.

How old was she? And was she mine? Before I could think anything more, Vivian rushed out and grabbed her daughter with a mix of urgency and relief.

“There you are, Paris. I turned for one moment to speak with the bartender and then you were gone. You scared me. You need to rest in the office until I finish here. We're almost done.”

Paris looked up at her mother, her expression a blend of innocence and protest. “But I'm not tired. Besides, I was talking with the nice man.”

Vivian gasped, holding her tighter to her bosom, until she peered around and noticed it was me standing nearby. I smiled and held my hand in a simple wave.

“Oh, Richard. I didn't see you there,” she said breathlessly. I couldn't get past the way my name sounded on her lips. She could whisper, moan or scream it and I'd probably never get enough.

“Anyway,ma petite, you shouldn't run off like that. You know better.” Her voice softened as she placed a hand along Paris's forehead, as if checking for fever. Her concern was palpable, a mother's worry that overshadowed everything else.

I stood to attention. “She's still sick?” I blurted, my words tumbling out before I could stop them.

Vivian paused, her eyes ablaze, meeting mine, and for a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of us. “I have an appointment next week before New Year’s with her pediatrician,” she said, smoothing back Paris’s hair with a tenderness that made my chest tighten.

I nodded, trying to mask the mix of emotions that threatened to surface. Concern, admiration, fear—so many feelings out of control inside of me.

She gathered Paris’s things, her focus shifting back to her daughter. “Let’s get you inside,” she murmured, picking her up and wrapping the blanket tighter around her.

“Bye, nice man,” Paris said and waved, her small voice carrying more weight than she probably knew.

At the door, Vivian set her down and shooed her inside, then hesitated. A look shared between us, hers like a protective mother, warning me away.

“She’s lovely. Seems to have a rather adventurous spirit,” I commented and stepped closer. “Reminds me of myself.”

“Yes. I think because she was born in France, it made her naturally curious about the world,” she answered, her face softening.

“How old is she?” I asked, that old gut instinct of mine waking up.

“Six. And I know what you’re thinking. We used protection that night, Richard.” She nodded, as if that should appease me, it didn’t. The timing of it all is a little suspect for me. “I suppose I have you to thank for the new van that was delivered to me yesterday?” She smirked and crossed her arms with the change of subject.

“Consider it a bonus for having to deal with Miriam Buchanan and the wedding

planning over the past year,” I explained and stepped even closer. I didn’t bother to add that a company would be arriving the next week to apply gorgeous new decals and lettering to the van to better advertise her Cupcake Cottage.

She glared at me. “I’d prefer to return it. I can take care of things on my own. Where is my old van? I’ll get it fixed eventually.”

“Too late. That old piece of junk is in the scrap yard by now, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” Damn, the vanilla sweet scent of her wafted in the air. I should run far away, but instead my feet were glued in place.

“At least that junk was mine, bought and paid for through my hard work and meticulous saving.”

“Complain all you want, it won’t change the fact that the new van is yours, Vivian. And it’s also safer to drive your child around in.”

“Humph,” she slammed the door behind her. My head jerked back at first; I doubted anyone had ever dared slam a door on me. But then a sly smile curved my lips. That fierce motherly independence of hers surprising me by how I found it so fucking attractive. I had to quickly adjust myself.

I remained outside longer after they went in, bothered by a vision turning my knuckles white as I held onto the railing staring out at the snow-laden forest. My life flashed forward giving me a glimpse of the future—and many lonely years ahead. That scared the hell out of me.

Once inside, I didn’t spot Vivian again, like she was hiding. I took part in one more toast to my brother and his new wife. Envy tortured me with the future they embraced together.

Miriam and I were among the last to leave, and as we drove away, I caught one more glimpse of Vivian, carrying her daughter in a blanket out to the van.

Miriam noticed, too, and shot me a glance like she could read right through me. Like she had spied that my old dream of having a wife and kids was returning with a vengeance.

“Shall I call the matchmaker?” She asked, her raised eyebrow and voice dripping with smug confidence as if she knew her son well.

I sighed. I should agree to her matchmaking, but I’d hate every minute of it. If it meant I’d finally let go of the past and find someone to love, though, so be it.

SUBTLE SIGNS

VIVIAN

I almost slipped on an icy patch while clearing the sidewalk outside of my bakery, my hand landing on the new van as I steadied myself. She was pretty painted all white almost like the snow. Even Paris said how much she loved the new car smell on the drive to school this morning. But I hated taking a handout like this from Richard, and I didn't know what to make of it. I wished Chelsea was back from her honeymoon so we could chat about it.

With a sigh, I returned to shoveling the foot of white stuff from the walkway, all part of January in Holly Creek. Famous for its twice-a-year Christmas-themed entertainment, shopping, and festivities, now the town slept under a heavy blanket of snow like most of the upstate. At least this quiet spell of the new year meant we shopkeepers could finally take a breather and prepare for spring when the crowds would return.

After I finished that chore, I headed inside to heat a kettle of water for a hot drink. I reached for a pretty tin tucked behind the sugar bin—the one from Angelina's in Paris that held a special batch of chocolate chaud, rich cocoa from Africa. Sadly, it held just enough left for one more cup. With Paris at school, I allowed myself a little indulgence.

Finally, my hot mug in hand, I sat down in the dining area of my bakery at one of the charming wrought-iron tables and chairs. I gazed upon the wall mural depicting the markets at the quaint Clerin Paris, like I was magically there. Sometimes the

famous street called to me, leaving me longing for my French life. But this small town had suited me well. After my divorce, and my mother's sudden passing, returning here to raise Paris had been an easy decision.

I loved growing up here and wanted the simplicity of that life for my daughter, too. Thankfully, Adrien had agreed to let us move here, probably all too happy to not have us cramping his style with the return of his bachelor life. We never meant that much to him.

Enough about the past. I had a long list of things to do today and dwelling on the disappointment of our marriage wasn't one of them. Before I could open my laptop, though, Paris's school suddenly called.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Bardeaux? This is Principal Karen Allen calling," the authoritative voice boomed over the line. I winced at her use of my ex's last name.

"Please. Just Vivian is fine." I'd already informed her and the teachers that was my preference. The only reason I hadn't reverted to my maiden name was that I didn't want Paris to feel like she didn't belong to me—silly, since of course she was my baby, regardless of the name.

"I'm afraid Paris collapsed during gym class this morning."

"Collapsed?" Panic tightened in my throat.

"The nurse has her now, and detected a slight fever present. Could you please come get her for the day?"

She didn't need to say more. "I'll be right there." I grabbed my coat, scarf, and keys,

locked up the shop, and drove the van as fast as I could. The entire five minutes to the school, guiltgnawed at me. I had ended up canceling Paris' pediatrician appointment last week because she seemed fine, and I dismissed it as just a bug, a bit of overexcitement during the holidays, or normal growing pains. But collapsing? That was different.

Then it hit me. I banged my hand on the steering wheel—she'd barely eaten breakfast because she said her tummy hurt. That might explain it; her appetite always fluctuated, sometimes plenty, sometimes none. I hated constantly nagging her about eating, afraid she'd develop a disorder.

Seeing her carried out by the school nurse to the front entrance made it clear this was something more serious. Gone was the usual sparkle in her eyes—pale and tearful as she fell into my arms, her whole body trembled. My maternal instinct screamed that this wasn't normal. I needed to get her to a doctor right away.

"Mommy, are they going to give me a shot?" Paris asked, her voice a shaky cry from the booster seat as I drove us to the local clinic. I wasn't entirely sure of the answer, but mustered up my courage and cleared my throat, determined to appear strong and upbeat for her sake.

"I'm sure it's nothing. Whatever happens, you'll be my brave girl, right, *ma chérie*?"

She nodded and met my gaze in the rearview mirror.

I forced a brave smile, exaggerating the happy crinkles appearing at the corners of my eyes, and brightened my tone as I added, "Guess what? When we get back to the shop after seeing the doctor, I'll warm you up a cup of Angelina's hot cocoa. Okay? I'll even top it with Chantilly cream, your favorite."

I hadn't finished that cup before leaving the shop; I'd gladly swap my last mug of it

for her to have a healthy diagnosis from the doctor. A small spark lit up in her eyes as she offered a faint smile. I loved how we shared a delight for those little Parisian touches just between us—special traditions, French words, and favorite foods.

At the clinic, I kept our hands laced together throughout the thorough exam by Dr. Stillman, a well-regarded local physician. He had already conferred with our usual pediatrician, Dr. Adler, and together they ordered tests. When the nurse came to draw the blood, I held my little girl tightly and whispered continuously in her ear about how strong she was.

They sent us home, rewarding Paris with a lollipop and stickers for not crying through the ordeal. Dr. Stillman promised to call a few hours later once the lab results were back.

How did other mothers handle this nail-biting wait? Since I couldn't drop to my knees and pray for hours without alarming my daughter, I did the next best thing—baking, nearly a religion to me.

“Let's make your favorite French Lace cookies,” I suggested, reaching for our matching aprons. Paris clapped her hands, always delighting in donning the frilly pink accessory and hat, imitating me at the large butcher block island that served as the heart of my kitchen at the shop. Although we lived in the apartment above us, which included a decent kitchen, we always did our baking here, where all the ingredients and tools we needed were right at hand.

We put on my playlist of French music, and, while *La Vie en Rose* serenaded us in the background, she sipped her cocoa and ate some scrambled eggs while sitting on a stool beside me. The rich, buttery rounds with a layer of chocolate frostings sandwiched in between came out perfectly. Watching her smile and giggle snacking away on one with me made it hard to believe that just a few hours earlier, she had collapsed.

Convinced that Dr. Adler's forthcoming call would bear only good news, I closed the shop for the day to spend quality time with Paris. I'd have her off to bed early so she'd be fresh for school the next morning. Everything would be fine.

Only when the call finally came from Dr. Adler, her voice hinted at concern. "Vivian, how is Paris now?"

"She's napping next to me on the couch, and seems fine. It's nothing, right?" I asked.

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“I’m sorry to tell you this, but Paris is severely anemic. We aren’t sure, but it could indicate a more serious issue like kidney disease, and further tests are needed. She’ll need a blood transfusion immediately,” Dr. Adler stated. Only the news didn’t register at first, like I was suspended between the perfect little world we had created and the intimidating reality beyond this moment.

“Oh. Okay. I could have her back to the clinic in an hour.” I peeked over at her, cozy under a blanket. Her tiny snores filled the space. We could head to the clinic, deal with that, and be home in time for dinner when I’d make her favorite croque monsieur.

Wait. Did the doctor say something about kidneys?

“Actually, Paris is AB negative, a very rare blood type, and our supply here is depleted. In her condition, fresh whole blood from a live donor is the best option,” she explained.

I offered mine, as casually as offering a pastry sample to a new customer, saying, “I believe I’m type A positive. Would that work?” After all, what did a transfusion really involve?

The doctor clarified that Paris could only receive AB negative or another negative blood type. “Your daughter needs this right away, Vivian. I’ve arranged everything for you at Albany Medical Center, where they’ll manage the procedure along with additional testing and treatment.”

“What?” I stuttered as the weight of all the words finally hit me, dragging my

thoughts from a brief detachment straight into deep worry. Tears welled up as I yearned to reach for my precious child, to shield her from this ordeal. “But she seems fine. I mean, sometimes she doesn’t eat much, but?—”

“The signs were probably there, but too subtle and easy to pass off. Fatigue, lack of appetite, fevers, nighttime bathroom trips.”

“Oh, my God. All of that...” My heart sank. “Why didn’t I question any of these things?”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. We’re here now, and we’ll figure this out. I’ve already sent her records to Albany, and I’ll be available to coordinate with the doctors as needed,” she continued, though all I could do was stare at my sleeping daughter and wish I could trade places with her.

The next hour became a blur. With Paris’ condition deemed too weak for me to risk driving her, just in case, the doctors arranged for a life flight to transport us to Albany Medical Center.

Once again, I found myself aboard a helicopter. This time, however, I clutched Paris’s hand as if it were my lifeline, mindful of the IV the EMTs had inserted into her. While I was nervous on the inside, my daughter faced everything like it was one big, thrilling adventure. She stared out of the window on the left side of her bed, her eyes wide with wonder until the constant drone of the machine lulled her back to sleep.

I used the quiet time to quickly send a text to my ex in France—Adrien deserved to know what was happening with our daughter. Of course, I didn’t get an immediate reply, but that wasn’t surprising. Besides sending money on rare occasions, he’d mostly stepped aside, barely involved in our lives.

He'd flown to the states twice on business since we moved here, each time meeting us in the city for dinner. When I took Paris to France last summer, he was hardly around, sparing little time for her. He'd call on holidays, and Paris knew him as her father, addressed him as such, but she'd never really had a relationship with him of any substance.

I could have taken him to court for more money over the years, but his business ventures never did well. Besides, the energy it would take to fight him was more drama I didn't need in my life. There were so many regrets I had about marrying him, but now wasn't the time to dwell on the past.

Next, I texted my brother. Keaton was away skiing near Denver over the New Year with friends. He sent a text back assuring me he would fly home immediately if needed. He was set to return in a few days anyway, so I told him not to worry, and I promised to keep him updated on Paris's condition.

Besides, he had his own venture to tend to, the Holly Creek Hops Brewery which had fast become a popular establishment when he opened it a few years ago. It didn't hurt the business at all that he was one of 8 bachelors in the reality TV show, *Brewed for Love*, last year, which featured micro-brewery bachelors competing for beautiful bachelorettes. He came in as a runner up, but with his good looks and charm, his internet celebrity status prevailed.

Someday, he'd find someone and start his own family. He deserved that. So I would never want us to be a burden to him.

After that, I reached out to Chelsea, though I hated to interrupt her newlywed bliss. She and Rex were enjoying an extended honeymoon in the Maldives, sailing and living their dream. Who knew when she'd receive my messages? I wouldn't blame her if I didn't hear back for a while—if I had just married a man like Rex, my phone would be the last thing I'd give attention to.

Aside from Keaton, Chelsea's family was my closest connection. I loved her siblings, Maisy and Colt, too, but they no longer lived in Holly Creek, what with Maisy working somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere on a science vessel, and Colt in the military.

I thought about texting their mother next, but knowing that Aunt Flora would worry excessively, I decided to wait until I had more details. As my mother's sister, she was like a second mother to me and Keaton, and Paris called her Gramma Flora. We made it a point to see her for dinner at her Flora's Diner in town at least once a week.

That was all. With just a few texts, my entire family was informed of the situation, leaving me on my own again. A less resilient woman might have buckled under the pressure and stress of single motherhood, but not me. I didn't have the luxury.

I'd made the mistake of falling in love with a man who I shouldn't have, but I survived it. Somehow, I would get through this too, taking care of my daughter by myself.

"We'll be landing in about five minutes," the EMT announced, waking Paris.

"Hi sweetie. Almost there," I said, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. The day I took a pregnancy test about a month or so after I'd returned to Adrien, I was so ecstatic. In the midst of our reunion, falling madly in love all over again, he and I hadn't been careful enough with protection.

At first, Adrien seemed hesitant about my pregnancy, but soon he became fascinated by the changes in my body. He promised things would be better between us. Before the baby came, he swept me off my feet with a whirlwind wedding, and things were grand at first. It didn't last.

Tears welled up in my eyes as the bad times reared their ugliness in my thoughts, but

I quickly brushed them away before Paris could notice my sadness. Her attention fixated on the view out the window, anyway.

What was going through her mind? Was she scared? How could a child comprehend all of this? Yes, I'd had to be strong for us for so long, but there were occasional moments like this when I wished for a different life, where I had someone to help share the burden.

If I could ever trust a man again, what would that even feel like to have someone in our lives to care for us like we deserved?

The helicopter touched down on the hospital rooftop in Albany, jolting me. Stop it, Vivian. Right now, my daughter needed me fully present and anchored in the moment, not lost in a past I couldn't change or a fantasy where the perfect man existed who could love us both.

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An hour later, we were settled into a shared room. The family on the other side of us smiled kindly as the nurse drew a curtain between us. From bits and pieces I overheard, I gathered their child, Jessica, was awaiting a kidney transplant. I couldn't imagine if that was my daughter in their situation...

I sat on the bed and clung tightly to Paris' hand as she watched a show on TV, all of this too serious and surreal to even comprehend, when a knock came at the door. I expected a doctor, but I gasped—Richard Buchanan stepped inside.

6

FAMILY TIES

RICHARD

I had navigated high-stakes business negotiations, fended off ruthless corporate takeovers, and made million-dollar decisions before breakfast—but nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared me for the call from Rex and Chelsea in the Maldives.

Paris was sick? Their news hit me hard. I cancelled my evening plans and flew straight to Albany in my helicopter. I was skeptical about the first woman Miriam's matchmaker lined up for me anyway. Madeline Mays would have been my date for drinks. As a high-profile divorce attorney, no matter how attractive, a woman known for mastering divorce procedures hardly evoked thoughts of a forever type of love in my mind.

After I landed at the hospital, I asked the nurse at the front desk for Vivian and Paris Kingston.

“Are you a relative?” the nurse asked with a raised eyebrow in true gatekeeper fashion. I was about to say no, but given Rex’s marriage, we were sort of family.

“Yes,” I replied.

The nurse couldn’t find their names in the system—until I remembered Vivian had married Adrien. “Uh, try Bardeaux. Paris Bardeaux,” I suggested, irritated at the mere thought of that asshole. Knowing that Vivian had chosen to return to him after our night together all those years ago, I loathed how quickly I’d judged her for it.

Since coming face to face again with Vivian at Rex’s wedding, the woman invaded my head in an endless parade of fragmented visions I couldn’t fight. I struggled daily to stretch my memory of the events that brought us together in the beginning—when everything happened in Paris.

“Okay. Here she is. Pediatrics, purple floor. Just follow the purple signs to the purple elevators,” he instructed, pointing to a plum-colored arrow on the wall.

I eventually located their room and noticed the door wasn’t fully closed, so I peeked inside. Paris was lying in bed, clutching the same stuffed tiger I recalled from Holly Creek, watching a show on the TV, while Vivian sat on the bed’s edge holding her hand, clearly worried about her daughter. The room wasn’t private; in the next bay, another family hovered around a coughing child.

I frowned, realizing Rex hadn’t given me much detail about what I was walking into. All I knew, after my first conversation with Paris—especially our discussion about camels and pyramids—was I’d do anything to ensure the little darling remained happy and healthy. No child should have to suffer through hard times.

I had long donated to children's charities, sponsored several little leagues and inner-city sports programs, and was the first donor New York Presbyterian Hospital called on to cover expenses for families in need. So, flying up in my helicopter to see Paris was hardly an imposition on my time, but more like a passion project.

My mother always said I would follow in my father's footsteps—a path I assumed meant both in business and family life. I was once on top of the world as head of Buchanan Energy, about to marry and start a family—until my ex shattered those dreams. After I cancelled our wedding, I resigned as CEO and wandered the globe without a care.

Yet after Rex's wedding, those old dreams dared stir again.

I knocked and then slipped my head into the room. "Hello?"

Vivian gasped and sprung upright from the bed at the sight of me. "What are you doing here?" Despite the worry lines on her face and the dark circles under her eyes, seeing her sent my pulse racing.

"Chelsea and Rex got your message and didn't want you and Paris to face this alone. They're rushing back from their honeymoon as fast as they can—" I began.

"They don't have to do that. I'll be fine."

"They insisted I be here until they arrived. So I dropped everything and flew up in my chopper," I explained, standing a few feet away.

"You... dropped everything? For us?" she asked, blinking in disbelief.

"Yeah. I did." I softened my gaze as I looked at her daughter with a gentle smile and waved.

“Hey, you’re the man who rides camels,” she chimed with a playful wave back.

“Yep. Hello again, Paris. I’m Richard. I brought you something—a book on deserts from the natural history museum. I think you’ll like the pictures in it. May I?” I asked, offering the book and raising my eyebrows at Vivian.

She nodded, and I stepped bedside to hand the heavy volume to Paris. It was so weighty it nearly slipped from her grasp into her lap. This oversized photo book, with its glossy pages, might have been perfect as a coffee table centerpiece in my penthouse, never seriously looked through, but here it served a practical purpose. Paris couldn’t turn the pages fast enough, absorbing each picture like a sponge.

“Thank you,” she smiled, then her little tongue worked a loose tooth.

“You’re welcome. When you’re feeling better, I’d love to take you and your mother to the museum, okay?” I proposed. Paris nodded eagerly.

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Vivian sighed, chewing her cheek. “That was really kind of you.”

“Happy to help.” Her sweet scent—vanilla, sugar, with a hint of roses—familiar and enchanting, wafted over me, despite the bleached hospital smell. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” she clipped, with a weak smile she probably hoped covered the truth.

A giggle from Paris diverted my attention to where she pointed at a humorous photo of a camel with lips curled, as if laughing.

She bombarded me with questions: “What is he laughing about? What do camels eat? How do they sleep with humps on their backs?” Her bright, inquisitive eyes made it hard to believe she was ill, but her pale skin and hollowed cheeks hinted at it.

“Paris, ma chère petite fille, that’s too many questions,” Vivian admonished, casting a sheepish grin my way.

“No. Not at all. I’m happy to answer them.” I did, every question as best I could until her thirst for knowledge was satisfied for the moment. Vivian’s face beamed with pride as she moved to the other side of the bed, draping an arm around her little girl as they continued exploring the book.

I eventually sat in the chair nearby, lingering my gaze upon them—which couldn’t be dragged away if my life depended on it—as if I admired a priceless painting in the Louvre Museum of the Mona Lisa with her child. If Leonardo da Vinci had ever painted one. If he had, it would far and away eclipse the single Mona Lisa that drew millions of visitors each year.

Eventually, Paris quieted as exhaustion must have overcome her, and she drifted off to sleep. It seemed to be a good time to pull Vivian aside to talk about her daughter's condition, but then someone knocked at the door.

"Vivian, can I have a word?" A man said. I presumed the doctor, but couldn't tell at first what with the curtains drawn around the space.

"Yes." She stepped behind the curtain to confer, and I peered through a gap, eyeing the man carefully while catching snippets of their conversation.

"We want to run more tests on her—especially on her kidneys—but first we must address her anemia. Unfortunately, her blood type is rare, so only certain compatible donors will work. We're aiming for a direct transfusion of fresh blood, which is ideal for her situation," he explained professionally, though I couldn't miss his unprofessional gaze lingering on her chest.

I didn't entirely blame him—if the dictionary had to illustrate the epitome of beauty, the image of Vivian would be there, in my opinion. Still, she struck me as someone who neither noticed nor cared about the number of men ogling her as she walked through a room.

"What if you can't find anyone?" Vivian's tone betrayed her anxiety.

"Don't worry. Our staff is already calling known, compatible donors. In the meantime, how about I bring you a cup of coffee and keep you company? Worst case, if we don't have a donor by morning, we'll use stored blood." He ended with a wink, and that was too much for me. Was he the type of doctor to prey on single mothers?

"What blood type does Paris need?" I interjected, parting the curtain and stepping behind Vivian. Startled, the doctor looked up. I rested my hand on her shoulder as if protecting something that belonged to me.

“Oh, you must be the father. Adrien Bardeaux?” he asked, brow creased while consulting the papers in his hand.

I seethed. “I’m Richard Buchanan, a family friend. And you’re... Dr. Handle,” I replied, reading his name tag and making a mental note to look up his background later. He seemed too young to be here. Definitely too flirty.

Albany might be a decent regional hospital, but I knew exactly how to leverage my influence and money to ensure Paris received the finest care. “I’m AB negative; will that work?”

His eyebrows nearly met his hairline. “Actually, that’s a match—and it’s perfect. We can screen you and get started in a little while.”

“The sooner, the better, wouldn’t you agree?” I nodded firmly with a stern look that wasn’t meant to be friendly. Once he left the room, Vivian turned toward me, and I softened my expression to one of genuine concern for her.

“I can’t believe you’re a match,” she whispered, shaking her head.

“My timing has always been impeccable,” I replied with a wry smile. Oh, the irony—I’d started the day scheduled to meet a match my mother had arranged, and instead, I became the match for a little girl in dire need. I didn’t mind the switch one bit.

“You seem to have a knack for heroism—from that night in Paris, to the van fiasco with the cakes, and now,” she remarked.

“I assure you, only the two of you receive my heroic efforts. Now, can you fill me in on the situation.”

She told me everything she knew, which wasn't much, unfortunately, until the doctors ran more tests. It took everything in me to refrain from cupping her face and kissing her worries away.

“It's awfully nice of you to be here, and I'll be sure to thank Chelsea when she's back for sending you. Seriously, though, you don't have to stay after donating the blood. I don't know how long this will take. And I'm sure you're a very busy man,” she finished and took in a deep breath.

“Hey. I'll have none of that. I'm here as long as you need me. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll check on the transfusion arrangements,” I assured her, and left the room.

I wandered the hall until I found an empty waiting area. There, I called an old friend in New York—Dr. Noah White, CEO of the prestigious Presbyterian Hospital, one of the top medical institutions in the country. We had a long history, considering my family's generous donations over the years, including our support for their recent cancer research center expansion, named in my father's honor. Rex and I had posed for photos alongside Dr. White at the groundbreaking ceremony earlier this year.

Thanks to that conversation, he quickly connected me with Robert Acoste, the CEO of the Albany hospital. I rode the elevator to his top-floor administrative office, and after a brief exchange, we reached an understanding: only the VIP treatment for Paris. My donation to fully fund a new medical research project they'd been eager to launch in the region helped seal the deal.

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Acoste immediately arranged a private room for Paris. I insisted that her entire hospital stay be charged to my black card, but he declined, stating that the donation covered the best care they could provide. Not stopping there, I demanded that the other family sharing the current room also have all their expenses handled by the hospital.

At my command, my accountant transferred the funds for the research project without delay. I left Acoste with one final warning: “Dr. Handle seems rather handsy. I suggest you replace him with someone more professional before you have a misconduct lawsuit on your hands.”

Acoste’s face paled to an unhealthy shade of white. I headed back downstairs, satisfied that I had done everything possible to improve the situation for Vivian and Paris.

When I returned to the room, the nursing staff and a new doctor were hustling to move us to a private room, expediting the testing and blood transfusion process immediately.

While Vivian prepared Paris with a talk about the transfusion procedure, an attempt at keeping her calm about it, I paced the hall. I texted Rex full details for Chelsea about Paris’ condition, unsure when they’d see it.

Vivian made no comment about the room upgrade and speed at which things were happening until I was finally hooked up to the machine that would process my blood for Paris.

“I know you must have done something to get us in here and push things along. I’m not sure whether I should be thankful or angry at you for interfering,” Vivian whispered, sitting beside me and leaning in close so the nurse wouldn’t overhear.

“I’d prefer your thanks, but it’s really unnecessary. I’d do anything to help you,” I insisted.

“We would have managed fine without your involvement, you know,” she said, crossing her arms and legs as her foot twitched nervously—a gesture that only deepened my respect for her independence. Not that it was a test, but if it were, Vivian aced it—whereas my ex had used my money and influence to extremes, leaving me wary of women’s motives when it came to my family’s fortune.

“I have zero doubts you would have survived. You’re a fighter, Vivian—anyone can see that.” For every second she’d had to go it alone as a single mother in this world, I respected her. “But I vowed to look after you while Rex and Chelsea are away. I’m certain if my brother were here, he’d have done the same as I have.”

“Maybe. I’m not so sure.”

“We’re family now, aren’t we? Buchanans take care of their own.” I leaned on our loose familial connection for a moment to draw her in.

She cocked her head. “I’m just Chelsea’s cousin. I don’t know that it qualifies me and Paris for your undivided attention today.”

“Oh, it definitely does.” I held back a smile, amused by her remark, as she slid over to where Paris waited for my blood. Vivian had captured my interest in more ways than mere thin family ties, more than even I could comprehend. I wasn’t so sure she felt the same, though.

The nurse attached a finger monitor and instantly my pulse displayed on a screen. Paris waved at me from her bed, and I waved back and gave a thumbs up. She giggled and put a thumb up back. What a little sweetheart.

Between her and her mother, any man would be lucky to call them his daughter and his wife—but the idea of another man beside them...? My free hand gripped the armrest too tight—I suddenly wanted to be that man.

“Sir, try to relax. Your pulse is getting overworked about something,” the nurse monitoring me admonished while the beeping sped up on the screen beside me.

“Sorry. I don’t know why,” I murmured. I rested my head back and squeezed my eyes shut, inhaling and exhaling, willing the beeping to slow back down. Once it did, I opened my eyes again—to Vivian’s concerned face beside me.

“Is everything okay, Richard? You’re flushed,” she said, placing a hand on my forearm. The beeping sped faster again as her touch set off fireworks up and down my arm.

“Yeah. Fine. This, er, always happens to me when I donate blood. No need to worry. Go on back to Paris.” I nodded with a reassuring smile, hoping I covered up the fact that my pulse lost its damn rhythm because it was her, simply standing there, making my body go crazy.

“Your heart rate is uh... rather responsive to certain people in the room,” the nurse snickered.

“No. Probably just nerves.”

“Right. We can go with that if you want. But the machine never lies,” she winked, glancing at the screen, then at me, amused.

I cleared my throat and closed my eyes again, gathering my composure, but my body betrayed me.

7

MY THING

VIVIAN

As Paris rested after the transfusion, the smile on her face appeared happier than I'd seen her since this entire ordeal began. Although tired, her dive into a lively conversation with Richard about the Amazon River melted my heart. As much as my six-year-old could talk with a man of Richard's age, I silently wondered why Adrien couldn't have been a better father to her like this.

Anytime I thought of Richard over the years, he was a youngish thirty something, maybe. Now, perhaps pushing forty? I couldn't tell, but his worldly experiences, his handsome good looks, his wealth, his designer spicy cologne... all of him screamed Daddy to me in a very, very good way.

Admittedly, older men were my thing... not that I was wondering about my "thing" given my daughter's situation right now. With Richard in proximity since we arrived in Albany, though, memories of our one night in Paris had been hard to keep at bay. It was special to me, even if he claimed to recall little of it.

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“The Globegans!” Paris pointed excitedly at the television screen when her latest favorite animated show came on, and I jumped. Mesmerized by the singing animals on the screen as they visited other animals around the world, she paused her conversation with Richard.

The way he gazed upon my daughter and treated her with respect, like she was a little lady, had me jealous for a moment. Then his gaze met mine across her bed and held there. As if the walls stripped away, and the clock hands moved backwards, we were together again directly under the Eiffel Tower where he’d caught me up in his strong arms.

“You’re beautiful, Viv. Adrien’s a fool. If I had a woman like you, I would—” He stopped short.

“You’d what? Marry me? Whisk me away to your castle?” I teased the suave billionaire who had been a good listener and easy to talk with. He proved exactly who I needed as I left Adrien behind at the club. Besides, I didn’t see Adrien following us. No texts or calls either. I broke up with him and it was as if I suddenly ceased to exist to him.

Well, screw that French bastard.

“Yes. All of it. We’d have the best of everything. I’d ensure you led a charmed life. You’d have whatever you wanted. If you were mine.” Richard’s words were unbelievable, that a man like him would offer me, well, basically the world. This was crazy, like living a dream tonight walking through Paris with him. “Only the best for you. I promise.”

As he finished, the lights of the tower lit up above us, and we laughed at the magical moment, as if the tower knew, right then, to bless us.

He picked me up and swung me around, and when my feet hit the ground, it was more like I landed in the clouds as his lips found mine. Soft, brushing, testing at first, then ending in a tangle of tongues and passion. Richard knew how to take a woman's breath away.

But still, in the depths of my mind, were thoughts of Adrien, the man I thought I loved...

The doctor's sudden arrival in the room broke the stare I held with Richard. "How are you feeling now, Paris?" Dr. Ferguson approached, and I gave him room to reach her. He held his fingers on her wrist at her pulse.

"I'm fine. Can I go home now?" She yawned.

"Soon. Let me talk with your mother about that, okay? Get some rest." The doctor nodded at me and I followed him to the door.

Once there, he explained, "The transfusion helped stabilize her, but we need to run additional tests to figure out what caused the severe anemia in the first place."

Worry edged into my voice as I asked, "But she's okay now, right?"

With a gentle yet firm tone, he replied, "She's better than she was when she came in, but we still want to run tests—leave no stone unturned."

Richard suddenly appeared by my side, arms crossed, and interjected, "Run the tests. Every one of them. Do whatever it takes."

I nodded in agreement, and waited until the doctor left before I turned to Richard to address how he'd interrupted, unsure how to feel about it. "Those tests will cost a lot. I would have preferred to review each test and its purpose to ensure there was no unnecessary overlap. I appreciate you being here, but you had no right to jump in like that."

"You don't have to worry about the costs."

"What do you mean?" My head jerked back.

"I've taken care of everything, all bills and expenses while we're here. And not only for you and Paris, but for all the families on this floor today."

I gasped. "All of them? That's great, but-but you don't have to for us. I'd find a way to pay for things."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. Often my charitable giving each year centers on children's foundations and pediatric hospitals. It's my thing, just what I do. Okay?"

"I'm not used to this, Richard. No one has ever?—"

"Well maybe you should get used to it."

"I-I..." I shook my head at this man with more money than I'd ever see in my lifetime. There was nothing I could do to stop him from spending his money the way he wanted to. "I don't know what to say. But please, I'm her mother. Let me make the decisions for my child's care, okay?"

He stepped back a beat, nodding, shoving his hands into his pockets. "You're right. I overstepped. But seeing her going through this... I only want to help."

“You are helping. And I don’t even think the words thank you cover how much gratitude I have for the blood donation and everything.”

“Would you like to call the doctor back in here to review the tests?”

I chewed a nail, thinking through everything. “No. It’s fine. I guess I wouldn’t want to cancel a test that might be the exact one she needs. God, this is so overwhelming. One minute life is going along fine and the next something big like this happens.”

“Hey, Vivian.” He rubbed both of my arms and stared down into my eyes. His warm touch drove a thrill straight down my spine. “You’ll get through this. You both will. You have me here, and I’m not going anywhere unless you kick me out. Rex and Chelsea will be here at some point, too.”

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“And my brother. I’ve spent years taking care of Paris all on my own, I guess I forgot what it feels like to have others to lean on.”

“See, we’ll get through this. You are not alone.” With a final squeeze, he left me there and he returned to Paris.

As if animated himself, he put on quite the show, recounting his misadventure of getting lost in the Amazon rainforest and coming face to face with a jaguar. A tall tale at best, certainly, but she clung to every word and watched his every movement as he pretended to crawl up trees and peek around bushes and row down the river. It surprised me at how good he was with her.

“Did you really see a jaguar?” She asked. The way the two of them got along tugged at my heart.

Richard brushed a curl behind her shoulder as he replied, “I did, sweetheart. But I was lucky. Jaguars aren’t easy to spot in the wild and when you do, they’re vicious creatures. Maybe one day, I’ll take you to see one—but in captivity.”

I shook my head. He’s paying for everything, for us and at least a dozen families on this floor. Who does that? A billionaire, that’s who. A man with more money than he knows what to do with, and with an enormous heart willing to do good with it. Looking at him, people might see his serious face, and often hear his gruff, commanding voice, but I was seeing underneath all of that. So was Paris.

As I quietly absorbed it all, my thoughts churned with an undeniable attraction toward Richard and how wonderful he was to us, yet I had to keep him at a safe

distance because my priority was, and always would be, Paris's well-being.

When she grew up and was off living her best life, then I could focus on mine and think about finding a man to love again. But until then, my entire world revolved around her.

The next morning, I awoke from the sleeper chair in the room, my back aching, begging me to get up and stretch. Paris remained deep in slumber, while across from me, Richard dozed in a regular armchair that seemed even less comfortable than mine.

It had been an exhausting day and night, and although the hospital usually permits only one parent to stay overnight, it appeared the nurse had made an exception for him—likely part of that VIP treatment reserved for men with a family name worth a fortune.

He had been with us every step of the way. He entertained Paris, stepped out to make calls, returned with snacks and coffee, regaled Paris with more stories, then dashed off to make work calls again. The man never slowed down.

Most importantly, he donated his blood—the very lifeblood she needed to survive. Now a part of Richard Buchanan flowed through her veins, a gift that held the promise of making her stronger. A deep gratitude filled me for that, for him, that I didn't think I could find the words to convey.

I rose, stretched, and moved quietly across the room, coaxing my circulation back into gear. Eventually, I paused beside him to take in his features: his sculpted bone structure, his well-shaped nose, and the gentle cascade of his dark hair, all balanced like a perfect specimen of a man. Temptation nudged me to trace his lips with my finger, but instead, I ran my finger across mine instead.

Oh, how wildly my heart had pounded during our first kiss beneath the Eiffel Tower.

Paris began to stir, so I glanced over to see if she was waking up. Suddenly, something landed on my hip. Looking down, my breath hitched when I saw Richard's hand resting there.

"Is everything all right?" His tired, gravelly voice stirred things deep within me, leaving my mouth dry. Part of me wished his hand would linger, explore, seek out the perfect spot that would ignite a spark in me that had long been dormant. I feared I wouldn't know what to do in bed with him. I'd bet he'd be really good at showing me how this body of mine works again.

I chuckled nervously. "Yes, good. We're all waking up, though it doesn't look like this was the most comfortable spot to sleep."

"It wasn't, but I'll survive. How about your sleeper chair?" he joked as he removed his hand and stretched his arms overhead. My eyes drifted to his torso where the hem of his shirt had inched upward, sparking a playful game of I-spy in my mind—I spied a happy trail. I spied the bottom of a six pack of abs. I spied my fingers itching to touch...

"Um, likely better than yours, not by much."

"Mommy?" Paris called out as she woke, startled by her unfamiliar surroundings. Ignoring any lingering temptations, I hurried over to her side.

"I'm here. Good morning. How do you feel? Bien?" I gently pressed the back of my hand to her forehead to check her temperature with my motherly instincts. She felt normal—a very good sign.

"Très bien," she yawned, then climbed up into my arms for a hug, careful of her IV.

“Are you fluent in French, Paris?” Richard yawned, too, and he came to stand beside us.

“Un petite peu,” she giggled, adding, “Mommy does a lot though.”

I explained, “Madame D’Orsay, who teaches French at the County High School, trades a few tutoring sessions with me for cupcakes a couple of times a month.” I deliberately left out how I often swapped my cupcakes for things I needed around town.

“Nice. To be honest, throughout all my travels I’ve only learned a few key phrases in several languages. Luckily, the translator app on my phone does wonders.”

“Taking the easy way out, huh?” I teased. “I could teach you a few things.”

“I’d wager there’d be a lot you could teach me. Maybe later. Coffee first, am I right?” he said as he put on his coat and tapped on his phone.

“Now you’re speaking my language. Yes, please.” I nodded. “If you don’t mind?”

“I don’t mind at all. I’ll check my emails, and be back soon with a couple of cups. Paris, want some hot cocoa?”

“Mais oui,” she grinned.

“That means yes,” I clarified for him.

“Yeah, I kind of guessed that.” He laughed and booped her nose playfully, gave me a wink, and left the room.

Both of us stared after him until he disappeared, and sighed.

“Mommy, can we keep Richard? I like him.” She cracked me up.

“Well, he’s not like a stray puppy, my love. He has his own house and his own life,” I explained gently. He lived in an entirely rich world, far apart from what we knew.

“Oh.” Her face fell. I couldn’t bear to see that, not when she seemed to be feeling better.

“But if we like him, we could see him again.” It was then that I realized how quickly, in just one day, she had grown fond of Richard. It wasn’t just my heart on the line with him reappearing in my life. This time, there were two hearts.

8

POSITIVE?

VIVIAN

“A little higher?” Richard asked from atop a chair.

“Yes, please,” I replied. He reached up to pull more rope through a ceiling hook, threading it into the drop ceiling grid. “Stop. Perfect.”

Several drop cloths with grommets had been strung up with the ropes, forming a teepee-like fort in the corner of our spacious room.

Nurse Kimmie Patrico, our nurse of the day, popped in. “This has to be the best blanket fort ever built in a hospital room,” she spoke with a Jersey-influenced drawl.

“Richard made it for me,” Paris chimed in, bouncing and clapping excitedly as she readied herself to move in, already collecting her stuffed animals and books into a pile. She was having a great day so far, as if the magic of Richard’s blood inside of her gave her new life. A part of me fantasized the doctors would burst in at any moment and tell me she was healed and we could go home.

Kimmie observed, “Hm. We’d better keep the other children from seeing it—they’ll be jealous.”

“They can visit my fort,” Paris offered cheerfully.

“It was easy, using just a few things I picked up at the hardware store down the road.” Richard stepped down from the chair and admired his handiwork. I knew that normally this wouldn’t have been allowed at the hospital, but for him and his VIP status, anything seemed possible. Then his phone rang, and as he headed out to take the call, he passed by me. He circled my wrist with his fingers, giving it a light squeeze, and whispered, “Be right back. Don’t let her move in without me. I don’t want to miss a thing.”

Kimmie must have overheard and, after he left, she teased, “I think some of the other

mothers might be jealous that you have Richard around, too.”

Paris added, “Everyone needs a Richard.” We shared a laugh.

“Well, whoever he’s dating must be one lucky woman,” Kimmie sighed on her way out.

Was she fishing for gossip about him? About us, er, not that there was an us? I wouldn’t be the one to divulge any details.

Richard had quickly made friends among the parents once word spread that he was covering their hospital bills—a detail I was certain he intended to be anonymous. I suspected the nurses were gossiping and let the word out, and while I was irritated by it, he took it all in stride.

Later that afternoon, with the test results in hand, the doctor pulled me aside.

“I have some results from our tests,” he started. Paris was napping, but Richard was reading something on his phone, close enough to hear, but respectfully at a distance based on our conversation yesterday.

I braced myself. “Go on.”

“We’ve confirmed the cause of Paris’s anemia. She’s in early-stage kidney failure. One kidney is already underperforming and the other is deteriorating. She’s at high risk of needing a transplant.”

I nearly collapsed under the weight of the news, but Richard had rushed over and caught me in his supportive arms before I could hit the floor. Choked up, I fumbled with my words.

He gently asked, “May I speak for us, Vivian?” I could only nod in reply, grateful for his respect of my wishes. “Failure, doctor? What does that mean exactly? How serious is it?” he pressed.

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Dr. Ferguson continued, “Paris has chronic kidney disease. One kidney has almost completely shut down, and the other is functioning at thirty percent. We need to put her on the transplant list immediately.”

Panicked, I shook my head and found my voice, pleading, “Are there no other options?”

“Can she manage with just one kidney?” Richard inquired.

“Normally, that might work,” the doctor explained sympathetically, “but because her remaining kidney is compromised, it won’t, in this case. She needs a transplant.”

Richard’s tone became resolute as he asked, “How much time do we have?”

“It’s hard to say. We can control her symptoms with medication and dialysis for a while, but the sooner we find a match, the better,” the doctor replied.

A surge of desperation took over me as I pulled myself away from Richard’s embrace, regaining my determination despite my shaky voice. “I’m her mother—take my kidney. I’d gladly donate it.”

The doctor shook his head. “Vivian, your blood is A positive which immediately rules you out because of Rh incompatibility. If we put your kidney into her body it would reject it. You cannot donate to her. However, Richard, you’re AB negative, a perfect match. You’re the strongest candidate for donation. We could test for compatibility and?—”

“No,” I interrupted firmly. “H-he’s already done so much. I can’t ask that of him.”

Richard regarded me, perplexed. “What are you talking about? This is your daughter’s life. If I’m a match and can help, I’d gladly give a kidney.”

Shocked at his willingness, I quickly turned to the doctor. “What about her father? I’ll call him in France and see if he can be tested for a match.”

“Vivian, don’t call him.” Richard’s eyes implored me.

“He’s her father. I can’t just leave him out of this.”

Clutching my phone as I left the room, I overheard him ask the doctor, “What does it take to be tested?”

The doctor explained methodically, “The process involves blood tests, genetic compatibility, and immune system screening. We look at six key HLA markers—ideally, a donor and child should share at least three or four. The closer the HLA match, the lower the risk of rejection...”

His words swirled in my mind, much like an intricate recipe. I had mastered making Chouquette Saint Honoré Cake during my culinary training, a complex process requiring time, precision, and a blend of choux pastry, caramelized sugar, and Chantilly cream. But the doctor’s medical jargon left me utterly confused.

How could Paris be so ill? I berated myself for missing any signs of this; that guilt would haunt me for years, especially if my dear little Paris didn’t pull through.

“Don’t think like that,” I muttered under my breath as I paced the hall, my hands trembling as I dialed Adrien in France.

When he answered, I launched straight into the matter—no time for pleasantries.

“Paris is sick. She needs a kidney transplant. Please, can you arrange for tests with your doctor to determine if you're a kidney match?”

“What do you mean?” he grumbled. I took a deep breath, explaining slowly; although he understood English very well, his tone was dismissive. By the end of my explanation, his French accent thickened with irritation. “It’s not enough I send you money? Now you want a piece of mon corps, my kidney?”

Frustration surged through me, and I snapped, “You only send money when it’s convenient for you. Your daughter’s kidneys are failing and you could save her life. We need to know if you’re compatible. What’s your blood type?”

Dismissively, he said, “Je ne sais pas. O positif? I don’t know.”

I pressed further, rubbing a hand across my forehead. Dealing with him was like having my personal migraine—total hell. “How soon can you have tests done?”

With a bitter reply, he cut off the conversation. “Look, I’m busy. This is the last thing I needed to deal with right now.” He hung up.

“What?” If I could reach through the phone and strangle him, I would—for all the times he’d let us down. I tried calling and texting again, but, as always, we were never convenient for him.

Unfortunately, this wasn’t new. Ever since we’d moved back to the States, it felt as though Paris and I no longer existed to him. Perhaps I should have stayed in France so Paris could have some connection with him, but I had to get as far from his clutches as possible.

Downhearted by the weight of it all, my shoulders fell, and I returned to the room. There, I found the doctor and Richard wrapping up their conversation in the doorway while Paris seemed to have dozed off.

“Doctor, I contacted Paris’ father in France. He’s willing to be tested, but it might take some time,” I informed them.

He nodded. “Every potential donor increases the chances of finding a match.”

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I added nervously, “He mentioned his blood type might be O positive.”

He eyed me skeptically. “Are you sure?”

“I’ll push him to get the tests done so we know for certain.” I wasn’t expecting Adrien to follow through, though.

Before more could be said, a nurse called the doctor from across the hall. Over his shoulder, he hurried away, adding, “Yes, get the tests. Mr. Bardeaux must be mistaken—there’s no way a father with O positive and a mother with your blood type could have produced a child with Paris’s blood type.”

Richard and I exchanged stunned looks. “Uh... did he just say...?” Richard shook his head, trying to comprehend it all.

I quickly reassured him, “No. No, that can’t be. Of course she’s Adrien’s. I’m sure he just forgot his blood type is all.”

As Paris woke and called for Richard, he returned to her, and I watched her tiny hand slip into his. She had him wrapped around her little finger, and he was equally enchanted by her.

“Have you been on a safari?” she asked, rubbing her tired eyes.

“Why yes, two years ago,” he replied with a smile, softly launching into another story about his adventures. I couldn’t help but roll my eyes—of course, Richard had been on one.

Yet, I was more grateful than ever for his presence. He was calm and kind with Paris, holding her attention and shielding her from worries over needles and tests.

Without him, I'd have had her glued to my phone, playing games or watching videos while I agonized over everything. Richard made this ordeal bearable. I'd thank Chelsea and Rex for sending him my way.

I would thank Richard too—somehow. Would cupcakes be enough as repayment for all he'd done? Or... would he take me?

I shook my head, not thinking clearly as I observed my daughter with him. What if the doctor was right about her paternity? With a sinking feeling, I remembered the moment I told Adrien I was pregnant, so sure at the time that the baby was his. Besides, the night I spent with Richard, we had used condoms—even though I wasn't on the pill then, struggling to access medication abroad.

The timing between my night with Richard and my reunion with Adrien was so close. I had clung to the hope that the baby was Adrien's—the man I believed I loved and had forgiven for his past behavior. But what if I was wrong and the baby was Richard's?

What if all that wasted time, all the heartbreak over Adrien, meant that poor Paris spent six years not knowing her true father?

No. It couldn't be? I almost blurted out my doubts, but I kept them in. Stepping out of the room again, I called Adrien once more.

After getting no response, I wandered down the hall in a daze until I found a quiet little waiting room at the end. I closed the door, switched off the lights, and allowed silent tears to stream down my face—even though what I really needed was a loud, anguished cry.

SOLID ROCK

VIVIAN

I located a bathroom in the corridor and splashed cold water on my face. Puffy eyes from all the crying were the last thing Paris needed to see when I returned to her room—I had to be strong for her. Yet, when I looked in the mirror above the sink, I didn't see a brave woman staring back.

"I must be the oldest twenty-eight-year-old mother on the planet," I mumbled with disgust. And this was the image greeting Richard since he arrived?

I hurriedly ran my fingers through my stringy hair, as if brushing it, splashed more cold water, and pinched my cheeks in a vain attempt to bring back some color. There was nothing I could do about the wrinkles creeping up on me, but a cool, damp towel pressed against my eyes somewhat reduced the puffiness and dark circles.

Why did I even bother? It wasn't like Richard was going to fall head over heels for me. He was here out of duty to his brother, and driven by his passion for supporting children in need, very admirable. All we were to him was his *project du jour*. Once Paris got better, he'd return to his billionaire lifestyle in the city while we went back to our small town.

The reality glared harshly back at me in the mirror—I didn't have to be on show for him because nothing could come of this. My attraction to him simply manifested as a result of memories from Paris, and easy to dismiss. I grabbed the edge of the counter and inhaled, breathing a little easier. There. No more thoughts of getting together with Richard.

Back to the present, where everything in my life had become overwhelming—what day was it today? I checked my phone and noticed several messages I'd been ignoring—some from delivery drivers whose routine drop-offs of eggs, milk, and other supplies had been thrown off schedule, and others from seasonal staff anxious after showing up for work only to find my shop closed.

I summoned my resolve, put on my proverbial big girl panties, and called to explain the situation to each of them. On a small note of relief, both of my employees had agreed to find other work, though they asked to be contacted if I needed help again when I reopened later in the season because they loved working with me. I'd taken to teaching them the basics of pastry making, and both were eager to continue.

With no clear timeline for returning to baking or reopening the shop, my income was bound to suffer. Thankfully, I had inherited both the shop and the two-story apartment above it after our mother passed away, and Keaton had willingly waived his share so that Paris and I could have a roof over our heads. Surely, once her medical condition improved, I'd eventually reopen my shop, negotiate with my creditors, and somehow manage.

Everything was a mess right now, but I knew it couldn't last forever.

After ending those calls, I took a minute to regain my composure, until my phone rang with a call from Chelsea.

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“Hi, where are you?” I asked through sniffles, genuinely happy to hear her voice.

“I’m still in the Maldives. I got your messages. A freak storm has stranded us here a couple more days until we can fly the Buchanan jet home. Is Paris okay?” She asked.

“Her diagnosis is not great. But Richard’s here, and he’s been incredibly helpful. Paris loves his travel stories.”

“And you? How are you holding up?”

“Barely hanging on.” My voice cracked as tears threatened to fall again. I updated her on the latest news from the doctor.

“Oh, dear. I’ll be there soon. Just lean on Richard for support—he’ll do anything you need, and if he doesn’t, then he’ll have me to contend with. And I know you, Viv. You’re too proud to ask for help, but please, do it anyway. Now isn’t the time to hide your needs,” she implored.

Before I could respond, music from the hall caught my attention. I peered out from the bathroom door and saw nurses, parents, and patients all making their way to the common room. The smell of popcorn permeated the usual bleach of the pediatric unit.

“There you are, Mrs. Bardeaux. Come quickly,” said Nurse Kimmie, though I disliked being addressed by that name and thought I’d told her.

“What’s going on?” My heart jumped as she waved me out of the bathroom.

“Didn’t Mr. Buchanan tell you? You have to see this,” she said.

“Chelsea? I have to go now. Let me know when you get here,” I said as I started down the noisy hall. Unable to catch her final words, I pocketed my phone, dabbed at my eyes with my sleeve, and entered the common room.

Gathered to watch a screening of a new animated movie, each family occupied blown up swimming pools filled with blankets and pillows, like having their own box seats at a theater. Twinkle lights on the ceiling above us sparkled like stars in the sky with the lights off, while the staff handed out buckets of popcorn. And what movie would be complete without 3D glasses?

The entire room transformed, and there was my beautiful girl in front, sitting beside Richard, her radiant grin filling my heart with warmth. She looked happier than ever. As they enjoyed a lively conversation, I clutched my chest.

Oh, God—if I kept seeing them together like this, my heart might burst. And if it affected me this way, what must it do to Paris? It was obvious—she was falling for him. After all, besides Keaton, she’d never had a father figure shower her with attention like this.

When everything was over, when she recovered and Richard lost interest once his services were no longer needed here, would it break her heart never to see him again? I should talk with him tonight, and warn him about the impact he was having on her, but then I caught sight of Paris’ face, bright with pure joy...

“Mommy!” She spotted me and eagerly waved me over. I tiptoed across the room, careful not to disrupt the others, my figure cutting a silhouette from the projector onto the wall. From the images and the music, I recognized Paris’ favorite animated cartoon characters, the Globegans, in their first animated full-length movie. But I thought it wasn’t due to be released until this summer?

I climbed into the little pool and got comfortable, pulling her into my arms. “How fun is this?”

“Isn’t it cool? Richard did this,” she said, her eyes glued to the screen.

For Paris’ sake, I forced a smile—because that was all I could muster in that moment. My daughter’s happiness meant everything, and if Richard made her happy, I couldn’t take him away from her right now.

He caught my eye, grinning ear to ear, with Paris between us. “Do you like it?” He whispered.

“Of course. I love it. But when did you have time to throw this together?” I shook my head in complete awe.

“I can’t divulge all my secrets or nothing would be a surprise. And I’m a master of them.” With a wink, he turned back to the show, grabbing a handful of popcorn.

As he sat across from me, something else vied for my nose’s attention—the aroma of his rich and spicy cologne enveloped me like a promise of safety. Like that one night in Paris where I’d escaped a bad scene with Adrien, only to find myself in the arms of this billionaire.

Oh, to be young and to lose myself with Richard all over again? It had happened in Paris; what if something were to happen between us here? I walked my eyes down his body, my fingers itching to touch, recalling every detail of his muscular frame, as if we were together only yesterday.

Paris shifted, snuggling closer into my body, striking a poignant reminder into my heart: she’s all that matters right now. She’s my entire focus, my life, my sweetest baby.

The man beside us was only a convenience. Not forever. Still, this whole room and event impressed me that he'd go to such lengths for us.

Later in the evening, Paris requested an encore, and Richard arranged with the nurses for us to have the common room to ourselves. So sweetly, he carried her on his back down the hallway to the cozy nest of the pool, jokingly calling himself "Paris' camel ride" to the tune of her giggles.

I settled in beside her with blankets and pillows, knowing it wouldn't be long before her eyes drifted shut, while Richard stood awkwardly nearby.

"Come on, join us for the movie," Paris invited, patting the spot next to her.

"Are you sure you two don't want some time alone?" He looked to me for reassurance. Alone... wasn't that always how it was for us? Paris and I floated through life, depending solely on each other. Richard was like an island we'd discovered, a temporary refuge before heading back out into the world... alone.

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"Stay," I nodded. We wouldn't be there long anyway, considering how sleepy my little girl was.

I was right. Once she was out, my heavy eyelids fought desperately not to close. All I wanted was to curl up and embrace her little body to mine and sleep. I could listen to her tiny snores all night. If only I wasn't worried I'd disturb her with my tossing and turning from worry.

"You must be exhausted," Richard whispered, reclining opposite me, so tall, his legs hung way out and his arms crossed beneath his head. He, too, looked worn from hours of staying by Paris' side. I could see how much he cared so deeply, so quickly for our situation.

"You too, but there must be a hotel nearby. We're fine, if you want to go. Thank you for everything you've done for us." I let him off the hook, assuring I could fully manage without him, in case he didn't think so.

"I'm sure you are fine, but I'm not leaving," he said, and I wasn't sure I really wanted him to. He'd become a solid rock I could lean on through all of this, no matter how independent and strong I thought I was. "Rex and Chelsea wouldn't want you facing this alone, and?—"

"Please, don't stay out of loyalty to them."

"I'm not here for them. I'm here for you and Paris."

I averted my gaze, knowing his eyes could see right through me and how much I

wanted to believe his words were true. Instead, I reached for Paris' hand again, committing the feel of her tiny fingers to memory. The past six years had flown by so quickly, and soon enough, before I knew it, she'd be a sassy teenager. Hand holding with me would stop. And she'd probably trade in her fascination with exploring the world for crushes on teenage boys.

"But yes, I took the liberty of booking a suite at the nearest hotel. It has two bedrooms, so we could take turns—one of us stays with her, while the other gets some rest, bathes, and has time to eat," he said calmly, once more offering the world to me.

"I can't just leave her here."

"I knew you'd say that. I've talked with the doctor about testing me as her kidney donor—" He held up a hand to silence my protest before I could voice it. "They'll be able to tell within about five days if I'm a match, and that's as fast as I could get them to push getting the test results. If it isn't me, though, finding another match could take just as long or even longer. Vivian, you can't keep up this pace day in and out—it won't do either of you any good if you're not well-rested."

I shook my head, unwilling to entertain the idea of leaving, so I changed the subject. "I cannot believe you're here. Of all people to run into. And to think you didn't have a clue who I was when you rescued me the night my van broke down."

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "Maybe not, but I took one look at your broken down van and at you, and had one single goal."

"Getting the cake to the wedding on time?"

"Make that two goals." He chuckled, his sultry gaze reached deeply inside of me. He stretched his arms wide, one landing behind my back where a brush of his fingertips

sent a thrill down my spine.

“I suppose for a man like you, a woman with a child isn’t exactly your pace.”

“Truthfully, you, being a single mother, threw me off initially. Now? The woman with a child in this room is incredibly appealing.” His low, intimate tone left no room for misinterpretation.

“What do you want, Richard?”

He drew in a deep breath. “I want Paris to pull through this. I want to make sure both of you are financially stable, healthy, and happy after all of this... and I want you.”

The fluttering in my stomach wouldn’t stop. I shouldn’t be here in the hospital flirting with a very rich man tempting me like this. Utterly drained, I sighed and placed a palm on my forehead. “I can’t think straight. Paris is my only priority right now.”

“And I wouldn’t expect anything less. I have so much respect for you—being a single mom, leaving that deadbeat in France, doing everything necessary to survive each day. I’ve placed you on the highest pedestal of any woman I’ve ever known, Vivian. And maybe, once the dust settles, you’ll honor me by saying yes when I call out of the blue one day to ask you on a date. Or say no, if you truly aren’t interested in me. Either way, your and your daughter’s happiness matters most. Does that clear things up?”

God, I was a mess, questioning his motives. “Yes, but I’m just so exhausted. It’s all been too much.”

“That’s exactly why you should go to the suite. I have a car waiting for you whenever you’re ready.” He arched a brow and nodded toward the door. “You could give me your number, and I’ll call you if anything happens with her overnight.”

I chuckled, removing my phone from my pocket and handing it over, flirting. “Guess that’s one way for you to get my phone number.”

“I could have gotten it from Rex. I think he and Chelsea hope that we... get together.”

“Do they now?” I gazed into his eyes and lost myself for a moment, while the words I hope so too, played on the tip of my tongue. But I stopped from blurting it. That would have been simply my exhaustion talking.

Despite a pang of guilt about leaving Paris overnight, I took him up on the offer to use the suite. I needed to look after myself for her sake. Once we gently returned Paris back to her hospital bed and she drifted off, I kissed her goodnight.

At the door, I glanced back once more at them both. Paris’ little body curled into a ball, sound asleep, while Richard sprawled out the full length of the sleeper chair, eyes closed, trying to get comfortable for the night ahead. I spoke to the nurses about the situation one more time, who all promised they’d keep an eye on them, then left.

At the suite, where I thought I’d head straight to a bed and collapse, my eyes fell first upon several boxes and baskets arranged on the coffee table in the elegantly appointed space. Curiosity won over, and I approached and opened each one.

The largest white boxes contained clothes for both Paris and me; fashionable yet comfortable items perfectly suited for the cold weather, like thick leggings, jeans, cashmere sweaters, boots. Plus, there were several sets of pajamas for Paris, and—my breath caught—fancy sets of bras and panties for me. Such luxuries were a bit much for us, all in the right sizes, too.

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How in the world did he manage to do this?

It suddenly dawned on me that I had left home without a single packed item, evident by the sweater I'd been in for two days straight. Not even toothbrushes.

I marveled over a basket filled with facial scrubs, moisturizers, dental care, scented bath soaps, and perfume. And not travel sizes—full sized bottles of elegant, expensive brands.

A fresh mix of brightly colored flowers occupied the center of the table. Their aroma battled for dominance with the scent of croissants, jam, and fresh berries loaded on a tray.

“I had my favorite brought in from NYC, probably the closest you'll get to Parisian croissants,” read Richard's note on the bakery box. I'd be the judge of that, hoping my appetite returned by morning to try one.

Another basket held cheeses, grapes, a baguette with ham, and a bottle of good red wine. Swiss dark chocolate topped it all off—though I wasn't hungry enough for more than mere nibbles of anything. Stress sapped my appetite.

Every item was lavish and over the top—but what did I expect from a man with means? His enthusiastic involvement in our lives had come as a complete surprise. I'd end up thanking him for the rest of my life for everything he'd done since this all began.

I could read so much into this, but right now, I didn't have the energy to analyze his

deeds and intentions. My brain shut down, and my body moved as if filled with heavy lead. I practically crawled into the nearest bedroom, where the inviting plush linens beckoned. I sprawled in the center of the bed and closed my eyes, my final thought a quiet prayer for Paris.

10

A SECOND CHANCE?

RICHARD

Hospital accommodations stood far from the five-star stays my black card usually afforded. To make matters worse, I spent half the night awake in a back-breaking chair, filled with thoughts of Vivian enjoying the suite and Paris confined to a hospital bed, one question rolling around in my head: Why had these two suddenly upended my life?

With no answers by dawn, the morning found me teetering on a child-sized pink chair while I sipped strong hospital coffee, silently praying the furniture would hold up under my manly frame.

To amuse Paris, I arranged a little breakfast for two in our room, sourcing the pink chairs and petite table from the common area. I replaced the cafeteria tray with real china and invited her to join me for my version of “Breakfast at the Plaza Hotel.”

“Mm. Yummy tea,” Paris commented, sipping from a delicate teacup and even extending her pinky.

A soft chuckle from the doorway startled us—Vivian had arrived. My pulse jetted off; I swept her from head to toe and back again, and I could tell by her refreshed smile the night at the suite did her good. Dressed in the clothes I’d picked out for her,

a surge of satisfaction powered through my veins, knowing I was making a difference in her mental and physical state.

Had it been anyone else, I'd likely have thrown money at their problems, wished them well, and moved on. But this was different. Vivian and I shared an intimate past, and Paris was an adorable child. Their sudden arrival had thrown my life into a tailspin—I couldn't walk away.

"Mommy!" Paris exclaimed, arms stretched wide as soon as she saw her.

Vivian knelt and embraced her daughter tightly, inhaling her scent. "I missed you, baby. I wanted to be here before you woke up. Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay. We saved you some blueberry muffins and fruit." Paris gestured around the table.

"Here, take my seat. There's even coffee." I stood, pulling my chair out for her and leaning in to whisper, "I hope your time in the suite was exactly what you needed."

"It was," she replied with a grateful smile. "And now it's your turn."

"Mommy, look—I have coffee, too," Paris said, proudly holding up her teacup before taking a sip.

"It's mostly milk." I winked, assuringly.

Vivian glanced around the room while reaching for a muffin, raising her brows at the new additions taped to the wall, a variety of maps and photos. "Where did all of this come from?"

"Guilty. My assistant couriered everything over early this morning," I admitted.

“Oh? You have an assistant? Now I know the secret behind all of these surprises. I suppose one call from you and they do your bidding?” She cast a sly grin at me.

“Actually I have several people in my employ, and yes, when I say ‘jump’, they don’t hesitate.” I grinned at her with all the bravado of my CEO status.

“We’re planning a trip around the world, Mommy,” Paris declared excitedly.

“A trip? Wow. That—that’s amazing,” Vivian said, her grin dropping, eyeing me with a hint of suspicion.

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I shrugged. “I get a kick out of her penchant for adventure. It doesn’t hurt to imagine, to have something fun to look forward to, right? When this is all over, I’d be happy to take you both on a trip.”

“And look at all my new friends.” She pointed toward a cluster of oversized stuffed wild animals in the corner, with the faces of lions, tigers, and bears peeking out over our breakfast. “And here—my ownla tour Eiffel.Richard said that’s where you two met, and that it’s special. Have I ever been there?” She jumped up and stood beside the statue, nearly her same height.

Vivian swallowed a bite of her muffin before replying, “Yes, last year. Remember, we went right to the top with your father?”

“Oh. Him.” The child’s smile faded, and my own turned down too, as if Vivian had suddenly killed our happy morning vibe.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I have some calls to make. I’ll head back to the suite to clean up and rest a bit. The doctor wants me here after lunch for more tests.” I sighed and tugged on my wool coat. “Bye, Paris. I’ll be back later.”

“Promise you’ll come back?” she pleaded, arms outstretched for a hug.

I crouched down for a quick embrace and murmured, “Promise, sweetheart.”

Vivian trailed me to the door, her forehead furrowed with concern. “A trip, Richard? Seriously? You’re spoiling her,” she chided, cocking her head.

“And I’ll spoil you, too, if you let me.”

She chuckled. “You already have, between the things you’ve done here and with all the items in the suite. Just you being here for us is enough. We’re not used to nice things?—”

“Maybe it’s time to let someone in who will truly treat you properly?” I interjected. My hand settled on her shoulder with a gentle squeeze, and I gazed at her with an intense plea. Every single second with these two awakened that dream for a family inside of me more and more.

“Someone like you?” She licked her lips, her gaze dropping to my mouth. How long had it been since a man made her feel truly cherished? And she should know firsthand how good I treat a woman, assuming I gave her the full Richard Buchanan experience our first time in Paris.

I could be everything Vivian needed right now. Forget my vow to steer clear of commitments. Forget my reluctance to get involved with a single mother—I was here and present, every minute yearning to be both the man Paris could call her father, and to be the man whose name Vivian moaned every night in my bed.

Years ago, she’d been foolish to return to Adrien—the mistake of a younger woman. Or perhaps I was the fool for not going after her the morning I woke up to an empty bed.

How different might things have been for us? I could have stayed in Paris a while longer, gotten to know her, fallen for her. Maybe even her child could have been mine. We would’ve married then. She wouldn’t have suffered with Adrien... and never espoused his last name.

Vivian would have been the perfect Buchanan wife—far better than my ex. Over the

past few years, I used to look into the future and get pissed at how Janet had ruined my life. But this week, since being around Paris and Vivian, all I saw was them.

Admittedly, I was ready to move on. Rex and Miriam would rejoice at hearing it.

“Yes, someone like me,” I said. “Perhaps you’d give me a second chance...?”

When she looked down and away, I knew I’d pressed too soon. My heart dropped, along with my hand from her shoulder, spying the worry creeping back into her face. I was here, but she wasn’t able to meet me yet. Whatever it took, no matter how long, I’d help her get there. “Can I get you anything else you need before I head back?”

“No, but thanks again. Everything in the suite was incredible, by the way. This sweater... just everything. I’ll pay you back for?—”

“Shhh,” I interrupted gently, fingering one of her curls back off her face. “I see it in your eyes. That’s all the thanks I need. I’ll be back later.”

Taking a chance, I pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Her breath hitched—the subtle sign from her I needed to keep trying.

Until a week ago, I’d had almost no hope anyone would want me for more than my money. Now, spending time with Vivian was slowly turning me from a man who soured at the word “commitment”—one whose ex had shattered his heart—back into a man who wanted it all.

Vivian wasn’t like Janet. She wasn’t demanding or asking for handouts. She appreciated whatever I gave her, and I’d gladly give her the world wrapped in a pretty bow because of it.

I sensed she hadn’t completely let her guard down, yet. Given her past with Adrien,

her walls might be too high for even me with all my Buchanan resources to break through.

After lunch, it was time for Paris' chest X-ray, part of her pre-op checkup to ensure she was fit for anesthesia. Mine, too. The doctors were testing us simultaneously at my insistence—me to ensure my kidney would be the perfect match for her, and her to ensure she was ready for surgery as soon as I was identified as a match.

And my instinct told me I would be. No matter how much Vivian chose denial and, irritatingly, kept trying to reach Adrien.

Meanwhile, every needle prick and test required a boost of courage from us to help Paris deal with it all. Vivian and I made a great team, with her warm, maternal tone, while I rallied us together.

Paris's voice trembled when she asked, "Will it hurt?"

"No, ma chérie. It won't hurt one bit. No needles this time. Just taking a photo of your heart. And I'll be there to hold your hand every second," Vivian assured her, gently dabbing away her little girl tears.

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“Listen, kiddo,” I added with a playful smile, “these new pajamas aren’t just super comfortable—they actually make you braver. Look at all those tigers on them. There’s no way these fierce creatures will let anything bad happen to you.”

I puffed up with pride over having ordered ultra-soft cotton pajamas for Paris. I even made sure the other patients on the floor got pairs of pajamas. With prints ranging from cupcakes to ponies to wild animals and more, the printed PJs were a hit. Paris adored them, and I promised to buy her even more—whatever she needed, despite Vivian’s cautionary glance about spoiling her.

“And you have a pair, too, Mommy. Put them on!” she announced, pointing at the silk pajama set I had laid out for Vivian that morning—a little nudge for her to join us in our pajama day. I was already dressed in mine.

“Yeah, Mommy. You don’t want to miss out on all the fun today,” I teased.

She cocked her head at me. "All right then, here I go."

While she slipped away into the bathroom to change, I turned to Paris and offered gentle reassurance.

“Don’t be scared, sweetheart. Everything the doctors and nurses are doing for you is to help you feel better,” I explained.

“But I feel good today. When can I go home?” She whined.

I had worked to make every moment seem like fun here, help her dwell little on all

the confusing hospital things around her and big discussions we had with her doctors. Help Vivian, too. I thought it had worked, considering how rarely Paris asked about going home.

“Very soon. I promise,” I assured her, ready to do anything to keep that promise.

Then, out of the blue, she asked, "Richard? Am I going to... Heaven?"

Her question stopped me and stole my breath; she was a child fearing her mortality, confronting a big, scary idea. My eyes flickered toward the bathroom door as I hesitated, unsure if I should answer while holding back a stray tear.

At least Paris now carried my Buchanan blood—we were fighters, and that thought helped keep me grounded.

Fortunately, quick thinking was one of my best skills, honed in business, and it would serve me well in comforting a sick kid. "Not until you're a hundred years old, at least. Just imagine yourself: old, with gray hair, wrinkled skin, even walking around with a cane. Like this."

I bent over dramatically, mimicking an old man shuffling across the room, which made her giggle.

Then, settling back into my chair, I said, "I know being here in the hospital hasn't been easy, but you are the bravest little girl I've ever met. Just hang in there a little longer, okay? Can you do that for me?"

"And you have to be brave, too," Paris declared, pointing at me with all the seriousness in her watery eyes.

“Oh, I'm very brave. But just in case, these tigers will protect me,” I joked, glancing

down at my burgundy silk pajamas adorned with tiger heads, and letting out a snarly roar. Paris burst into laughter. “Come on, let me hear how your tigers roar.”

Soon, Vivian emerged from the bathroom, finding us both roaring away.

“Wow! Look at your mommy in her matching set of pajamas. Doesn’t she look pretty?” I regarded her striking modeling poses with all the affection in my heart.

“Yeah, but you have to roar with us,” Paris shouted.

To her credit, Vivian joined in with a sparkle in her eye and the loudest roar of all. That playful moment quickly turned into a tickle fight between mother and daughter while I stood back, marveling at the bond they shared.

A surge of envy flickered within me that someone like Adrien Bardeaux ever had any place in their lives.

Meanwhile, here I was, nearly a guaranteed match, ready to give my kidney, my money—my heart and soul?—while she still clung to the hope that Adrien would step up and donate.

Dr. Ferguson promised the tests were being expedited and that we’d have an answer soon. I didn’t doubt I’d be the match—or maybe that was just my hopeful ego talking. If I was, Vivian would have to choose then who would be best for her daughter: Adrien or me?

I predicted the asshole would let her down. But shouldn’t she know the type of man he was by now? The very thought of his kidney becoming a part of Paris made me ill. If he came anywhere near us, I’d need several men to hold me back from tearing him apart.

As the nurses wheeled Paris out of the room, Vivian and I locked eyes, her fear as clear as day.

I gave her my usual reassuring wink—the same signal I always offered whenever the nurses took Paris away for testing, promising that everything would be okay. This time, I reached out and let my knuckles gently brush down along her arm.

A shiver ran through her soft skin as goosebumps formed, and an electric spark passed between us—more intense than anything I'd ever felt with another woman. And this time, she didn't look away.

“I heard every word in the bathroom, Richard,” she whispered.

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“Oh, um...” Shit. Was she mad how I handled Paris’ question about Heaven?

“You’re so good with her. You were wonderful. Thank you for answering her. I don’t know what I would have said?—”

“You’re her mother and you would have said the perfect thing. She’ll be fine. And so will you,” I murmured as I lingered to capture her new scent of the designer perfume and shampoo I’d bought for her to use in the suite, although I missed her usual vanilla. “I have a little more fun in store for us when Paris gets back.”

“Richard, what have you done now?” she teased, her lips curving into a smile as she studied me.

“Wait and see. It’s a surprise that Paris will love. I guarantee it.”

“She’s loved them all. You and your surprises. Don’t you know how having you here with us is enough?” Then, she balanced on her toes and planted a soft kiss on my cheek before leaving the room. I stood there, awed by her affection. It was a crack in her wall, finally giving way.

I paced the room, running a hand through my hair in frustration as I waited for the nurses to get me for my Xray. Emotions bubbled up, admitting what I desired now: a family. The kid. The mother. Forever.

What was happening to me?

As a distraction, I studied the lineup of maps Paris had helped me tape to the

wall—her “travel schedule.” It outlined an extravagant trip, and I longed to whisk them both away to show them the wonders of the world. According to Paris, we’d start at the North Pole to see polar bears, then head to Egypt to gaze at the pyramids and ride camels in the desert, then visit the rainforest, and?—

Before I could finish, an unfamiliar man stepped into the room. I sized him up in a flash; we were nearly the same height and build. He wore an olive cable-knit wool sweater, a puffer vest, and a black trucker cap on his head. Rugged but refined, and a little familiar.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I was told this is Paris Bardeaux’s room,” he remarked. His eyes darted around from my silk pajamas to the stuffed animals and vibrant maps that gave the room more character than a typical sterile hospital setup.

“It is. And who might you be?” I inquired, my fists tensing, ready to protect if needed.

“Should I ask you the same?” He cautiously extended his hand. “I’m Keaton Kingston.”

“Ah, Vivian’s brother. I’m Richard Buchanan. You own Holly Creek Hops Brewery, right? Nice establishment.” Relieved, I shook his hand firmly, our grips equal in strength.

“That’s me. I’m afraid she hasn’t mentioned you at all,” he noted.

“I’m a... a friend,” I explained, yet hating the word because I wanted to be more.

He folded his arms, studying me with skeptical eyes. “Last I heard, Vivian didn’t

have any friends.”

“Well, I’m also Rex’s brother, Chelsea’s husband.”

“I didn’t make their wedding. Spent the holidays out in Denver skiing with some friends. But I rushed back from my trip expecting to find Viv alone, dealing with all of this. Definitely not expecting to find you here. Guess I’m glad you were.” He squinted at the nearest wall where there was a drawing Paris had made of herself with Vivian and me.

“Has she filled you in on what’s going on with Paris?”

“Yep. We’ve had a stream of constant texts flowing.”

But no mention of me? Interesting. How should I take that? I assumed she’d never told her brother about our one night together long ago, either.

“So, have you ever considered bottling your brews? I know the owners of the country's largest bottling plant, and they've been partnering with micro-breweries over the past year. I could introduce you when you're ready," I suggested, steering the conversation to familiar business territory.

His eyebrows rose as he turned away from the wall maps. "Really? That would be incredible. I picked up some new flavor ideas while in Denver and I’m planning to expand our reach this summer regionally. Next step would be bottling." He warmed up to me, which was crucial since I hoped to be part of his sister and niece’s lives for a long time, if things went my way.

Just then, the nurse dropped by and signaled that it was time for my chest X-ray. “My blood is a match for Paris. And I’m undergoing further evaluation to see if I can donate my kidney.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought I’d do the same.”

“Okay. The more people tested, the faster we’ll get someone to match. Then we can proceed with the transplant. I’ll inform the staff and they’ll start testing you immediately. Paris and Vivian should be back soon. Please, make yourself comfortable. We’ll talk more later.” I gestured as if inviting him into our little family circle.

If I approached Vivian like a business deal, I’d evaluate where I stood. Having Paris and Keaton on my side was a definite advantage. But she wasn’t a transaction; she was a woman full of passion and spirit. I wouldn’t give up trying to win her yet. And since when did a Buchanan ever give up on what they wanted?

PAJAMAS

VIVIAN

Paris and I returned from getting her chest Xray, and I grinned upon seeing a man standing at the window, absorbed in his phone. At first glance from behind, I assumed it was Richard, but he wasn't.

"Look who it is." I gently nudged her forward.

"Uncle Keaton!" She shouted with delight.

"There's my girl." Striding over in two large steps, he scooped her up into his arms. Paris giggled and hugged him tightly. "I brought you something from Denver. A belated Christmas present."

I watched with affection as he carefully set her on her bed, then retrieved a round, neatly wrapped gift from his bag—a package nearly as big as his hand.

Where was Richard? I'd love to introduce these two. Keaton always had a flare for business, so they should have things in common to talk about. They'd get along well.

"What is it?" Paris eagerly tore away a corner of the red wrapping paper.

"Judging by your room, I'm pretty sure you're going to like it," he declared, nodding toward the maps on her wall.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said, joining his side. We shared a brief hug while Paris continued unwrapping her gift.

She gasped in amazement. “So cool!”

Keaton demonstrated. “It’s a snow globe. You shake it gently like this and snow falls on the scene. Here’s the North Pole. See? And this is a train passing through the mountains arriving with kids to visit Santa. Can you spot him there somewhere?”

She peered inside the clear dome and remarked, “Richard is going to take me to the North Pole on a big adventure.”

“Hm. Is he now?” He mused as he cocked an eyebrow at me, lowering his voice. “I met Richard when I arrived. Looks like we have some catching up to do, Viv.”

“Yes, I suppose we do,” I whispered back.

“Nice pajamas, by the way. Wasn’t Richard wearing the same ones?” Keaton teased, his observant eyes scanning my outfit and perhaps drawing conclusions.

“Richard is just a friend,” I responded with a casual shrug, unaware that the man had slipped behind me and caught my words.

I gasped when I finally realized he was there. Gone were his pajamas, replaced by faded jeans, a gray Columbia sweatshirt, and ball cap on backwards. The rich man was so fine, dressed down, he took my breath away, and I kicked myself for sorting him into the friend column. But wewerefriends, weren’t we? I couldn’t think of any other way to describe the current situation between us.

“Come see what I have. It’s the North Pole. Is this where you’re taking me?” Paris boasted, holding up the enormous snow globe.

“Yeah? That’s something else.” His eyes avoided mine, and his smile faded for a moment—as if my comment had struck a nerve.

“How fast does a train go?” She asked him.

“That depends on the train. There’s one in France called the Train à Grande Vitesse and it can go almost two hundred miles per hour,” he explained in the usual patient way in which he connected with my daughter. Always calm and cool, so good to her.

“Can we go on the fast train?” The excitement in her eyes was impossible to ignore.

Richard’s smile flatlined. “Sure, sweetheart. But first, get better, okay?” His tone seemed less confident about their grand adventure now, not that I expected him to actually follow through, but Paris certainly did. It broke my heart.

I could see now this was a problem. While their interactions kept her happy and entertained, there was an expectation that had evolved, that he’d be in our lives for some time to come. That this trip would actually happen. What if he wasn’t around much longer and the trip never materialized?

He continued answering her follow-up questions about train travel until I stepped in and smiled at him. “How was your test?”

“All good. I’ll bet you’re happy to see your brother again?”

“Yes, I am. Although we’ve had little time to catch up yet.” I elbowed Keaton. “I want to hear all about your time in Denver. Did the paparazzi follow you around? Did women swoon and fall at your feet?”

“Knock it off,” he elbowed back. “You know the celebrity stuff gets old real fast.”

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“Hate to interrupt, but that surprise I mentioned has arrived. Follow me?” Richard consulted something on his phone.

“Oh. Okay,” I said, reaching for Paris and picking her up.

“What is it?” She excitedly asked as we followed him back to the common room where the patients were already seated, and waiting for whatever this surprise was.

Paris dashed ahead to secure a seat right in the middle, front and center between the children. Like the other adults, we hung back and hugged the walls. I stood by the door while Richard positioned himself a few yards away from me, arms folded, grumpy face, and seemingly unapproachable.

Next to me, Keaton, always the charmer, struck up a conversation with the mother of another patient.

Behind me, outside the room, the nurses gathered at their station. They whispered and shared gossip—but I caught every word.

“Wait until I tell my best friend that I met two famous men on shift today—Richard and Keaton are H-O-T.” It was easy to make out Nurse Kimmie’s New Jersey-type of accent.

Another nurse chimed in, “Right? A billionaire bachelor and a reality TV heartthrob in one day? Nothing this exciting has happened in this department in ages.”

“Danica, the new night nurse, told me that Richard overheard her worrying about

how she'd pay for her mother's cancer meds. Guess who covered it?" Kimmie continued. "In a fantasy world, I'd choose Richard and his money any day. Since he arrived, he's done nothing but go out of his way for everyone here. Look at how happy he's making these kids."

One of the nurses mused, "Money comes and goes, though, and both men are handsome. But Keaton—he's just swoon-worthy."

"Well, if you ask me, that Vivian doesn't understand just how much Richard would do for her. You can see in his eyes how much he cares. Why can't I find one guy who looks at me that way?" Kimmie vented.

I realized then just how scrutinized we were. All I wanted was for my daughter to thrive with as little drama as possible. The two men in my life drew too much attention.

"And in your fantasy, which one would you marry and which would you F-U-C-K?" one nurse blurted out.

My mouth dropped in shock that someone would even ask such a question.

Without hesitation, they all answered in unison, laughing, "Both—to marry and to F-U-C-K."

I turned bright red, hoping neither man had overheard, when suddenly music began filling the hall, as if a live chorus were approaching.

Next thing we knew, actors and actresses from the Lion King burst into the room like Broadway performers. Dressed in elaborate costumes complete with makeup, they resembled the wild animals they portrayed perfectly.

The children cheered, and Paris—sitting centrally—gasped with her hands on her cheeks, her eyes huge and her little legs swinging excitedly beneath the chair as she watched the impromptu performance. As the characters sang and twirled, they even encouraged her and some kids to dance along. I took photos and videos to remember it all by.

Tears welled in my eyes as I edged closer to Richard and whispered, “This is remarkable. Did you really bring Broadway performers up here to Albany?”

He offered a mysterious smile. “I pulled some strings. Buchanans have long been patrons of the arts. Listen, if you’re good here, I’m heading to the suite for a while—I have some work to catch up on.”

“Oh, sure. That’s fine. Keaton will keep me company.” I nodded.

“Okay, enjoy the show. Text me later if you need anything or if you want me to come back to give you two a break tonight.” With that, he left me, as he headed toward Paris. After whispering something in her ear and sharing a brief hug, he slipped out the door. An uneasy feeling stirred inside of me, as if I ached at the thought of him leaving, so I followed after him.

“Richard?” I called, but he didn’t stop. Was this the real him—had the illusion of keeping a little girl happy worn thin? His life suddenly tied down by a child too demanding? The last thing I needed was another mood-swinging man like Adrien, but I never imagined Richard could be like him. I got close enough and tugged at his sleeve. “Richard? Is everything okay? You seem off.”

He halted in the hallway and clipped, “I’m fine.”

Our eyes met in a smoldering, heated dance—until I noticed movement out of the corner of my vision. The nurses at their station, all curious spectators close enough to

overhear.

Not wanting to fan the flames of gossip, I broke the silence. “We can discuss this later.”

He noticed them too. “No. Let’s talk right now.” He motioned to follow and led me to a nearby storage closet, clicking the door shut behind us for privacy.

“Vivian, I liked being needed and being here for you. But now with Keaton—and since I’m only a friend...maybe you don’t need me around.” A wry smirk surfaced, confirming that my words had clearly wounded him.

“Maybe I don’t need you around?” I shrugged a shoulder to my ear and rested my back against the door. “What if I enjoy having you here? Besides, Paris adores you—if you haven’t noticed. You have been completely unexpected, Richard. And after all we’ve been through so far, I would definitely consider you a true friend. Which, by the way, there’s nothing wrong with being friends—it’s a compliment to both of us. But if you stay, who knows? Perhaps we do have a second chance at something more. So stay if you want to. And also because I want you to.”

“You do?” A slow smile spread across his face.

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“Yes, truly.” I mirrored the gentle curve of his smile. Unbeknownst to us, we had grown so close that our breaths mingled. Every inch of space between us became charged with electricity, as if the memory of that one unforgettable night we shared in Paris had bonded us more strongly than I realized.

I swallowed hard and glanced down at his lips as he lightly licked them. The scent of him filled the confines of the closet like an intoxicating pheromone. My mouth went dry, longing for his touch, even as another part of me stirred with desire, soaking my panties.

“So I’ll stay then.” In a sexy move, he pressed a palm above my head, inching himself closer.

“Good. Then stay. I want you to.” I agreed, breathlessly, repeating myself, but not caring at this point.

The back of his knuckles caressed my cheek. “Because you want me. Admit it.”

My heart raced with lust. “I... um...”

He drew his hand through my hair, landing at the back of my neck. His lips brushed against my earlobe while whispered words tickled my skin, “You do. I know it.”

Suddenly, applause and shouts of “Bravo!” echoed from the common room, a jarring reminder of our lives beyond this stolen moment in a closet. The reality set in—I was a single mother with an ailing daughter, and I shouldn’t be risking too much with this captivating man in a room cluttered with bleach bottles.

I gently pressed against his pecs creating space between us. “Tell you what—go on and take care of whatever you need to in the suite, but come back later to say goodnight to Paris. We can talk more after she falls asleep, okay?” I suggested.

“Then I will. Now—come here.” He tugged at my waist, drawing me into his embrace where I fit so right under his chin, our bodies aligned.

I rested my head on his chest. His strong heartbeat echoed in my ear, likedéjà vu;it reminded me of the last time we’d shared such closeness, lying in his arms in our night of passion in Paris. I couldn’t pinpoint when or where exactly, but the anticipation of it happening again tingled through me.

My body buzzed with the possibility of another union, though a small voice wondered if this was merely a fantasy. Did I deserve happiness when my daughter’s life hung in the balance?

12

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

VIVIAN

After dinner,Keaton and I relaxed in the common room, watching Paris play with Jessie, a new little friend of hers who was also waiting for a kidney transplant. We finally had time to catch up, and as close siblings who shared every detail without reservation, I held nothing back, telling him all about Richard—from the first night we met, to our reunion at Chelsea’s wedding, to now.

“That’s wild how you ended up meeting again,” he couldn’t believe it.

“Yes. And you know it’s difficult for me to let someone in after the way Adrien

treated me.” I hated dredging up the darkest night when Paris and I left him for good.

“Trust me. I remember the countless phone calls I got from you.” He shook his head and finished off a candy bar from the cafeteria. “But once you told me exactly how he treated you, I’d have flown all the way to France to sort you out—and to kick his ass.”

I laughed, adding, “Not sure that would have helped. If Adrien wouldn’t change for me and Paris, he wouldn’t change for you, no matter how charming you are.” I reached over and tousled his hair, a habit from our childhood that he always pretended to hate.

“Stop, stop—don’t ruin my image in front of all the nurses,” he protested with a mischievous wink.

“As far as relationships go, Adrien will always be my biggest regret, but not a mistake. Because it brought me Paris.”

“I think every person on the planet has to go through one bad relationship to get to a good one,” he mused.

“Oh yeah? Enough about my love life. Tell me what’s up with yours. Did you end up skiing in Denver with what’s her name?” I teased, knowing he had already cycled through half the women from that dating show.

“Cassandra? Nope.” He looked away. “She and Anthony got together the day before I arrived, and that was it. Before I left to come back here, he told me he thinks she’s the one. I texted her and asked how serious it was, and she sent kiss emojis back like it’s a game. Like she forgot how she totally flirted with me by both text and phone before I flew out there, only then to snub me the entire time in favor of him. Whatever. I’m over it.” Yet, he didn’t seem over it at all.

“Texting? Seriously?” I patted his hand. “I wish you’d find someone closer to home, though I realize that might be selfish on my part. It’s only because I don’t want to see you swept away by some semi-famous woman who takes you far from Holly Creek and me. You know Paris would be devastated, too.”

“No matter where life takes me, I’ll always be the best uncle Paris has.” He glanced over at her and they shared a smile across the room. I loved how they’d bonded since we moved back here from France.

“Richard’s really great with Paris, too. I think you’ll see that. He has a big, generous heart; not one of these billionaires stingy with their money—not that I’d ever take advantage of him. I think I should open up to him. What do you think?”

“I think you already know what you want. You’re just too scared to act on it.” He shrugged. “I wish I had all the answers. Do what makes you happy. If he makes you happy, I’m happy. If he makes Paris happy, even better.”

“That’s a lot of happiness,” I elbowed him with a twerk of my lips.

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“Yep. It is, especially if I can trust a billionaire with the two people I love most in this world. I have my own life to live, you know.” He shoved me playfully, shoulder to shoulder.

“You sure do. Any other female prospects? Paris needs some cousins.”

“Don’t push me to settle down yet, Viv. I just turned thirty.”

“Old man.”

“Shut it. And no, not a single prospect in sight.” He sighed. “I think I’m going to focus on my business for a while, and let love find me. Richard said he’d introduce me to a bottling company. That could be a huge deal.”

“He did? Interesting.” Clearly Richard had earned the trust of Paris and Keaton. I should give him a chance. Across the room, Paris yawned. “Oh, she’s rubbing her eyes. Can you go get her? I want to text Richard to come and say goodnight to her.”

Keaton scooped her up and spun her around, drawing giggles from her. I texted while trailing after them, yawning myself.

Once we had her settled for the night—with cupcake jammies picked out, teeth brushed, and hair braided—Keaton read to her from two books. Still, there was no sign of Richard.

I wasn’t about to send a nagging follow-up text, that might be awkward. Even though he’d been here for us throughout this ordeal, I tried to have no expectations of him,

his time, or his kindness. I didn't want Paris to be let down, though.

Thankfully, she drifted off before she could ask about him. But inside, worry gnawed at me. Despite our earlier talk, was his absence revealing his true colors? Once again, I doubted—whether he deserved it or not.

“What's wrong?” Keaton asked softly as he finished reading, noticing the scowl on my face.

I masked it with another yawn. “Nothing. I'm just tired.”

“Go to the suite and get some rest. I'll stay here.”

“No, that's too much to ask. You just got into town,” I objected.

“Yeah, and I still need to check in at Hops with my team tomorrow. But tonight, I'm here. So go on.” He settled into the sleeper chair.

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. Got this spot right here, and a remote control for the TV. A couple of cute nurses to flirt with if I get really bored. I'll be fine.” He stretched out his limbs for the night. “Ah, nice and comfy.”

“Your back won't thank you in the morning. Believe me, I know.” I chuckled and drew a blanket over the top of him. “Thanks for being here. You can add ‘best brother’ to the list.”

“That's a given.”

“I'll be back early, hopefully before she wakes.” I kissed his forehead, gave my

precious girl one more glance, sent up a prayer for her to get better, and left.

The hotel was only a five-minute walk away, and I knew the fresh air and movement would do me well. I'd already changed out of my pajamas earlier and was glad I'd bundled up in a sweater and my winter coat. Spring couldn't arrive soon enough—but what would things be like for Paris by then?

A shiver ran down my spine, and I folded my arms as I quickened my pace. The biting cold helped distract me from my worries about her. I blew out clouds of breath as I hurried toward the hotel.

I assumed Richard would be there. Perhaps he'd dozed off and missed my text—I should give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, he had been so busy organizing surprises for Paris and the children, checking in with the doctors about her condition and tests, entertaining her alongside me, and fielding a constant stream of work calls.

I hadn't even asked him to put his life on hold for us, yet he had. That should mean something. So if he needed sleep, I couldn't really blame him; he'd already done more than enough for us.

As I ducked under the broad portico of the hotel, the snow began falling again. I saw a man and a woman exit the revolving front door and head toward a waiting car—and then I recognized Richard. I froze, watching him hug the woman and hold the door open for her.

“Oh, my God.” It was like Adrien all over again, catching him cheating red-handed. My heart couldn't handle it—I had no desire to repeat a relationship like that. Rage surged within me, and I shouted, “You jerk!”

“Vivian?” Richard's eyes widened as both he and his companion took notice of me.

“Guess you were too busy with your lady friend here to make it back to the hospital? Good thing Paris fell asleep and didn’t ask where you were. I can handle my own broken heart, but I’d never forgive you for letting her down and breaking hers,” I yelled. I wasn’t about to let another man deceive me again, regardless of how kind he might seem to my child.

“You must be the mother.” The woman nodded like she understood something I didn’t. “I’m Dr. Remington.”

Richard sighed and split the distance between us. “She’s my therapist—has been ever since I broke things off with my ex.”

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“What? But I saw you hug her.” I protested, not ready to forgive.

“So? My family has known her and her husband a long time. I sought counseling from her after I called off my wedding to Janet because I recognized I was in trouble. She’s helped me sort through a lot.”

I glanced between them, trying to process his words.

“Listen, just because I’m wealthy doesn’t mean I don’t have my own problems. Mental and physical health are vital. And ever since you and Paris came into my life, I’ve needed?—”

“I get it. We’ve been too much for you, haven’t we? Paris’ diagnosis is a lot to deal with, and you’ve stepped in, even offering to donate a kidney, which you didn’t have to. And now it’s causing you too much stress.” I suddenly felt terrible about how much our situation must be weighing on him, so much that he required his therapist. Then again, I could probably use one, too.

“Stop. I can handle that. What I can’t handle are the missing pieces of our first night together in Paris.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not only a therapist but a practicing hypnotherapist, too. Richard called me so we could work together to recover the memories that are missing for him... aboutyou,” the doctor explained, just as Richard finally closed the distance between us.

“I was drugged that night, Vivian. I think the bartender slipped something into my drink at Club Aces. Why, I don’t know? I have my suspicions.”

“Drugged?” She shook her head. “I’d heard Adrien’s parties were always a little wild. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“But the point is that my memories of our first night together are fragmented. The session ran longer than I expected. I’m sorry I missed saying goodnight to Paris. I promise I’ll be there when she wakes up in the morning.” Richard ran his hands down my arms, his eyes pleading for me to understand.

“But Richard, if you really wanted to know everything about our night in Paris, you could have just asked me.”

“I tried to tell him that, but Buchanan’s can be a stubborn lot,” the doctor interjected with a knowing smirk. “It could take two or more sessions for your memory to improve with hypnotherapy. Or one discussion with Vivian. It’s up to you. Either way, I’m heading back to the city. Call me if you’d like to schedule another session.”

With that, she slipped into the car and left. Richard gently took my hand and led me into the lobby, stopping just inside the threshold. “I know I could have asked you. And I will—but hearing a story isn’t the same as reliving it. I want to remember everything, to know exactly how it felt to kiss you for the first time under the Eiffel Tower.”

Stunned couldn’t begin to describe my reaction to this news. “That moment was incredibly special to me.”

“I recall things in fragments, but not the entire picture. Like kissing. I remember kissing a lot, but not our veryfirstkiss—the way your lips might have warmed to mine and how my heart would have leapt out of my skin at the first touch of you. And

pretty much everything we did in my bed at the hotel—gone.” He pressed a lock of my hair back off my face.

“Oh, Richard...” A tear welled up at how sad it was he couldn’t share the same appreciation for our night together.

“I recall one thing clearly, though. How you took my breath away the first time I saw you entering Club Aces, because you were so beautiful. I don’t think you know what simply looking at you does to me every day.” he whispered.

I shook my head. “You could have anything in the world you want, but hiring a hypnotist to dredge up memories of our first kiss? That’s so... so...”

“Silly, I know. I should have just asked you.” He turned and headed toward the elevator, but I caught up, stopping him in his tracks. I didn’t care that we were in the middle of the lobby with the night desk clerk eyeing us. Every moment counted now.

“If you’d let me finish, I was going to say that it’s incredibly romantic,” I explained, imploring him with my eyes.

“Yeah? More than a first kiss in Paris?”

“I think everything you’ve done this past week qualifies as romantic. And by the way, taking care of your mental health isn’t silly. I’ve never met a man quite like you.”

“Actually, you have met me before, and that’s the whole point. Things could have been so different between us. I want to go back in time and do it all over again, but better. Unfortunately, there haven’t been enough modern advances in time travel.” He chuckled, and wrapped his arms around me. “All I know is, I want you, Vivian.”

In that instant, the deep pull of longing that I’d been too afraid to acknowledge until

now took over.

“Yes, Richard, I want you too.” I ran my hands over his chest, clutching his shirt as if I’d lose him, but I couldn’t, not now, maybe never. “Kiss me.” I pulled him closer.

He murmured my name against my forehead, his full lips brushing softly there. My pulse raced with more feathery kisses landing along my cheek and jaw before he captured my mouth.

With the searing heat of pent-up desire, my heart thundered in my chest, almost tearing itself apart in its fervor. The kiss was raw, and charged with the electricity of words left unspoken for too long. I desperately hoped his heart mirrored mine.

He pulled back just enough to look into my eyes, as if seeing the truth between us. “Hell, yes. I feel it now.” He pulled me into his world, our tongues colliding in a fiery dance of exploration and need. As we plunged deeper into the passionate kiss, it left me breathless, dizzy with desire. I half expected to look up and see the Eiffel Tower magically lighting up again above us.

Suddenly, an angry voice shattered our special moment.

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“What ishedoing here? What is the meaning of this?” Adrien’s furious words broke our embrace. I blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear away a hallucination—but Adrien was very much real and present.

“W-what areyoudoing here?” I stuttered, scrambling to regain my composure. The last thing I expected was for him to show up here.

“I came to save my daughter,” he snarled. “You wanted testing,oui?”

Richard stiffened beside me, his fists clenching, speaking through gritted teeth, “Stay away from Paris.”

With a scowl, Adrien fired back, “You have no right to keep me from what is mine.”

On that note, he rushed out of the hotel into a waiting taxi.

13

THE TEST RESULTS

RICHARD

Vivian trembledbeside me as her ex stormed out of the building—her grip on my shirt tight and her breathing erratic. “Oh no, he’s headed to the hospital—I just know it. But Paris is sleeping—” she began, panic lacing her voice.

Before she could finish, I grabbed her hand and bolted. “Then let’s beat him there.”

My driver, dependable and waiting in the car parked across the portico, saw us coming, leapt in, and started the engine. Once inside, I barked, “That taxi that just left? I’ll double your pay if you get us to the hospital before him.”

“Yes, sir!” he replied without hesitation. He delivered on his promise, and we arrived with a minute to spare, sprinting out just as the taxi pulled up.

“Call security,” I ordered the nurse at the reception desk as we hurried past. “Send them to the purple floor.” Clutching Vivian’s hand, we raced up the flights of stairs, the ascent worse than the steps to the Montmartre in Paris.

Gasping for breath at the top, she cautioned, “He has a right to see his daughter, Richard. I’d just prefer he wait until morning when she’s awake.”

“I agree,” I replied, though inwardly, I wished I could keep him away forever.

At the nurses’ station, where some night nurses were talking with Keaton, their conversation halted in surprise at our frantic arrival.

“My ex-husband is on his way here,” Vivian shrieked.

“Adrien?” Keaton’s expression turned from confusion to anger as he pressed his fist into the palm of the other hand. “Great. Let me be the one to welcome him back to the USA.”

“Get in line, Keaton,” I snapped as, with Vivian between us, we formed a united front in the hall against the approaching threat. The elevator doors slid open, and Adrien stepped out, spotting us. He ambled forward with a cocky smirk, deliberately stalling the inevitable confrontation.

“Sir, are you a relative? We only allow relatives after visiting hours,” Sara, the head

night nurse, calmly addressed him.

“I am Paris Bardeaux’s father, and nothing will keep me from seeing her. Step aside,” he shouted, peppering his words with extra French slang.

“Please, Adrien. Paris is sleeping. You know she’s been ill and needs her rest. Let’s return in the morning so you can see her.”

Ignoring Vivian’s plea, he pointed at me. “Only relatives? He should not be here then.”

“His brother married my cousin, so he is a relative,” she explained to the nurse.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I hissed.

“And as her father, I have a say in who stays in her room, oui?” he demanded.

Sara shot me an apologetic look, as if my VIP status only carries me so far. “Yes, you do.”

“Then both of them need to leave,” he commanded, nodding toward Keaton and me.

“Wait a minute—I’m her uncle, directly related. I should be allowed to stay,” Keaton protested.

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Vivian's glare was sharper than any knife as she declared, "I have a say too, and they're both staying."

At that moment, a burly man in a blue jacket emblazoned with the word 'SECURITY' strode forward; his name tag read Floyd. "Hospital rules permit only one parent to stay overnight. You have five minutes to decide who that will be before I break up this little gathering," he addressed us sternly.

Adrien retorted, pounding his fist on the nurse's desk. "Je suis arrivé—I deserve to stay. I have not even seen my little Paris yet,ma fille!"

Vivian countered sharply. "Oh, now you suddenly care about her? Why haven't you been taking my calls?"

"Sir, you're not wearing the mandatory hospital bracelet for parents or guardians. I need proper identification before we proceed," Floyd demanded. I silently promised myself to give him a thousand dollars tomorrow for that reprieve.

While Adrien fumbled for his passport, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dr. Ferguson waving me over. I took Vivian's hand, and we shuffled toward him. "I was working late and couldn't help but overhear your conversation. We need to discuss something that directly impacts this situation," he began, adjusting his thick glasses.

"What is it, doctor?" I urged, keeping a wary eye on Adrien, although Keaton stood there solid and scowling, his arms crossed, watching the asshole's every move.

"Some test results came in tonight. I was going to wait until morning to share them,

but...” He flipped open Paris’s medical chart and continued, “According to the paternity analysis?—”

“Paternity?” Vivian interrupted, gripping my arm, worry etched on her face.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before now that I was having the doctor run the test. But I just had to be sure. I was a perfect match for Paris’ blood, so I couldn’t shake the thought. What if...?” I turned back to the doctor. “And the results are?”

He cleared his throat. “You are the father, Richard. No doubt about that.”

I expelled the breath I was holding, a broad grin spreading across my face as I whispered, “I have a child.”

“Oh, my God. I had no idea. I swear to you,” Vivian cried.

I pulled her into a tight embrace, as she murmured, “I went back to Adrien shortly after we were together... I just thought... but the timing... oh, my God.”

“Shh, sweetheart. It’s fine. The past is done. We’re here now and that’s all that matters. She’s mine. She’s really mine,” I reassured her, unable to wipe the smile from my face.

“What’s going on?” Keaton called over, prompting me to briefly let go of Vivian, though I kept a steady hold of her hand for reassurance.

Dr. Ferguson then announced in a clear voice, “The paternity test confirms that Richard Buchanan is Paris’s father.”

“Non, non! This is outrageous,” Adrien roared as he advanced on Vivian. I pushed her behind me, ready to defend. Only Floyd swiftly grabbed him and held him back.

Parents poked their heads out of their rooms, drawn by the commotion. I stole a quick glance at Paris' closed door, hoping she wasn't hearing any of this. What would she do seeing the man who was supposed to be her father reacting in such a way? Would she cry over him? Miss him? Feel abandoned when he left?

"Liar! La menteuse! You swore that you and Richard never slept together," Adrien bellowed, his face flushed with anger. It then took both Floyd and Keaton to hold him back.

"Sir, I'm going to have to remove you from the premises for causing a disturbance," Floyd commanded. Adrien's resistance proved strong, struggling against the big guard, when another guard appeared.

"I'm so sorry, Adrien." Vivian broke down into tears, dropping her face into her hands.

"You don't owe that asshole any kind of apology," I advised her.

"She is not mine? Then I want my money back. All of it or I will sue you, Viv," Adrien snapped.

I stepped forward, getting right up into his face.

"Money? Name your price and I'll have it transferred to you within the hour, but then you stay the hell away from us. Do you understand me?" I glared with steely eyes.

With a smug smirk, he declared, "Five million dollars."

A gasp came from behind me as Vivian interjected, "You never paid me that much—not even close. Twenty thousand over the past few years, if that. I can call my bank tomorrow and verify the exact amount."

“Non, this is for the deal you both ruined. Because Richard cancelled a lucrative deal with Club Aces that could have saved me from financial disaster, and I have not yet fully recovered.” He turned his glare on Vivian next. “And because you have only brought me bad luck since the day we met. So my price is five million. You pay, then I will leave the country tonight.”

“Five million? Done.” I shrugged at the amount, a drop compared to the wealth I’d amassed over the years and my family trust to boot. “I’ll get your number from Vivian and someone from my team will be in touch within the hour. Now get the hell out of my sight.”

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“Wait,” Vivian shrieked, moving toward him. “Adrien, for six years, my little girl knew you as her father. You can’t just leave tonight. Please, stay until the morning and say goodbye to her. We can all figure this out like adults. The most important things are for Paris to understand that none of this was her fault and not feel abandoned.”

He snorted and muttered French expletives under his breath. I understood Vivian’s plea, though I wished she hadn’t suggested he stay—as if I’d ever let him near my daughter, anyway.

“She is not mine. Why should I care to say goodbye?” he sneered, turning his back on the idea.

“You fucking asshole,” I snarled, clenching my fist, wanting to hurt him in the worst way. That wouldn’t do to start out as Paris’ father with an assault scandal on my hands.

Instead, I nodded at Floyd, who, along with the other guard, ushered Adrien away. I quickly texted my driver outside, instructing him to follow Adrien’s every move and report back hourly until he left the country for good.

Vivian reeled and collapsed into my arms, tears streaming down her face. I lifted her and carried her toward Paris’ room.

Keaton opened the door for us, and I stepped directly to the bed. “It’s going to be okay, Vivian. Look—there’s our daughter, our little sleeping beauty,” I whispered, trying to soothe her as I gestured toward our girl, curled up in a little ball in the center

of the mattress.

“I’ll give you some privacy,” Keaton said and headed back out. I could hear him addressing things with the nurses while I sat down on the sleeper chair with Vivian on my lap. As she wept, I held her close.

Nurse Sara brought a box of tissues and a cup of chamomile tea, while Dr. Ferguson stopped by to reassure us that Paris would be fine and that children were remarkably resilient.

“I promise I’ll get the best referral from Dr. Remington for child therapists for Paris if she needs it. But she won’t miss Adrien. You’ll see. I’ll be the best father she’s ever had. She won’t even remember him.” I vowed to back up every promise. “Please don’t be upset with me. I never would have broken the paternity news to you like that tonight. It all got out of hand with Adrien showing up.”

“Oh, no. I’m not upset with you. I’m furious with myself,” she admitted, clutching her chest and trembling. “How could I have been so wrong about who her father was? I was young and naïve then, blinded by what I thought was love. I bought every lie Adrien told me after I found out I was pregnant. Every promise he gave that he’d be better. I made such a mess of things.”

“Hey, I don’t think any less of you for the past, okay? There’s no way to change it. Will it be messy figuring all this out? Yeah. But we’ll survive it, baby—together. I’ll make sure of it. From now on, you and Paris have every Buchanan resource at your disposal.”

After a long pause, she lifted her head and met my gaze. “I don’t need every Buchanan. I just need you.” Her hand cupped my cheek, and I gazed into her bright blue eyes, a pair I could lose myself in forever. Exactly what I desired most.

I couldn't resist and gently kissed her lips. My heart beat wildly out of my chest the same as when we kissed at the hotel. "Was it like this the first time when we stood under the Eiffel Tower?"

"This was better." Her lips curved, her face glowed. I never wanted to forget this moment.

Footsteps approached, and Keaton appeared in the doorway. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

I waved him in, continuing to speak in hushed tones. "Did Adrien leave?"

"Yeah. Floyd said they got him into the taxi. Do you think we should call the police or get a restraining order?" He asked.

"I have my driver following him. We'll keep tabs on him until he's gone. We can call if there are any further problems, but I know he's money motivated. Once he has it in hand, I'm certain he won't bother us." I peered at Vivian in my arms, whose exhaustion from the day suddenly wore on her face.

"Five million is too much to give him." Vivian shook her head.

"But I would have given him my entire fortune, baby, just to make sure he disappeared for good."

"Everything?"

"It's only money." A man like me, with no money, but all the experience I gained, would be able to rebuild, without a doubt. I remained that self-assured. "You and Paris mean more to me than the balance in my bank account."

“You two have a lot to discuss. Go back to the suite. I’ll stay.” Keaton offered.

“Yes, good idea. I’ll talk to Nurse Sara about it,” she agreed, rising and moving to Paris’ side. She gently pulled the blanket over Paris, and together we admired our sleeping beauty.

“My daughter,” I whispered, the words so new to me.

“Ourdaughter,” she insisted, covering my hand with hers.

“Yes. Ours.”

14

DESPERATE MEASURES

RICHARD

Vivian sat across the room in the hotel suite, elegantly poised on the arm of the plush sofa as she gazed out the window at Albany's snowy landscape.

The moonlight caught her chestnut hair, making it shine—utterly captivating. Though we had finally found ourselves alone, she immediately asked for a glass of wine and a few moments to herself to decompress from the day.

I couldn't fault her; with Adrien's unexpected arrival, the heated confrontation, and the shocking revelation from the paternity test—a revelation that declared Paris as my daughter—anyone would be overwhelmed.

I had handled transferring the money to Adrien's account, and at last, my driver confirmed that Adrien had left the hotel and was en route to the airport. With him out of the picture, I could now devote myself to Vivian for the night.

She sipped her wine, crossing one leg over the other in a way that could make any man weak, but she was here with me, the only man she'd ever need, if I could convince her of that.

Aware of the charged silence between us, I casually set a copy of the paternity test results on the coffee table—a seemingly simple piece of paper that had changed my life in an instant. Paris was my daughter. Now it was time to claim her mother.

"Feeling better?" I asked as I stepped closer, hooking my thumbs in my belt loops.

“Yes,” she replied after another sip.

I leaned against the tall window, deliberately ignoring the view, and fixed my gaze on her.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a sly smile, raking her eyes down my front.

“I’m savoring this moment,” I replied, reaching for her glass and downing the last of the wine before setting it aside. Without resistance, she allowed me to pull her into my arms.

“Is that so? And what exactly are you thinking about?” Her tone was teasing, yet tinged with uncertainty.

“Not what. Who... We have an incredible daughter.”

“We do.” Her hands caressed up my arms and locked behind my neck. “I think she’s going to love having you for a father.”

“And she means everything to me. But so does her mother.” With a light touch, I traced my thumb along her jawline. “You’re so fucking sweet and sexy, Vivian, like the perfect cupcake.”

“Cupcake?” She arched her brow with a chuckle.

“That’s you. Miriam used to buy our favorite cupcakes for our birthdays growing up. I always scoured the box at first opening to find the perfect one to eat, and only that one. I wouldn’t touch the others.”

“Only the best for you? So spoiled.” She grinned and rolled her eyes.

“Damn right. And I’ve wanted you from the moment we met.”

“You had me once before.” Her pulse quickened under my thumb at her neck—a reaction that stirred a primal satisfaction within me. At long last, this mesmerizing woman was in my arms.

“Believe me, I’m overjoyed our first union gave us our precious daughter. Wish I could remember every second of it with you. Tonight, though, I’m aiming for mutual satisfaction—a night neither of us will ever forget,” I murmured softly while running my fingers through her hair. She leaned deeper into my caress.

“Only one?” She challenged me. Her intense gaze ignited a flame within me. That blend of defiance and vulnerability disarmed me completely. “If all you want is one night, we should stop. It wouldn’t do either of us any favors starting out having another one night stand. We have our daughter to think about. She has to be our priority.”

“You’re misreading my intentions. I told you before. I want you. A second chance at something real.”

After a prolonged pause, she said, “It won’t be easy for me to trust again. Look at how quick I was to jump to conclusions when you walked your therapist to the car.”

“I’ll make it easy for you. Whatever it takes. Tonight isn’t one night, Vivian, but the first of many, if I get my way.”

“And I suppose you always do?”

“I rarely lose.”

“So I’m a conquest? A trophy to be had?”

“No, stop putting words into my mouth. You’re the mother of my child. I’m in awe of you, and have total respect for you. I’d give you and Paris a life you deserve, and I believe you know that. So if you would kindly set aside all your fears and give me a chance.”

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The corner of her lips curled up. “Tough negotiator, Mr. Buchanan.”

“Mr. Buchanan?” I questioned, although I liked her saying it. My desire intensified, cock thick and greedy, straining against my zipper.

“Not fair you calling me cupcake. So yes. Mr. B, you get a nickname, too.”

God help me if those words didn’t fire me up. I claimed her lips, pouring everything I had into a single, deep kiss.

"You think you're pretty irresistible, don't you?" she teased against my mouth, sarcasm melting into desire.

“Nothing would make me happier than knowing you’ve wanted me from the start, Vivian,” I growled. I turned her body around to face the window. She gasped when I placed both her palms on the glass above her head. My hands trailed down her sides, then with one I gathered her hair to the side, giving me access to the back of her neck. I planted kisses there, her soft moans like music.

“Tell me you’ve wanted me.” I wouldn’t give up pursuing this. Yes, I was spoiled—if by spoiled it meant I’d do anything to keep her and make her mine.

My other hand caressed the front of her, palming her nipples through the fabric of her sweater. I skimmed down her torso landing at the apex of her thighs, not deterred by her gasp—and she didn’t stop me.

Through her leggings, I rubbed her heated center, her body squirming at my touch.

She arched her ass against my cock her breath catching when she realized what I had waiting for her there. “Feel what you do to me? Tell me, Vivian. You’ve wanted me all this time. Say it,” I demanded.

“Oh, Richard... I have. I want you. Yes!” At last she let me in.

I let her hair go and snaked my arm around the front of her. I held her wrapped in my embrace, pressed against me, where I could claim her.

“Give Albany a good show, cupcake,” I dared her, reaching a hand under her sweater. I tugged down the cup of lace, kneading her breast. My fingers tweaked her nipple to a peak.

I shifted my fingers under the waistband of her leggings, into her panties. Skin on skin, her center hot as fuck. My fingers explored her slick seam, then strummed her clit. She cried out, grinding against my hand. Whatever friction she needed to achieve her first orgasm with me. First of many.

“I-I can’t believe we’re doing this here...” She moaned through her pants, fighting against her rising tide. “What if someone sees?”

“Let the world know how much I desire you. Come for me, Vivian.”

“Oh, God. It’s been so long?—”

“Use me then. Let yourself go and let me hear my name on your lips when you do.”

She clung to me tightly, her cries escalating from my relentless pursuit of her. As her breath hitched and then paused, she unraveled in my embrace, arching against me.

“Ooh, yes. Richard!” Her body became an earthquake, tearing down every last brick

of the wall standing between us.

“You soaked my hand. Beautiful, baby,” I kissed her temple, nuzzling my face next to hers and giving her a moment’s rest while I sucked and tasted her sweet nectar from my fingers. When done, she twisted her head and kissed me, tasting herself on me.

Swaying with her in my arms, I peered out at the moonlit night, the stars above and the world below. All the worries about our daughter’s condition still existed, but tonight my focus was on giving Vivian all the tender care she needed, too.

I turned her back around. “I’ll be wanting more tastes of you later. But right now, I need you,” I gave voice to the greed yearning for her had created, and ground myself into her.

“I need you, too.” On her invitation, we staggered toward one of the bedrooms, frantically kissing and shedding clothes toward inevitable surrender. Her sweater joined my sweatshirt on the floor, while my belt clattered near the door.

We both kicked our shoes off, but her leggings turned into a walking challenge as I attempted to remove them on the way to the bed. I nearly tripped her while tearing them off. Only her black bra and panties remained untouched.

I paused so I could appreciate the view of the lacy things I’d purchased for her to wear. “I hope you never get tired of me calling you beautiful.”

All smiles, she fumbled with the zipper of my jeans, then her hands wandered under my t-shirt to help pull it off. She bit her lip, lazily crawling her fingertips along the contours of my muscles.

“I remember this view—you are one sexy man, Mr. B. In fact, according to all the

nurses, you're a man they'd like to F-U-C-K."

I flinched from her tickles, chuckling, and grabbed her wrists. I pinned them behind her back, pressing her to me. "They'll never get a chance. All I see is you. You're it, Vivian. Remember? The perfect cupcake."

"I'd like to trust you." She kissed and sucked along my chest.

"Then do. I've wanted you from the moment we met. And something you should know. Whatever a Buchanan wants, they get."

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“Family motto?” She cocked her head.

“Pretty much. You might as well commit it to memory now, after all, Paris is half of me.”

“I seem to be learning a lot about Buchanans lately. Anything else I should know?”

“Yeah. To become one, we have an initiation where we make you drink the blood of a lion on a full moon night and pledge allegiance to the family crest.”

“What?” Her eyes widened.

“I’m kidding.” I backed her up to the bed until we tumbled onto it. Our breathless laughter mingled with soft moans as we adjusted amid the plush linens, a tangle of limbs and longing.

“You were far more suave in Paris last time, carrying me to bed and undressing me,” she teased.

“I’m more desperate to get inside of you this time. I won’t last long. If you can handle my impatience now, next time I promise to be twice as suave,” I murmured against her neck, savoring the sweet taste of her skin while hovering over her.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she replied, adding a moan of my name as I ground my hips into hers.

I moved lower, devoting my mouth and tongue to worship her breasts, her nipples,

and every inch of her. I trailed my fingers under her panties again, and along the seam from her slick entrance to her sensitive center. Then I shimmed her panties off, down her lean legs. I added my mouth to pleasure her there, tasting her again.

She gasped, “Oh, don’t ever stop,” as her hands played through my hair like her private playground, and pulled me deeper into her.

“Never stop,” I vowed, kissing the inside of her creamy thighs. “You’ve been all I’ve thought about. Out of my mind. Have to have you.”

I lavished her with my tongue until she came again. The taste of her was better than the finest cuisine; and I’d had the privilege of dining with some of the best chefs in the world.

Knowing how good I pleased her shot through me like a bolt of lightning. The tension coiled tighter inside of me, my cock in agony and in need of release. I undressed myself the rest of the way then caught her appreciative stare at my length and girth.

“Best view in Albany?” My coy grin locked in place as I returned on top, sliding her legs open with my knee.

“Yes, you are. Condom?”

“Damn. Right. Condoms. Hold on,” I quickly grabbed one from my wallet and sheathed myself, torn between spontaneity and caution. Although the image of her pregnant with our second child teased my mind, a distant possibility with our second chance...

“I’m on the pill this time,” she assured me, removing her bra. “Although I don’t know why, when I haven’t been with a man in so long. I’ve probably forgotten how.” Like arrows, that struck my heart and ego, setting my pulse on edge.

Our surroundings blurred. All my eyes could focus on was her radiant beauty in the center of the bed, and the apex of her thighs.

Tonight, I needed to be joined with her.

I pressed the head of my arousal against her warm center, inching in through her wet walls. My cock stretched her, eager for our bodies to reacquaint. Her ragged breaths dialed me in how far to push. Once seated inside of her fully, I had little control left, squeezing back the urge to release. All of her so familiar, like I'd found my way back to our one special night in Paris.

Between our fervent kisses, I growled into her mouth, "Fuck, you're perfect for me, Vivian. Such a good girl for me..."

She moved with instinct, rocking her hips against me as her feet dug into my rear, providing the leverage that made our passion all the more pleasurable.

With each thrust, every moan that escaped her lips unhinged me, the deep scratches of her nails on my back intensifying. Changing angles, putting one of her legs on my shoulder, I aimed deeper for that exquisite spot of hers, in and out, adding the pressure of my thumb to her clit.

"Yes, Richard," she chanted my name, as I coaxed her into deeper waves of pleasure, requiring another orgasm from her before I could claim my own.

Her heat set every inch of my skin ablaze as I drove into her, until her body arched, shuddering in response. My own climax chased hers like an all-consuming fire.

We were perfection together—in my mind, the only description for us.

We collapsed onto our backs, fighting for breaths. Catching her eyes, we laughed, the

first time all week I'd seen her this relaxed.

"You needed that," I teased.

"I did. You, too. And you provided, exactly like you've been there for me this whole time. You're too good for me."

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Up on my elbow, I kissed her. “I’m giving you everything you deserve. Be right back.”

I quickly cleaned up in the bathroom, then brought a washcloth back to bed and cleaned her, too. With her as my little spoon, where she fit perfectly under my chin, we rested. She fell asleep quickly, no surprise given the strain she’d been under lately.

The past seven years were nothing more than a detour in our timeline we were never supposed to take. But tonight we put everything back on track.

15

MAGICAL NIGHT

RICHARD

Vivian shifted closer, her eyes opening slowly with a sleepy sweetness that promised comfort. I could have woken up every day to those mesmerizing blues.

“Good morning. Looks like there’s no walk of shame today,” I teased in a husky tone, reaching to tuck her hair from her eyes.

“I woke a little while ago and thought about escaping,” she replied coolly before a chuckle escaped her.

“Not this time—you won’t escape me. I’ll never let you go,” I assured her as the soft

sunrise peeked through the window.

She snuggled against me and yawned. “What time is it?”

“Early. We have an hour before Paris wakes up.”

“I should go and clean up,” she noted, though she made no move to do so.

“Before you do, can I ask you something?” I adjusted our position so that her head rested easily on my shoulder, then finally posed the question that had been on my mind. “Help me see what I’m missing about our night in Paris?”

She looked up, a gentle hand trailing down my cheek and neck until it rested just above my heart. “You really want me to tell you?”

“Yes, please. I want to hear it from your point of view.”

She nodded and intertwined our fingers. “That night, you were everything I needed as a young woman, desperate to escape Adrien. Your strength carried me, and your words had the wisdom of someone older and more experienced.”

I scratched at the scruff along my jaw. “I don’t know about that. For years, I beat myself up over how my ego got the better of me trying to do that deal with that asshole.”

“To me, you were exactly the man I needed that night. As we walked beneath the Eiffel Tower, the magic of moonlight, the charm of Parisian streets, your confident presence and encouraging assurances, mixed with my desire to get back at Adrien for the way he cheated on me—it all made it inevitable that I ended up in your arms, kissing you. The twinkling lights above on the tower felt like a sign that we were meant to be together that night.”

“Get back at him?” I asked.

“It was a choice I made. Not only did you have me feeling so good, but I was driven by a need to get back at him. Adrien had made me feel worthless with his cheating, and you were his complete opposite—gentle, considerate, and incredibly sexy. How could any woman in my situation say no to your charms?”

“I’m glad now that you didn’t, because we have Paris.” I pressed her hand to my lips with a kiss.

“You’re not upset about how I used you? Trust me, that’s not who I am. I’m not that type of person.”

“Hey, I know the person you are. The circumstances played a big role.”

“Not that it makes a difference, but I never mentioned about us to him. I only said we talked. I couldn’t bring myself to be spiteful and reveal we were together—our time was too precious to me to tarnish it. Didn’t want the memory to be spoiled.”

“See, I knew it. My sweet cupcake.” I hugged her closer and kissed her forehead. “I just wish you hadn’t left me the morning after.”

“I knew nothing serious could develop since you were returning to the States.”

“I could have come back often—set you up in a lovely apartment, taken good care of you.” I shook my head at what might have been.

“But my focus was on my education—studying under a famous chef and building my culinary career. I had fallen in love with France and wanted to stay, even amidst the turmoil of dealing with Adrien. And despite my special night with you, I couldn’t shake him from my mind.”

My jaw tensed at the repeated mention of his name. I wished I could erase it completely, to make her forget him.

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She sighed and continued. “After our night together, the very next day, Adrien pleaded for forgiveness.” She brushed a tear from the corner of her eye. “A few weeks later, after relentless groveling, daily flower deliveries, and dates, Adrien won me back. He promised to change and hurt me no more, so foolishly, I returned to him. Then I discovered I was pregnant. The timing was so close that I convinced myself the baby was his. He proposed immediately, and soon we were married.”

“Why didn’t you get a test to be sure he was the father?”

“If only I had. I wouldn’t have had to deal with him.”

Or take his last name, which bothered me to no end.

“And you divorced him—what happened?” I asked, though it pained me to delve into these memories.

“After we got married, Adrien showed his true nature. He lied, got aggressive with me during our arguments, and stayed out late into the night.”

“Wait. I don’t like hearing that. How aggressive? How did he mistreat you?” Every muscle in my body tightened on edge at the thought of what she endured.

“It only happened a few times when we argued.” She shook her head, clearly reluctant to say more, and I didn’t want to pressure her to relive any of it. “His business was struggling, and we were having a hard time. It was a stressful period for him.”

“That asshole doesn’t deserve your justifications for his behavior. Everyone deals with stress, and there are plenty of ways to manage it without taking it out on you.” I took her hand and kissed it. “If I’d known, I would have helped you leave.”

“He never really connected with the baby or embraced being a father. Every time he held Paris, she’d cry and cry. Eventually, he stopped trying altogether, and that added even more pressure on me.” She dabbed a tear from her cheek. “In the end, I realized I couldn’t stay with him. I couldn’t risk things getting worse or him ever endangering Paris.”

“I’m so glad you finally recognized that.”

“When I told him I wanted a divorce, he didn’t fight for me. And when I said I wanted to move back to the States with Paris, he didn’t contest it—like all he wanted was to get back to his life without a wife or child. Things have remained tense between us, but I did my best, for Paris’s sake, to keep some kind of connection.”

“That was far too generous of you.”

“Please, Richard, I did what I believed was best.”

“I’m not judging you. I’m incredibly proud of you for getting out of that horrible situation. Honestly, I beat myself up for not chasing you harder that morning. I truly think I could have given you a better life—if only I hadn’t been drugged the night before.” I massaged my forehead, lost in thought. “Vivian, during all your time with Adrien, did you ever hear about him using drugs for himself or getting involved in buying, selling, or passing them on to others?”

“I wasn’t really into the party scene, but he definitely was. Club Aces was all the rage for concerts, wild parties, and celebrity sightings, but when I met him, it was at a quiet garden party hosted by the parents of the chef I studied under. Adrien’s parents

were friends with them, and he appeared a clean-cut young man making his mark in business. We began dating, and his parents really took to me, especially his mother. A few months later, he invited me to move in, and that's when I saw his double life—the polished version he showed to his family and the darker side immersed in the party scene.”

She stared up at the ceiling and sighed. “So yes, drugs were in the picture. I'm pretty sure he used them recreationally, although I'm uncertain about any buying or selling. I'd heard some people say that Club Aces was the go-to spot if you were looking to score any kind of drug imaginable. Over time, he'd become an embarrassment to his mother who was a devout Christian in social circles.”

“You know the authorities eventually raided his club, right?”

“I'd heard about it. By then, I'd already left him. I was making plans to return to the states.” She exhaled deeply and sat up straighter. “Looking back, I can hardly believe that life with Adrien was my own—it felt like it belonged to someone else.”

I couldn't bear another minute of her dwelling on that prick. I shifted, positioning myself over her. “Enough. I've heard all I need about him. You have to believe that I would never treat you like he did, and I'll prove that every day. So, tell me what it takes to erase him from your memory forever—I'll do anything you ask.” I trailed kisses down her neck, lingering over each breast as her soft moans filled the space.

“Tell me, cupcake,” I growled, pressing further until my mouth found her clit, my tongue seeking through her folds...

“Memory of who? What? All I see and feel is you, Mr. Buchanan. Yes, right there,” she whimpered, clutching a handful of the duvet and arching her back. I added my fingers for her pleasure—curling them, stroking her, never relenting until she came undone on my tongue. “Do you want to spoil me? Give me more of that.”

“Fuck yes, Vivian. I’m giving you my all.” I aligned my cock and thrust into her wet center, holding there bare, desperate for every inch of me to satisfy her deepest desires so that she’d never yearn for another man.

16

FIND A WAY

VIVIAN

After our intimate night together, Richard and I walked hand in hand into the hospital, the sunlight on my face like a new day with him beside me. Once we were riding the purple elevator to the Pediatrics unit, though, I drifted away from him, as reality grew closer.

“We probably need to figure out how to tell Paris about you, about her father,” I said.

“And about us,” he replied. He gave me a puzzled look.

“I think we should wait to say anything.” I peeked up. His face flushed with confusion and hurt. Quickly, I outlined my reasoning. “Paris has been through so much. I worry for her well-being.”

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“She’s tougher than you think,” he insisted.

“This has all happened so quickly. I just need time to catch up and decide how to explain this to her.”

“Don’t I get a say about it, too, as her father?”

“Of course you do, but please, let’s hold off for now. We can talk about it later today and figure out how to tell her together.”

“Okay, cupcake. I’ll follow your lead—for now.” He nodded, a skeptical smile touching his lips as he used my new nickname while we stepped off the elevator.

I grinned at the affectionate term, remembering our passion of the night before, yet a pang of guilt hit me for asking him to delay something so important, especially knowing how happy he was at finally having a daughter. I needed to come to terms with everything first, and for her sake think of the best way to do this.

Soon we reached Paris’ room and Dr. Ferguson emerged with a warm greeting. “Ah, there you are. I have more good news.” I peeked into the room where Paris enjoyed breakfast with her Uncle Keaton.

“Okay. Can’t wait to hear,” Richard said on our behalf.

“The test results are in. After consulting with my staff, we’ve determined that your kidney is the ideal match for Paris. As soon as you’re ready, we can begin preparations for the surgery immediately.”

At first, Richard just stared, unblinking, his eyes wide with disbelief at the news. Suddenly, pure joy overtook him; he burst out laughing, clasping his hands together and raising them to the heavens like in prayerful gratitude, while I hesitated. Yet, wasn't this exactly what I had always secretly wished for—a partner with whom I could share this journey instead of facing it alone?

Richard swept me up in his arms and spun me around. “Hear that, cupcake? It's me. I can save her.”

“Why did you call Mommy cupcake?” came Paris' curious question from the doorway. Quickly, Richard set me down as we exchanged a look. When I didn't reply immediately, he added, “Well, she bakes cupcakes—I thought it was a perfect nickname.”

“Do I have a nickname?”

“Why, yes. How about my little explorer? After all, once this is over, we're going to take you on a world tour.”

“Okay, yippee,” she beamed and clapped, returning to her breakfast.

Perhaps Richard was right that Paris would take the news well. Out with the old father. In with the new, fun, and better one.

“You know what I think?” Richard said, wrapping an arm around my shoulder as we watched our daughter with tender admiration. “She's far smarter and more capable of handling things than you give her credit for.”

“Yes, maybe so. Still, let's talk later, just the two of us. There's no rush, right?”

“Sure, but we're moving forward with the operation, aren't we? I just discovered

she's my daughter, and if I have a chance to save her and help her regain her health, I'll take it."

"Are you absolutely sure you're willing to donate a kidney for her? It's a major operation—the ultimate sacrifice for a little girl you're only just beginning to know," I said, needing reassurance that he truly understood the gravity of his decision.

"Time loses meaning in moments like this. Just like when I first saw you, the moment I met her, there was an unbreakable connection. Even though everything is new and uncertain, I'd fight in a heartbeat for you both to have the life you deserve." He caressed my cheek as he looked deeply into my eyes. "I've never been more certain about anything. She's my daughter, Vivian. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her—and you."

"I can't argue with that, can I? I'm sorry I hesitated for a moment. It's been such an ordeal?—"

"I know. Come here." He enveloped me in a comforting embrace. "Let me share your burdens. You're not alone anymore, remember?"

Tears welled in my eyes as I nuzzled close. "Yes, Richard, let's go ahead with the operation."

"Oh, cupcake, you've made me the happiest man alive."

"Are you two going to keep hugging all day or come eat breakfast?" Paris called from inside her room. We both laughed and joined her, and I instantly felt lighter, as though Richard had taken many years of worry off my shoulders.

As we finished breakfast, unexpected visitors arrived. Rex and Chelsea, with her friend Sophie from the city, along with Flora, too.

“Gramma!” Paris lit up at the sight of her and dove into her arms.

“I missed you, my little Paris-girl. I brought your favorite slice of strawberry pie,” Flora said, setting it aside.

“I missed you, too. Mommy, can I show Gramma Flora the playroom?” Paris asked. I nodded, happy to see the two reunited, and they went off to the common area to play.

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It was a joyful reunion, and I missed Chelsea terribly, hugging her tightly. “How were the Maldives?”

“Wonderful, of course. But that’s not important right now. Tell us everything. How is Paris? She seemed so happy to see us. What’s her current condition?” Chelsea asked as Rex helped her take off her coat. I couldn’t help but envy the glow on her face, fresh off their Maldivian honeymoon.

Under his breath, Richard whispered, “Should we share everything?”

“Share what?” Rex heard and raised an eyebrow at his brother.

I melted at the gleam in Richard’s eyes and the uncontrollable smile he wore—eager to announce to everyone that he had a daughter and was ready to save her life. Though I still needed time to prepare for the conversation we’d have with Paris, I nodded, approving this like it could be a practice round.

Together, we recounted every detail—from our first meeting in Paris, the situation with Adrien and the confrontation over the paternity test, to Richard’s suitability as her kidney donor.

When we finished, Rex remarked, “That is one hell of a story, brother. Miriam’s going to flip over having a granddaughter to spoil.”

My eyes widened; I’d completely forgotten Miriam was part of the package with Richard.

“She’s going to adore you both,” Rex quickly added, noticing my reaction.

“That’s right. She will,” Richard confirmed.

“Don’t worry about Miriam at all. I’m just happy to see the two of you together. I had a feeling things might work out,” Chelsea admitted with a sly smile.

“I must say, for the first time in a long time, I have a good feeling about things too,” I confessed, stealing a sideways glance at Richard. “But we’re still figuring it all out. So for now, please, let’s keep these details quiet. We’re planning how to tell Paris about her real father and the operation soon.”

His steady blue gaze assured me, whispering, “I think this is the beginning of something great.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I glanced around at our supportive friends and family, everything falling into place—like not a thing could go wrong now.

“I just have one question,” Sophie piped up from the corner. “Aren’t you Keaton Kingston from *Brewed for Love*?” She gestured toward my brother, who flashed a smoldering smile in her direction.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I laughed. “There’s been so much news, I forgot the two of you hadn’t met. Keaton, Sophie is Chelsea’s friend from the city, and she works at an exclusive advertising firm there.”

“Oh really? Impressive.” Keaton’s smile hinted at a possible interest in her. I kept a chuckle to myself about my bachelor brother.

“Actually, I’m currently unemployed,” Sophie sighed. “I spent a fortune on my marketing degree from Columbia, jumped into the brutal world of New York

advertising, only to find the most unscrupulous companies—even if they were prestigious. So I left, and now I have about thirty days until my rent is due to find another job.”

“Oh honey, why didn’t you tell me earlier?” Chelsea said, placing an arm around her.

“And spoil your honeymoon? No chance. I’ll find something,” Sophie shrugged.

“Or I could whisk my wife away on another extended honeymoon sailing the world, and you could continue house sitting for us, saving you the hassle of your apartment,” Rex teased as he pulled Chelsea close.

“Another honeymoon?” Chelsea’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“Sweetness, I’d take a million honeymoons with you,” he flirted as he cuddled her.

The way Rex looked at Chelsea... I recognized the same intensity that Richard showed me. I always believed Chelsea was fortunate to have Rex—and perhaps now was my turn with Richard.

Richard’s hand drifted to the small of my back, sending a thrill that reached deep into my heart and soul. In that moment, my emotional walls crumbled. He could be the best thing in my life, right alongside our daughter, but I constantly pushed him away or second guessed or hesitated to go all in.

What if he was right about this being our second chance? Here we were, working together for Paris to survive. With a second chance, we could be so much more. If I didn’t take this chance now, another might never appear.

As the day wore on, Keaton eventually left for Holly Creek to tend to his business, although I noticed he exchanged numbers with Sophie—an interesting detail I’d

follow up on the next time I saw him.

Richard spoke with the medical staff and made several calls and arrangements that included having his personal physician and a renowned pediatric surgeon fly in for the transplant surgeries, which was so like him given his money and power to make it happen. But I understood how much comfort it brought him to know that only the best care would be provided for both him and Paris.

There were still a few days of pre-op testing before the operation could be scheduled. All of our friends and family wanted to pitch in, so Chelsea created a group calendar where they could each take turns to help watch over Paris. Richard and I wouldn't be overwhelmed on our own through this. Of course, with recovery for both father and daughter post-surgery, I'd be caring for two people, which made the calendar of helpers even more meaningful to me.

After dinner, Paris was so happy when her Gramma Flora agreed to stay overnight for a "slumber party" with just the two of them, giving us a break. Richard informed the nurses, and we prepared to leave, saying good night to our daughter together. Only I noticed Richard holding onto Paris a little longer than usual, the sight of them twisting my heart. I shouldn't keep Richard from telling her she's his daughter much longer. It wasn't fair to either of them; he missed out on her first six years of life. I wouldn't want him missing more.

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Back in the quiet space of the hotel suite, we settled onto the couch to talk, side by side, our thighs touching.

“Are you nervous about the operation? I’ve never been under. I had Paris naturally—a grueling four-hour labor,” I inquired, and I laced our fingers together, giving his hand a squeeze.

He shifted sideways to me, his other hand caressing the back of my neck. “I regret missing out on so many moments, like watching your baby belly grow and talking to our baby in the womb. I know I might have dreaded seeing you in pain during labor, but when our baby was born, it would have been the proudest time of my life.” He exhaled deeply. “Yes, I’m nervous. Going under anesthesia always carries a risk. Speaking of which...” he trailed off.

“What is it? Tell me.” I gently cupped his face, the worry wearing there. He rarely showed vulnerability like this.

“Vivian, what if something happens to me on the table?” he confided. “The thought of losing you and Paris terrifies me. I want to tell her everything before the surgery, so she understands who her real father is—should anything go wrong.”

“Stop. Nothing bad will happen.” My stomach churned at the very idea of losing him or her, but he was right. Paris needed to be told the truth.

“There’s more. I also need to call Miriam. I’m her son, so she’s bound to want to be there for my surgery. We can’t keep the news that I’m Paris’ father from her, either.”

I chuckled and rolled my eyes at his practicality. “As a mother, I’d expect to be there, no matter what. And I know how much Miriam loves her boys; I saw it throughout the wedding. You’re right. I know we have to tell her.”

“Good. Thank you for understanding.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek. “Now come here.”

I giggled as he lifted me onto his lap. “Big strong man. Showing off how you can handle me?”

“I’ll do more than that. I’ll take care of you in every way. Tell me what bills you have.”

“What?” I asked, shifting myself slightly from him in surprise.

“You and Paris will never have to struggle again. I swear it. Give me all your bills—expenses for the shop, anything you need. Whether it’s a remodel, an expansion, or that project you’ve always dreamed of; consider it done.”

“Richard, I can’t let you do that.”

His eyes studied my face in earnest. Then a smile grew slowly, ear to ear. “Every single time, you pass my test, Vivian.”

“Test? What do you mean?”

With tender fingers, he brushed through my hair. “My ex was only interested in my money. That made me wary of falling for anyone again. But here you are, and here I am, offering you my kidney, my unwavering devotion, all of my money—only for you to fuss about it. I practically have to coax you into accepting anything I want to give you. And that, my sweet little cupcake, means you’ve passed my test.”

He held my hands and squeezed. “Vivian, I’m falling for you.”

My heart melted at his sincerity. “Oh, Richard. I—” I started to echo him, but a deep-seated fear of repeating past mistakes held me back. Not that I thought he could be like Adrien and hurt me; it just wasn’t easy to trust again. Would I ever be able to let him in completely?

“It’s okay if you can’t say it yet, Vivian. I’ll wait for you. But while I do, know that I’m going to pay every bill of yours and spoil both you and Paris every chance I get. And you don’t have to keep thanking me. Just—find a way to fall for me, too. That’s all I want.”

Tears welled up again as the whirlwind of the week overpowered me. “Richard,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I never expected you to come into my life, but I’m so glad you did.”

“Me, too. God bless that beat-up van of yours for breaking down. I should have kept it after all, and gold plated that thing to keep around as a prized symbol of the second time we met.”

He had me in stitches with that.

“Oh, and cupcake? I have one more thing I’d like from you tonight.”

I smiled sweetly. “What could that be?” I teased, even though a playful hint in his demeanor suggested it was something more intimate—and I could feel it growing in his pants.

“I want to kiss you... Want to make love with you... Want to hear you come with my name on your lips...” He nuzzled my neck and softly grazed my earlobe, sending delightful shivers along my skin.

“I’m not stopping you from taking what you want,” I moaned, and probably never would. Talk about spoiled—the billionaire was used to getting his way.

“You’re mine, good girl.” He stood and carried me off to bed, laying me out gently, taking my breath away by the intensity of his eyes gazing deep into mine the entire way. “There my sweet. Did I fulfill my promise, doubling down on the suave moves?” He asked with a smoldering gaze while undressing me.

“Oh yes, Mr. Buchanan. You did very well.” All night long, I surrendered myself to him—believing each thrust of his cock like a fierce vow of loyalty for me, each passionate kiss a plea that we’d never let each other go.

TO TELL THE TRUTH

RICHARD

Vivian and I had been building toward this moment all day, exchanging those silent glances that only occur when the stakes involve life, love, and illness. We'd steal whispered moments whenever we could away from Paris, finally reaching an agreement—not just about the surgery, but about something even larger and more frightening.

Telling Paris the truth.

As a grown man, there was nothing that scared me more. What if she wept over losing Adrien as her father? What if she pushed me away? What if she couldn't understand, and her bright spirit began to fade?

But then again, what if the truth paved the way for something wonderful? Up close, I'd catch a spark of excitement in her eyes when I spun tales of adventures. When she said my name and giggled, her sweet little voice called to me.

I saw the truth in the way I watched her sleep, hoping she'd dream of faraway places I longed to show her someday. All this time, she had been a part of me—a piece of my heart—yet so far away.

And now, we were about to change everything.

Vivian stood by the window in Paris' room, cradling a cup of decaf. Paris lay in bed

with her favorite blanket—a pink one adorned with a pony, so worn it'd been lovingly mended by Vivian.

Paris' legs jiggled under the covers as she tapped away on her tablet, working on assignments sent by her teacher at Holly Creek, trying to keep up with her class.

“Vivian,” I said softly as I approached her, “it’s almost dinner time. We should tell her.”

She set her mug down and nodded—half terrified, half ready.

Paris had been in good spirits, a little tired, but less pale. That small miracle alone fed hope into my heart that we'd all make it through this.

“Ma chérie, Richard and I want to talk to you about something. Have you finished what your teacher sent?” Vivian began, glancing at her work. From where I stood, I noticed she had picked out all the letter B's from the alphabet soup picture on the screen—B for Buchanan, as if fortune were smiling on me.

Paris shrugged, setting her tablet aside and sitting a little straighter, her fingers neatly interlaced in her lap like a miniature adult.

Vivian settled at one side of the bed, gently running her fingers through Paris's hair in slow, soothing strokes. I stood beside her, unified in our purpose.

It was Vivian who started, “We told you that the doctors are going to help you feel better soon, didn't we?”

Paris nodded solemnly. “To fix my kidney?”

“Yes,” Vivian confirmed. “And we also explained that someone very special would

give you a new kidney to help your body heal. That special someone is Richard.”

Looking at me, Paris furrowed her brows as she asked, “You’ll make me all better?”

“That’s right,” I replied, my throat thick with emotion. “I have two kidneys, so I’m going to give you one.”

“Will it hurt me?” she asked quietly, her voice suddenly small.

Vivian reached out, brushing her thumb softly across Paris’s cheek. “You’ll be asleep, darling. The doctors will make sure you don’t feel anything, and when you wake up, you’ll be stronger.”

Pausing, she asked, “Like a superhero?”

“Even better,” I said. “You’ll have my kidney, plus you’ve already got my Buchanan blood. You’ll heal quickly.”

Her wide eyes locked on mine. “Does it hurt you to give me your kidney?”

I couldn’t hide the truth from her. “It might hurt a bit, but you’re worth it. I’m brave and strong—and so are you. We’re going to be just fine.”

She sat quietly for a moment, like a tiny philosopher in a pink bathrobe, weighing every word. Then she nodded. “Okay.”

She picked her tablet up again, but Vivian’s gentle hand paused her motion.

“We have one more thing to tell you, *ma chérie*,” Vivian said, her voice trembling slightly as she smiled. I placed a supportive hand on her back.

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“Paris, I’m giving you my kidney, but there’s something else: I’m your real father. I have been since the day you were born.” I paused, waiting for her response.

She blinked once, then again, her small hands falling silent on her lap. “But I have a daddy. He’s in Paris.” She could have twisted a knife into me, it hurt to hear.

“We thought Adrien was your father for a long time, but the doctors discovered he wasn’t,” Vivian explained, her fingers curling around the edge of the blanket.

For a moment, silence hung in the air as I waited for her reaction. “Is that why he doesn’t like to see me?”

Vivian made a soft, broken sound and covered her mouth, as if holding back tears. Paris must have picked up on how things were more than we realized.

I took over. “Adrien was simply busy all the time and lived far away from you, so it wasn’t easy for him to spend time with you. But now that the doctors confirmed that I’m your real father, You’re my daughter, Paris. I’m here and I’ll make time for you every day.”

Paris looked at me, head tilted in confusion. “You’re my real daddy?”

“Yes, I am, sweetheart,” I said, my voice pensive.

Then her face lit up with a bright, infectious grin that filled my heart and soul. “I’m glad it’s you. You’re so fun. I was already pretending you were my daddy in my head.”

I pressed a hand against my heart, leaned forward, and kissed the crown of her head, my lips lingering against her soft curls.

“Now you don’t have to pretend anymore,” I whispered.

“So I can call you my daddy?”

“Yes, sweetheart. May I have a hug?”

She climbed out of bed and wrapped her arms around me. “Mommy needs to hug us too.”

“Absolutely,” I pulled her in with us, and in that moment, I knew that no matter what lay ahead—surgery, pain, healing, or happiness—we had already won.

Our bond would always find a way. Father. Daughter. Mother.

I finally picked up the phone and called Miriam. When she answered, I launched right in. “Mother, I have news. Turns out I have a?—”

“Richard, darling, perfect timing. I have Patricia Mason on the other line. Hold please and I’ll have my assistant connect our calls together.”

“No, Mother don’t—” A frustrated sigh released from me hearing her click away. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

Rex heard it all as I had her on speaker, and he chortled sitting by the window. Thankfully I made this call from his and Chelsea’s room at the hotel, while the women hung back at the hospital, playing with Paris.

“Since when has Patricia become involved in this?” Rex arched an eyebrow at the

mention of the matchmaker. Miriam had threatened us both with the idea of using her at one time or another over the past few years.

“I blame you for being the perfect son, getting married and having a million dollar wedding. My jealousy came out, okay? I told Miriam at your second nuptials in Holly Creek I’d be willing to try.” I flipped him off for good measure, and he continued to snicker about it. “Of course now I don’t need help. I have a daughter.”

“You have a what?!” Miriam shrieked into the phone. I gasped.

“Oh, shit,” Rex doubled over, snorting, laughing, covering his mouth with his hand. I threw the nearest thing at him—a pillow—lucky for him it was a soft object. He used it to muffle his guffaws.

“Uh, Mother... I didn’t realize you were still on the line. Are we patched in to Patricia?” I asked.

“Hello, Richard. I’m here. Having a daughter is a new development. Shall I change your profile status on our database to single father?” Patricia’s Northeastern elite accent elocution formed perfectly around each word, as she clued in quickly to the situation.

“Yes—er, no. I don’t actually need a profile anymore. You see, I’m falling for someone. So... Thanks for your services anyway, Patricia,” I exclaimed.

“Oh. Okay. Well, if your situation changes, reach out. Otherwise, Miriam, congratulations on both your sons finding love. I’ll close out the account and send you my bill. Ta ta for now.” She clicked off the line, leaving absolute dead space behind. I wouldn’t be surprised if Miriam had hung up.

“Mother? Are you there?” I asked.

“I’m trying to understand, Richard. I really am, and very calmly, too. Aren’t I, Mr. Astor?”

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I pictured her quiet, unassuming husband sitting beside her with his nose in the Financial Times without a care as to what we were on about.

“I’m literally sitting here appreciating the view out our veranda at the Hamptons, letting the waves crashing on the shore soothe me into a false sense of calm. Oh, excuse me for a moment. The maid just brought me a fresh martini and I think I need to guzzle it to get through the rest of this conversation.”

I slapped a hand to my forehead at her dramatics. Rex practically died, trying to catch his breath from whatever humor he saw in this situation. At least one of us found it funny.

“I’m back. Now, let’s start over shall we? So... Hello, Richard, what’s new with you?”

“Uh, well, it’s an interesting story, Mother. You see, it turns out that I met Vivian seven years ago in Paris. We, uh, had a lovely night together that resulted in her pregnancy. And I just found out her daughter is mine. A paternity test proves it.”

“Mm-hmm. Vivian who, darling? Do I know her family?”

I stuttered. “Miriam... Vivian from Cupcake Cottage. You remember her? With a daughter? Cousin to Chelsea?” I spelled it out for her.

“The cake lady?” She asked, sounding horrified.

“Vivian. And her daughter’s name—ourdaughter’s name—is Paris, and she’s

precious, beautiful, smart. And Vivian is very special to me, too. I'd like you to meet them. I mean, I know you met them during the wedding planning for Rex's wedding, but things are different now."

I paused waiting to gauge her reaction, but all I heard was a sniffle and the sound of tissue rubbing against the phone.

"Yes. You're a grandmother. And she's six and already has the Buchanan penchant for adventure and exploring the world. You'll love her..." I hesitated. "And if you don't, well, it doesn't matter. Because I love her and she's mine, and I'm going to spoil her for the rest of my life, and hopefully her mother, too, with or without you."

"Obviously I'm shocked, but I'm also happy for you. I really am." She cried. "Oh my goodness, did you hear that, Mr. Astor? We have our first grandchild. And it's a girl! Oh, I cannot wait to take her to high tea at the Plaza. Treat her to a spa day with my other friends and their granddaughters. How soon can I meet the little one?"

I could tell Miriam was getting into it now, but... "Here's the thing. She's sick and needs a kidney transplant."

Mother gasped, and I proceeded to fill in certain details from the week, leaving her sobbing by the end.

"Oh, darling, I hope you're doing everything you can for her? Sparing no expense?"

"Of course I am. And I'm donating my kidney to her. The surgery is set for two days from now."

"What? We'll be in Albany tonight. Pack your bags Mr. Astor." She quickly hung up.

Subdued now, Rex sauntered over and clapped me on the back. "That went better

than I expected. Are you okay?"

"I will be. I just need Paris to survive this, and I hope her body won't reject my kidney."

"You're my hero, man. I know everything will turn out fine. And by the way, you're the one I should be jealous of. The first Buchanan grandchild for Miriam is quite an honor. Of course, I figure that let's Chelsea and me off the hook for pressure from her to have a child. Judging by Paris' cuteness factor, I'd say we have at least two years until Miriam pressures us again. High-five for more honeymooning for me!" He held up his hand with a cocky grin.

"Asshole." I brought him in for a quick hug instead. "Thanks for being here for me."

"Always, brother. Let's head back to the hospital."

I breathed deeper, releasing the worry over Miriam, and Paris accepting me as her father. Now the countdown to the operation started, and I still had a couple more things to work out with Vivian.

18

MIMI IN THE HOUSE

VIVIAN

I paced the hospital room while we waited for Richard's mother to arrive. "Should I be nervous about this meeting today?"

"Relax. You met Miriam while working on Rex's wedding. You know how she is." Richard sat calmly in a chair, unfazed by this.

“That was different—I provided a service. I only got the wedding cake contract because I’m family, and Chelsea insisted on it.”

“I’m sure Miriam enjoyed your cake. I can still hear her telling her friends, ‘The cake is moist,’” he mimicked her tone, then rolled his eyes and added, “Listen, don’t worry about Miriam. You don’t have to pass her approval in order to be in my life. You are in my life, and Paris. There’s no way I’ll let either of you go. Besides, all of this is worrying over nothing because Miriam will adore you two. And she’s going to spoil Paris like crazy.”

“How can you be so sure?”

He held up a finger. “One: Paris is her first granddaughter and she’ll stop at nothing to parade the little darling around to all her friends.” He held up another finger. “And Two: Sheraised two boys, so trust me when I say that Paris is going to get everything the little girl’s heart desires from her grandmother.”

“I don’t want Paris spoiled with things. I just want her to be loved.”

“How about both? Because once Miriam meets our girl, there’s no limit to her spending money on her, but only because she’ll love her. Okay?” He came forward and cupped my face.

“If you say so.”

“And as for you, my sweet cupcake...” he kissed me, “If I care for you, that’s all that matters. You have that mix of small-town charm from Chelsea and a hint of Parisian sophistication. Miriam will welcome you with open arms. Can you trust me and let go of your worries?”

I nodded just in time, as the rapid click-clack of high heels approached down the hospital corridor.

Miriam Buchanan-Astor entered as if gracing a red carpet, fully expecting adoration. Dressed in true city style—from her elegant heels and chic frock with matching coat to the designer scarf casually tossed over one shoulder—she commanded attention.

Trailing behind her was a man carrying several packages. I recognized him from Chelsea's wedding. He'd been introduced as Miriam's second husband, Mr. Astor. I found it interesting when Chelsea mentioned how he adored Miriam, but preferred to let her always take the spotlight, as if he could even steal it from her. He set the packages down by the fort in the room's corner, then waved hello at Richard and me.

"Where is my granddaughter?" Miriam asked, fluttering her long eyelashes as she breezed past greetings and pleasantries.

"She's studying with a math tutor in the common room. We're trying to get her caught up on what she's missed at school since this all began," I explained, drawing attention to myself.

Miriam appraised me with a once-over. I silently congratulated myself for wearing the cashmere sweater dress, booties, and a stylish scarf draped at my neck—all thanks to the wealthy man by my side. I hoped my outfit would help make a good impression.

"Vivian, my dear, just look at you," she cooed as she extended her hands, which I took warmly. "Ever since we met at your lovely shop in Holly Creek, I admired your style and your delectable confections. When Richard spoke about you and Paris, my heart practically burst with joy. I'm so happy for both of you." She then produced a tissue from her designer purse and dabbed her nose.

"Thank you. It's nice to see you again, Miriam," I replied politely, keeping things cordial

Turning to Richard, she added, "And you, my brave son—sacrificing a piece of yourself for your new daughter? I couldn't be prouder! Your father would have been, too."

“Thanks, Mother. I’m happy you’re here.” Richard embraced her before returning to stand by my side.

She murmured a concern, “Though I worry about you and this surgery, darling.”

“The tutoring time is nearly over. Let me go fetch Paris,” I said, relieved to step out as Miriam’s signature Chanel perfume filled the room. Even though Paris and I had spoken earlier about the situation, I wanted a few more minutes to remind her what to expect.

Finding them at a small table and chairs in the common room, I lingered near Paris and her tutor, happy to see the little one quickly grasping basic first-grade addition and subtraction. I hoped this academic disruption wouldn’t cause her being held back a year.

Once the lesson ended, Paris hugged me, and I crouched down to her level. “Remember, Richard’s mother is visiting. Her name is Miriam—you met her at my shop. I know you’ll be on your best behavior. She’s going to adore you, okay? So, no worries.”

“I’m not worried, Mommy. Is she like Gramma Flora? Look, I even drew a picture for her,” Paris said with adorable pride, showing me a drawing that looked like an apple pie with smiley faces. Oh no. Paris might expect Miriam to be the warm, homely Flora versus the sophisticated Miriam. I hoped she could grow to love both.

“Lovely. We can give that to her later. Right now, let’s meet Miriam, okay?” I took Paris’s hand and led her back to the room. Initially, she hid a little behind me.

Miriam bubbled with excitement, “There you are! I’ve always longed for a little girl in the family. Paris, ma petite, sais-tu à quel point tu es spéciale?”

My daughter's face lit up. "Tu parles français aussi?"

"Mais, oui," she replied.

Shockingly, Miriam spoke nearly perfect French. Did Richard? By his puzzled expression, it suggested he did not, so I translated: "She said, 'Do you know how special you are?'"

"That's right—because you're my first Buchanan grandchild. Very special indeed." Miriam clutched her heart.

"Gramma Flora doesn't know any French," Paris noted.

"But she can bake delicious strawberry pies," I reminded her.

"Well, we all have our own talents," Miriam replied. "Now, Paris, why don't you come up here? I brought some gifts just for you." With a manicured hand, she patted the hospital bed and motioned toward a neat pile of wrapped boxes, well experienced in how to bribe a child to do her bidding.

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Paris's eyes went wide at the sight of gifts wrapped in shiny pink and gold paper with exquisite ribbons. They were almost too pretty to open.

Richard interjected playfully, "Come along, sweetheart. Miriam is my mother, and believe me, she won't bite." He gently took her hand, escorted her to the bed, and helped her climb up.

"Mr. Astor, if you would please," Miriam called, removing her scarf and coat and placing them neatly on a chair.

After he set down the packages on the bed, Mr. Astor smiled and said, "Hello, little miss. Nice to meet you," extending his hand for a brief shake.

"Pleased to meet you, sir." Paris showed off her manners and I beamed with pride.

"That's Mr. Astor, my husband—call him Mr. Astor. Everyone does. And as for me, how about you call me Mimi? Since you already have Grandma Flora," she joked.

Paris giggled. "Mimi? I like that name!"

"Then it's settled. And I must say, I love your pajamas," Miriam added, admiring the pattern of the Eiffel Tower printed on them. "Each gift is numbered. Can you find number one?"

The game began, and Paris excitedly uncovered each package—from one to ten—with a little help from Richard when needed. By the end, she had unwrapped a Barbie doll with several outfits, a Barbie car, and, as the last surprise, a Barbie horse,

which quickly became her favorite.

“Ma chérie...Wasn’t it so kind of Miriam to give these to you?”

“Thank you so much, Mimi,” Paris responded, kneeling on the bed and opening her arms wide for a hug—which Miriam was more than happy to give.

“That was very sweet of you, thank you,” I said, adding my gratitude. Miriam dabbed a tear from the corner of her eye, clearly delighted.

“Now, let’s have a little chat,” she said as she settled into a nearby seat while Paris continued playing with her new toys. “I would love to support a special interest of yours, so tell me—would you like to try dancing? Ballet?”

Paris scrunched her nose.

“Acting? Theater?” Miriam offered.

My daughter shook her head, and Miriam continued to suggest various hobbies until she mentioned pony camps and horseback riding lessons.

Paris gasped, “Oh, can I, Mommy? Can I have a horse? Daddy, can I?”

While I loved her calling Richard her daddy, a twinge of concern hit me about a horse of our own. Where would I possibly keep one? And as a single mom running a business, I already had my hands full.

Miriam practically leaped from her seat and hugged Paris tightly. “Of course you will have one. I promise you’ll have the very best. You can even start riding lessons this summer once you’re feeling better.”

Paris clapped her hands and declared, “I’m so happy—I’m going to name my horse something really cute!” And just like that, she was completely on board with the plan. In true Buchanan fashion, everything moved forward fast, and I was powerless to stop it.

Miriam clutched her heart. “You’re a true horse girl, just like I was. Believe it or not, I almost made it to the Olympics in dressage.”

“What’s dressage?” Paris asked innocently.

“It’s all about achieving perfection on a horse. When you come to my home, I’ll dig out my old awards and photos to show you. I have a video or two as well. I was quite good in my day and earned many blue ribbons and silver cups in competitions.”

Horses, riding lessons, competitions—the idea was extravagant, and luckily, the Buchanans had deep pockets because I couldn’t possibly afford such a hobby on my own.

“Vivian, I’ll need Paris’s blouse, pants, and boot sizes so I can order her riding habit today,” Miriam said, pulling a miniature gold-covered notebook and pen from her purse, waiting expectantly.

“Oh, she’s kind of in between sizes right now. Would it be best to wait?” I cocked my head at her.

“Nonsense. I’ll order a set now, another later, and anytime she goes through a growth spurt.”

I rattled off the sizes, all the while trying to imagine how much it would cost over the years, eventually giving up as the numbers grew into too many zeros.

Soon, as Miriam and Richard kept up a detailed discussion about barns, feed, and riding gear, I became dizzy and pulled out my phone. I snapped a quick photo of them and texted it to Chelsea. Since she and Rex had spent the morning at a hotel, we had this rare moment alone with Miriam. I captioned the photo: “When my daughter met her billionaire-fairy-grandmother.”

Chelsea: How was it?

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Vivian: They charmed each other, of course. And apparently we own a horse now. Send help.

Chelsea: Oh my! And how was my MIL to you?

Vivian: Miriam seems to have accepted me.

Chelsea: Yes! Welcome to the family.

I was about to complain that she was getting ahead of herself when I overheard Richard and Miriam speaking quietly nearby while Paris remained absorbed with her new toys.

“When will they move to the city?” Miriam asked matter-of-factly. “You know, to get Paris into all the best schools, put her on the waiting lists now. Of course, we’ve donated a fortune to a few over the years, so I could easily get her name to the top of a list with one phone call.”

“School? City?” I grabbed Richard’s arm, confused.

Miriam clicked her tongue and edged closer. “Well, of course, Vivian. I assumed you two had discussed some sort of co-parenting or custody arrangement. Living hours apart isn’t ideal.” She looked pointedly at Richard.

He quickly interjected, “That’s not important right now, Mother. We need to focus on the surgery and Paris’s health—everything else we’ll work out later.” He squeezed me and kissed my temple as if to reassure me she had misspoken. But it was too late;

my doubts resurfaced.

I trusted him, clearly too blinded by his attention to think things through about sharing custody and living arrangements and-and... horses.

I'd never had to share Paris before. With Richard would be one thing, but Miriam, too? And what about our life in Holly Creek? My shop? Paris' school friends?

The secure, small-town upbringing I had dreamed of for my daughter suddenly seemed threatened by these big-city influences.

19

FAMILY GAMES

VIVIAN

After lunch, Rex and Chelsea arrived and stayed with us for the rest of the day. It gave me a chance to slip Chelsea away to the empty waiting room down the hall and share my deepest worries about Miriam's visit.

"What if Richard and Miriam take my little girl away? Or what if they want her shuttled back and forth to the city constantly? They've got more money than I do to fight a custody battle," I confessed.

"You're being irrational. Richard wouldn't do that to you. Rex mentioned that all his brother ever wanted was to follow in their father's footsteps—business success with a loving family. Please, don't get so worked up," she urged.

"But Miriam can be such a force to reckon with."

“Believe me, I know. I survived an entire year of wedding planning while she kept butting in and giving orders at every opportunity. Once I finally stood up for what mattered to me, we began seeing each other as equals. Rex always has my back.”

“You’re lucky, Chels.”

“Rex loves his mom, but he loves me, too. Since I’m the one he sleeps with every night, he’s learned to side with me and keep me happy when it comes to anything with Miriam.” She smiled mischievously.

“That’s great for you, having Rex trained like that. I’m not so sure about Richard. When the topic of moving and Paris’ school came up, he just pushed it aside to talk about it later—he didn’t really stand up for me or ask what I wanted.”

“Then you need to have a conversation with him. Typically, couples have time to discuss and understand each other’s needs before having kids. You two have jumped a few steps by having a child first. Now, talk it through and figure things out.”

“You’re good at this.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve spent a little more time with the Buchanans than you have.”

“True. Any other advice?” She considered it for a minute.

“Deep down, I think Richard craves to love and be loved more than anything else. Trust that, and lean into it if you’re feeling something for him. Before long, you could have him eating wedding cake out of your hands.” She winked. I automatically pictured him naked, eating a slice of salted caramel cake from my hand. Not an unpleasant view of him at all.

I snorted. “There’s no way I’m ever having a big city wedding like you did. I mean...

if Richard and I were even... er, you know.”

She wrapped me in a hug. “Give him a chance, Viv. See where this goes.”

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When we returned to the room, we paused just inside the doorway to watch Rex and Richard play a game with Paris. They were acting out various words for her to guess, striking goofy positions, and soon everyone got involved, splitting into teams and laughing until time flew by.

Before dinner, Miriam and Mr. Astor had left, and after dinner, Flora and Sophie stopped by. The fun continued with a stack of classic board games brought in by the nurses.

“Mommy, this is so fun. It’s like we’re one big family on a game night,” Paris squealed. My heart tightened. It had been just the two of us for so long, but did she ever think about what it’d be like to have a full, loving family? A dad who was really present. More siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and even grandparents—never being alone and always having all the love and support she could ever need?

How could I be so stubborn, keeping Paris from experiencing the full family life the Buchanans could offer?

Richard squeezed my hand and asked softly, “Everything okay? You need to talk?”

I squeezed back and pressed my lips together. “Later, after she’s asleep.”

When it was time for everyone to go, I couldn’t thank them enough for making the day pass so quickly that I didn’t have time to worry about the operation scheduled for the next day.

Once it was just Richard, Paris, and me, we teamed up to get her ready for bed and

calm her down. He read her a story while I braided her hair. In between, there were plenty of snuggles and answers to her random questions about the surgery she'd face the following day, many of them repeats which I simply chalked up to her nerves.

She awed me with how calmly she handled it all. I wished I could trade places with her—to be the one going to sleep, cut open and stitched back up. Or maybe swap with Richard, so that it would be my kidney in her body instead of his. He kept saying how brave she was, thanks to his Buchanan blood, and that it made her stronger.

After lots of hugs and snuggles, I tucked her in with a brief prayer. Richard stood on the other side of the bed, gently smoothing stray hairs from her face.

With one hand on mine and the other on his, her eyes grew heavy as she yawned. “Mommy? Are we a family now with Daddy Richard?”

I choked up, biting back tears.

Richard met my gaze and nodded. “Is that what you want, my little explorer?”

Her answer came as a soft snore as she drifted off to sleep, but I was certain she would have said yes.

Quietly, we left her side and headed to the bathroom, keeping the door slightly open just in case she woke up and called for us. I barely had time to breathe before he pulled me in, his hand resting at the back of my neck, drawing my lips to his like he'd missed me all day.

I welcomed his embrace, craving more, but we still needed to talk. When he finally pulled away, leaving me breathless and speechless, he was the one with so much to say.

“I know you were upset about Miriam today, with all her talk of moving, changing schools, and custody. Ignore her. This is our life, not hers. I have no intention of taking our daughter away or disrupting what she has with you. I can see how much she needs you.”

“Oh, thank God. I thought you were agreeing with her when you said we’d talk later.”

“No. I meant that all decisions regarding Paris are between you and me as her parents. I won’t let my mother interfere. We’ll make our way, okay?”

I sighed, joking half-heartedly. “I thought I’d have to win the lottery to afford to fight you in court over custody.”

He seemed offended by this. “Do you really think so little of me that I’d do that?”

“No. It was a misunderstanding is all. I’m so happy we’re talking things out.”

“Vivian, I want the best for our daughter, and clearly what’s been working so far has made her the adorable and smart girl she is. All I ask is that you make some room for me. Whether it’s one night a week or more. Or if you want a real family, I’m here, ready to jump in.”

”Oh, Richard.” I kissed him again, and the doubts that had burdened my mind all day melted away. “Thank you. This means so much to me we’ve talked.”

“I know. And we’ll have more to figure out, especially once she’s better. Meanwhile, maybe this will help. Rex bought some property in Holly Creek as a wedding gift for Chelsea. They plan to build a house there so they can come up from the city whenever their schedules allow. The property is already divided into a few parcels, and he offered me one. I’m taking it and moving to your town to be closer to you. I run my business and all my investments and interests remotely from my home office

now. Doesn't really matter where that is."

"You're really moving?" I asked, grinning through happy tears. It had only been a short week since we'd reconnected, but a lifetime of emotions rushed in.

"Well, it might start as more of a camping setup until I can draw up plans, get permits, build a house—and I suppose even a barn for the horse—but I think Paris would love the outdoor adventure, if you two would join me there now and then."

I chuckled at how well he knew her so well, so fast. "She'll love it."

He drew me close, tucking me under his chin. "Imagine cozy campfires in the summer. The parcel I'm getting is right next to a stream. On nights when Flora is watching her, you and I can make love under the stars."

I laughed again. "You've really thought this through, haven't you?"

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“Vivian, my sweet cupcake, I missed six years of Paris’ life. I will not miss out on the rest of it. If Holly Creek is where you want to raise her, then I’ll be right there—whether you need me a little or a lot. I’ll build a family home and when you’re ready, we can all live in it, if things between us progress.”

“I think we’d like that very much.”

“Oh yeah? Of course, we’ll need to travel to faraway places on her breaks from school. I’ve put a lot of thought into travel plans, too.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you, Richard Buchanan.” My heart filled with so much appreciation for him, finally letting him in. Falling for him...

We swayed together in each other’s arms in silence for a few minutes until he sighed and let me go. Earlier that morning, I had asked if I could have the night with Paris to myself. He needed a good rest for the operation the next morning, and thankfully, he agreed to stay in the hotel suite.

“I’ll see you in the morning, love,” he said, kissing me one more time. I followed him to the hospital door and pulled him back by his sleeve for another quick kiss.

“Richard, in case I forget, thank you for giving our daughter your kidney tomorrow.”

“Don’t you know by now that I’d give you two everything I have?” With one more kiss, he left.

How could anyone expect me to sleep on the eve of the major operations? I stifled a

yawn in the quiet hospital room, the only other sound the soft, rhythmic snores of Paris.

Early yet, I didn't expect anyone here for some time. And everyone we knew planned to be here today waiting and praying that the operations would be successful.

I rubbed my arms for warmth and ambled over to the window, watching the day begin. The morning clouds lifted, the sky cleared, and the sun shone as if a promise of good things to come. I took it as a sign that all might be okay today.

From behind, I heard the gentle tread of someone entering the room, careful not to disturb my sleeping beauty.

"It's me," Richard whispered as he made his way over, clutching a coffee cup from a nearby cafe we'd discovered. "Got your favorite."

"How did you know I needed this?" I replied, accepting the cup gratefully, happy to sip this liquid gold.

"Did she sleep well? And you?" he asked quietly.

"She did. But I couldn't sleep at all," I answered, taking another sip before setting my cup on the window ledge. I reached for his arm and nestled under it to lean against him, but in doing so, a stack of papers tumbled to the floor. "Oops. I didn't see those there. What are they?"

"I've been thinking," he began softly as he bent down to pick them up, his tone low and measured. "Just in case something happens to me?—"

"No," I blurted out before I could stop it, hazarding a guess as to what it was.

He looked straight into my eyes, calm even as a storm churned inside me. “Vivian, listen to me.” He held the folder between us like it was something sacred. “These papers guarantee that you and Paris will never be left wanting for anything.”

“I don’t care about the money,” I snapped, louder than intended. My words felt brittle, like an unyielding bone. Meanwhile, Paris continued to sleep.

“I know,” he murmured. “That’s why you deserve it.”

I snorted. “Is this just another one of your tests?”

“No. You passed every single one of them. This is serious.”

I regarded the papers with several brightly colored tabs. He explained that he’d changed his will, and set up trusts. His businesses. The properties. The accounts. His entire Buchanan legacy. My name was on them. Paris’s name, too. Legal lingo sat in tight rows that blurred in my vision.

“You are serious,” I whispered.

He nodded. “In case something happens... I want to know you’re both provided for.”

I shook my head, tears threatening to spill. “Don’t say that. Please, don’t even go there.”

“You know it’s a risk on that operating table,” he replied. “Even if the odds are low.”

My hand hovered over the papers. “But you are going to be fine.”

“Yes, but I’ll feel better knowing you’ll be taken care of for a lifetime,” he whispered.

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“I can’t...” I choked, pressing a palm to his chest. “You can’t expect me to prepare for losing you. I need positivity right now. I need to believe that you and Paris will wake up from your surgeries, recover well, and that life will continue. Please.”

I leaned my forehead against his chest, inhaling the clean scent of soap—no designer cologne allowed before the operation. His arms wrapped around me, holding me secure and steady.

“I don’t want your money, Richard. I don’t want your buildings or your businesses.”

“What do you want then?” he asked quietly.

“You.” My voice cracked. “I just want you.”

20

THE BRAVEST

VIVIAN

By the time preparations for the operation began, Paris was a bundle of nerves. They gave her something to help her relax, and she settled into her pre-op room, tucked beneath the blankets. Her curls were pulled back and hidden, and her cheeks looked unusually pale, with a small IV secured on her arm like a badge of courage. Even her fuzzy socks peeked out from under the covers.

She was far too young for all of this. Why did this have to happen to her?

Before his own pre-op procedures, the nurses permitted Richard to do a brief visit to her bedside, and the moment her face lit up, I knew a beautiful father and daughter bond unfolded.

He leaned in, his hand softly brushing her cheek as he asked, “Are you ready, my little explorer?”

With a slow nod, she replied, “Will you be brave?”

Smiling, he said, “Only if you promise to be brave too.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he held her tenderly, as if cradling something fragile.

“I’ll see you later,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Remember, we have an entire world to explore together soon. And Paris, there’s something I want you to know: even though we’ve only met this week, you are my little girl now. You’ve taken up residence in my heart, and I will always love you.” He tapped his chest.

“I love you, Daddy,” she whispered back.

Observing them, my hand flew to my heart, and I held it there.

I followed Richard into the corridor that connected their rooms. His turn came first—the surgical team would harvest his kidney before attending to Paris. I gripped his hand tightly, as though it were the only tether keeping him grounded.

“You’re going to be fine,” I reassured him, running my thumb over his knuckles. “The nurses are keeping Paris calm so that I can join you in the operating room and wait until they put you under anesthesia.”

With a low chuckle and a wink, he replied, “You’ll distract the surgeons, and I don’t need them making any mistakes—you’re too damn beautiful for this sterile place to handle.”

“Richard, seriously,” I said gently. “It’s my turn to be there for you.”

“Then go be with our daughter. She may appear brave on the outside, but inside she must be terrified,” he said with a faint smile. “You know, I thought that by April, once we’ve both recovered, visiting Paris would be wonderful. Spring transforms the city into something breathtaking, as I’m sure you remember. I’ll arrange for a nanny and tutor so we can steal some time together and perhaps walk down memory lane from the night we first met.” He kissed the back of my hand.

“Sounds lovely. But first, let’s get through this,” I implored, nodding as I forced a smile despite the lump in my throat.

His eyes grew somber and his voice dropped. “Vivian—tell her I’m the luckiest man to have known her.”

Tears ran unchecked down my cheeks, and I made no attempt to wipe them away. “No, you’ll tell her yourself when this is all over,” I whispered softly.

A throat cleared from someone on the surgical team, reminding us that time was short. In the final seconds, panic set in. “There’s so much I want to say to you, Richard.” It was so natural for our daughter to express her love for this remarkable man; the words were poised on my lips, yet my past kept them at bay.

He squeezed my hand one last time and studied my face as if etching it into memory. “You don’t have to say anything. Your eyes speak volumes. But I’ll say it—I love you, Vivian.”

Those words lifted my heart, and I kissed him through my tears as if it were our last farewell—just in case—while clinging to hope for more time together.

Once both were wheeled into surgery, our friends and family gathered to wait with me in our room.

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Miriam and I talked as she showed me old photos and shared funny stories about Richard as a young boy. By age eight, he'd already had a custom-made three-piece suit matching Patrick's, which he wore proudly as he shadowed his father at work. I could easily picture him—a tiny CEO in the making, already mastering his destiny.

Chelsea sat with me and held my hands for a time. "They'll be fine, I'm sure of it. They're Buchanans, after all. Their bloodline is incredibly strong. Rex once told me about his family, tracing back to Scotland's history. They were survivors of the Battle of Culloden, and that fierce legacy gives them the strength to overcome anything."

I managed a tearful smile and replied, "Then I call upon the ancestors to help them through this." I sputtered a smile through tears. "They have to come out, okay? Paris is my everything, and Richard—he's meant the world to me this week."

"Who knew he could have such a big heart beneath all that gruff exterior?" Chelsea remarked, gently squeezing my hand.

"He told me he loves me." I dabbed at my eyes with a tissue. "I couldn't bring myself to say it back, even though my whole heart was there with him. Why couldn't I speak those words? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong with you. Look at everything you've endured in the past—of course, you'd have some trust issues. But I truly believe you've captured the heart of a man I thought had long given up on love. After what Janet did to him, he became so wary of commitment. Can you imagine someone plotting to kill her husband for money?"

“She didn’t deserve him...” And I’m so glad. I couldn’t imagine the difficulty if he’d been married, then found out about Paris.

“Luck was with him to find out on his wedding day and call the whole thing off. Both of you have faced enough to scare anyone from committing again.” At that moment, she waved over Rex, who arrived, handing out cups of coffee.

“Thank you,” I told him, using the cup more to warm my hands than for the brew, grateful for any distraction from the constant stream of tissues clutched in my grasp.

“Anyway,” Chelsea continued, “my point is that you and Richard have a solid foundation—a great start. Don’t let him go, Vivian. Give him a chance. I have a good feeling about the two of you.”

Rex took a seat beside her. “Talking about my brother? You’ll find no one more loyal to those he cares about.”

I listened half-heartedly as their conversation drifted from topic to topic, eventually touching on her sister Maisy, who had returned to the science vessel for the rest of her research contract. Then Rex said he got a text from his friend Brooks, mentioning they’d spent the night together at the Plaza Hotel after Chelsea’s wedding. “It’s a shame when two people can’t see what they have right in front of him,” Rex commented. “Not like us, sweetness—we knew immediately that we were meant for each other.”

Chelsea laughed, lightening the mood in the otherwise somber waiting room. “You did, but you nearly ruined it with that first proposal of a marriage of convenience.”

“It took me realizing how deeply I love you to end up groveling on my knees. I persisted because I knew I wanted you—And what a Buchanan wants?—”

Chelsea and I finished for him, chanting, “—A Buchanan gets.”

He tilted his head and said, “That’s why I know Richard won’t give up. He’ll wait for you, Vivian. Now that he has a daughter, he’ll be even more determined to get who he wants.”

His words provided some reassurance. As we all waited, Flora brought out an apple pie to share, though I couldn’t eat a bite. She joined Keaton and me, and together we prayed.

“It isn’t easy being a mother and watching your child go through such trials, but you’re doing an incredible job, Vivian—keeping it all together for her sake. Just remember, Paris has many years ahead of her. I know in my heart she’ll make it through this, and so will you, because you have all of us supporting you.”

“Thank you, Flora. That means so much to me,” I said, and we embraced before I turned to Keaton. With another two hours looming, the stress of it wore on me.

“Come here, lean over,” he urged, draping his arm around my shoulders so I could rest my head. “You’re the bravest woman I know, Viv.”

Bravery was exactly what Rex had urged Paris to show, and if they could be that brave, then for their sake, I had no choice but to summon that courage as well. Everyone around me was so kind and caring as we waited. All I could do was pray.

For the first time in years, my prayer wasn’t for money. Or for miracles. Only for love to survive—for the two people I loved most in this world.

When the doctors confirmed the operations were successful, my heart soared with joy. They planned to keep a close watch on Paris to ensure her body accepted the kidney, and their report filled me with hope.

In the recovery room, the only sounds were the beeping monitors and the rhythmic thumping of my heart in my ears. I sat beside Paris' bed, holding her hand as her skin gradually warmed. Eventually, her eyelashes gently fluttered open.

"Mommy?" she murmured.

"I'm right here, mon cœur," I answered, kissing her fingers softly. "You're okay."

She frowned and tried to sit up, wincing as she did, so I helped her settle back against the pillow.

"Lie back. You need to rest for now, sweetheart," I advised.

"Where's Daddy?" she croaked.

The strong bond between them made my heart skip a beat. "He's resting in his room. You both came through the surgeries very well."

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Her eyes slowly blinked, glistening with moisture. “Did it hurt him?”

“Maybe a little,” I whispered, “but he said he’d do it all over again, just to be with you.”

“I want to see him.”

“As soon as the nurses give the okay,” I replied, gently tucking a stray lock of hair from her forehead. I had been in his room when he awoke from anesthesia. “He’s been asking about you, too.”

“Was he brave?” she asked quietly.

I swallowed hard. “Yes, baby. He was.”

She offered a faint smile as her eyes closed once more. I watched her slip into sleep as if she were floating—her breathing eased, alive, and on the path to recovery.

Eventually, the nurses wheeled Richard’s bed into Paris’s room while she was asleep, positioning the two beds so close that I could stand between them and touch both. Despite looking pale, he smiled and reached his arm across toward her.

“How is she?” he asked as soon as I stepped between them.

“She’s tired, but doing well,” I replied, keeping my voice calm despite the inner turmoil. “Every time she wakes up, she asks about you.”

When Paris suddenly stirred, he softly said, “Hey there, my little explorer,” his voice still rough from the anesthesia.

“Daddy, I missed you,” she said hoarsely.

“I missed you even more,” he replied warmly.

“Mommy, I want cupcakes,” she whined sleepily. I wasn’t sure she even knew what she was saying yet, still under the effects of anesthesia.

“Believe me, sweetheart, when we get home, I’ll make you the best cupcakes ever.”

Richard squeezed my hand. “Make sure she gets the most perfect cupcake. I’ll settle for the second best.”

“Looks like I’ll have to make two perfect cupcakes, then. Challenge accepted.” I attempted humor.

The machines continued their rhythmic hum as they held hands. I moved closer, kissing her curls as she drifted back to sleep, then turned to Richard.

He looked up at me and whispered, “Thank you.” His eyes were tired but shone brightly.

“For what?” I asked, gently stroking his fingers.

“For giving me her. She’s the most precious gift. Listen, I want to talk to you about—” Richard began. I stopped him. The last time he sounded like this, he offered me his will and all his worldly goods.

“Shh. Just rest. We have plenty of time to talk while you both recover. We’ll have

nothing but time for the next four to six weeks.” I kissed his forehead. “There’s one more thing I want to say. I should have said it before the surgery. I love you, Richard.”

“I know you do. Say it again,” he murmured with a faint smile.

“I love you so much.”

“I love you, too. Thanks for being here with me.”

“You’re thanking me? I’m the one who owes you a million thanks. Now just rest.” I kissed him and stayed with them for a while as they drifted in and out of sleep and the nurses checked on their recovery. They had made it through this stage; the rest should be easier, and I’d be by their sides every step of the way.

21

MATCHING SCARS

VIVIAN

Richard was the proudest man I’d ever known, and he despised showing any weakness. Yet, every time he laughed, I noticed the wince that followed, and every time he shifted in his chair, his jaw tensed—as if he could will the discomfort away. His slow recovery left him no choice but to cut back on work, something I had to remind him of every now and then.

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I knocked. “Time’s up. That’s enough work for today,” I said gently from the doorway of his penthouse home office, holding a stack of fresh clothes in one hand.

“Ah, my beautiful nurse. I’m getting better every day because of you,” he replied with his ever-confident smile. With a playful twitch of his eyebrows, he added, “I even have something for you. It just arrived in today’s mail.”

“For me?” I asked. He slid a black envelope my way. Curious, I entered and set the clothes down. The well-designed room screamed “wealthy CEO,” from the pinstriped wallpaper to the gold accents on his glass desk to the floor-to-ceiling windows showcasing Manhattan. Richard had it all. It was easy in the hospital to think of him as just a regular guy with a lot of money. Here in his penthouse, my idea of “wealthy” had to be redefined.

“What is it?” I traced my name in gold foiled lettering on the front.

“Open it.”

When I did, I gasped at the black card inside. “No. I can’t take this.”

“I have one for Paris, too.”

“She’s six, Richard.”

“Going on seven. I had my first card at eight.”

“I’m drawing a firm line on this one—no.” I tossed the card back on his desk and

crossed my arms.

“Okay, maybe we’ll wait until she’s sixteen?—”

“Try twenty-one with proof that she’s responsible with money.” I insisted.

“Fine. But you need to take yours, Vivian.” He slid the envelope back to me. “If anything were to happen to me?—”

“Wait. Why are you always worried something is going to happen to you?”

“I’m worth a fortune. Adrien or someone drugged me back in Paris, God knows why. I had my ex plotting my demise. Who knows what life brings. Sweetheart, most people don’t have the luxury I have to take care of the people around them. I do. And that means you can keep this card in case you ever need it.”

I didn’t budge.

“No limit on the spending. In fact, use it every day. Go wild. Buy whatever you need—or want—to your heart’s desire. I wouldn’t mind if, for once, you buy yourself something,” he grumbled.

“How can I possibly splurge when you’re buying me things all the time? I need nothing else. Well, except maybe the door fixed at my shop that is warped and squeaks and can only lock if held tightly in place.”

“Door? Consider it done.”

“Richard, stop testing me.”

“This isn’t a test Vivian, this is serious. Please, take the card. Hide it away in your

purse for a rainy day or emergency, or use it daily. You're stuck with that card." He crossed his arms too, trying to hide the wince until his eyes watered.

"Stop. I can tell you're in pain."

He exhaled sharply and let his arms drop. "Thanks."

"And fine. I'll keep the card for emergencies."

"That makes me happy. And you know what else makes me happy? We've reached week 4. I'm cleared for light duty." He wiggled his eyebrows.

I chuckled. "You are too much."

Back at the hospital, after his surgeries, he had begged me to let Paris recover at his place. He couldn't bear the thought of being away during her four- to six-week recovery if we were miles apart. We talked it over and agreed that his one-level penthouse was better suited for their recuperation than my two-story apartment. Naturally, he hired top-tier nurses, nannies, and tutors for round-the-clock care—worried I might wear myself out trying to care for both of them.

Though I missed my shop, I knew this was the best option for now. Paris absolutely adored the breathtaking views of the New York skyline from every angle of the penthouse, especially from her room, which she lovingly dubbed the treehouse. On our first day, she discovered that Richard had prepared an oasis of a room for her, complete with adorable touches that made me have to give props to his designer.

There were genuine first-class airplane seats turned into a cozy reading nook bordered by faux palm fronds, wallpaper made of maps, and several globes scattered about. Add to that binoculars, stuffed animals, and a small tent in the corner with a duvet depicting the Globegans—she had everything her heart desired. A neon sign

reading “Little Explorer” hung above her bed. More gifts soon followed from Miriam, from toys to clothes, though her new riding hat was the item she loved most. She couldn’t stop wearing it all day, chattering about finally taking riding lessons that summer.

As for me, I could have chosen any room, but I stayed with Richard in his so I could watch over him—I simply wanted to be there with him.

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“I think it’s time you change from yesterday’s ‘wealthy hermit’ look,” I said, coming up to his side with a kiss on his cheek, and took him in. Shirt halfway unbuttoned, revealing the soft hairs of his chest, sweatpants—his new best friend—skin that could use some sunshine... and still gorgeous. The butterflies fluttered inside of me seeing him.

“I’m healing. It’s a whole vibe I have going on here.”

“I think the vibe could use a wash and dry.” I tugged him toward the hallway.

“Yes, ma’am.” With a huge grin, he promptly shut off his tablet and neatly stacked his papers. “I’d never refuse one of your sponge baths. Since I’m cleared for duty, I expect a little extra care today.”

“Now, Mr. Buchanan, you know the doctor said light duty. You must be careful.”

“No promises. Where’s our girl?” he inquired.

“With her tutor. They just began, so we have at least an hour or two.”

“Plenty of time.”

I chuckled. “Been giving this moment a lot of thought?”

“Four weeks without you felt like forever, my cupcake. I need you.” He lowered his voice, sending a thrill through me as he locked and closed his bedroom door behind us.

“Let’s get you undressed first.” I reached for him, and his hands landed on my hips. “You look...” I trailed off, my fingers threading through his hair.

“Devilishly handsome?” he offered, grinning.

“More like charmingly miserable. Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“Depends what you have in mind, cupcake.”

I knelt before him, sliding my hands up his thighs to his waistband. “Does that give you a clue?”

He chuckled and immediately grimaced, one hand holding the side of his abdomen.

“Does it hurt?” I jumped to my feet, concern threading through my voice.

“Only every second of the day if I move, but it’s getting better.”

“Give it time.” I considered him carefully. “I think we should wait another week.”

“Vivian—I can handle it. Trust me, my discomfort pales compared to the ache in my balls.”

I laughed and unbuttoned his shirt, working it open slowly, and kissing him. I was careful not to brush too close to the raw spot I knew waited underneath.

As the shirt fell open, my breath caught. There it was, low and to the left of his ribs. The surrounding skin faintly bruised, the outline of the surgical tape clean but delicate.

“Sexy, right? Come on. You can tell me.”

I laughed softly. “Worth it for our daughter.” I reached for the edge of the bandage, and peeled it back with slow, practiced hands until it revealed the permanent mark of his ultimate love. I leaned down and kissed the skin just above the scar, grateful for his sacrifice.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He reached out and cupped my face. “You owe me nothing,” he murmured.

“I’m not saying it because I owe you. I’m saying it because I love you.”

He brought my hand to his heart and held it there. “I love you, too.” Then he slowly moved my hand along his torso to the bulge in his sweats. “Where were we?”

I traced my fingertips along his waistband, careful not to tickle his skin or he’d flinch and wince, and I smiled coyly. “Sit or stand? Which will hurt less?”

“They’re about equal. But I’ll take sitting.”

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After helping him lower his sweatpants and settling him comfortably, I dropped to my knees to adore this incredible, selfless man who loved us.

Our eyes met as I caressed his muscular thighs, taken aback by the hitch in his breath and how much sway I seemed to have over him. His manhood—thick, veiny, long, and satisfying—pulsed with eagerness and twitched before me.

“One of the things I loved about our first time in Paris was discovering just how well-endowed you are. Is that a Buchanan trait?” I teased as my hands roamed over his velvety skin, marveling at how he grew even thicker.

With a twinkle in his eye, he replied, “Could be a family legend.” His gaze then sharpened, focusing intently on every move I made.

I wrapped my fingers around him, and his hips instinctively thrust into my grasp.

“Ouch. Ah.”

I stopped immediately. “No thrusting, Mr. B. By order of Nurse Vivian.” I cast him a stern look.

“Fuck woman, I’m going to have to buy you a nurse’s uniform for putting that fantasy of you in my head.” He leaned back and let out a shaky breath.

“Shall I continue? Or if it’s too much...?”

“Please, don’t stop,” he moaned.

From base to tip, I moved rhythmically, my tongue following my hands.

“Faster?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” he urged, gently tugging at my hair and drawing my mouth closer.

I licked and sucked along his head, swirling my tongue around his crown, and then relaxed my throat to take him deep.

“So good. Every inch, like a good girl sucking my cock,” he moaned, his body tensing and trembling.

I drove him wild with my mouth, bobbing my head until his breathing turned into grunts or cries of pain. Couldn’t tell.

“I’m close, baby,” he warned.

I let him go, then began stroking him with my hand as he guided my movements with his own.

I pushed his hand aside and took him deep again, his entire length disappearing down my throat. I repeated until his final grunt emerged through gritted teeth, his body convulsing with release and pain.

After swallowing, I released him, kissing and licking until he calmed. With lazy, half-closed eyes, he appreciated me as I carefully tucked him back into his sweatpants.

“Thank you. Come here—but be gentle,” he beckoned in a low, husky voice, leaving me worried he was hurting.

I straddled him carefully and hugged his neck. “I hope it didn’t hurt too much for the

first try?”

“Worth it. And I’m sure it’ll get easier with time.”

“I’m just glad Paris hasn’t had to go through as much pain as you have.” I sat back up so as not to risk hurting him.

“She’s young. I’m practically an old man. There’s no comparison.”

“You’re not that old,” I teased.

“Old enough that I don’t want to wait much longer to have another child with you.”

“Huh?” My jaw dropped. “That’s quite the bombshell, Richard.”

“You’ve never thought about it? Can you have another?”

I shrugged. “I should be able to. And no, I haven’t given it much thought. My situation wasn’t ideal for having another child, so I put it out of my mind.”

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“And now?” He ran his fingertips up and down my arms. “Things could be quite ideal, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but... damn you, Richard. Why does everything in your life always move at the speed of light? I like our slow pace right now. We’re still in the getting-to-know-each-other phase.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “How many phases are there? I’m clueless—explain it to me.”

Before I could answer, his phone rang from the pocket of his sweatpants.

“I’ll get it for you.” I hopped off of him and reach for the pocket.

“It’s probably nothing important. Leave it.”

“Nope, I’m getting it.”

“Fine, Vivian. We’ll put a pin in this conversation, but I want us to talk about our future soon, okay?”

I handed him the phone. “And as a Buchanan, when you want something, you get it.”

“You got that right, cupcake... Hello?”

I went to check on Paris. She and her tutor were just finishing up. After discussing her progress, I brought her into the kitchen to help me make my salted caramel

cupcakes. During our first week here, Richard had asked for a detailed list of what I needed for baking. Knowing I had everything available kept me busy making their favorites.

Paris was improving each day, although she still grew tired easily. We kept a light schedule—short tutoring sessions, coloring, warm bubble baths, and cuddles. The penthouse had become her playground, with its vast windows and glittering city lights making her feel as though she were living in a storybook.

We worked on the recipe together, chatting and listening to music until the cupcakes were finally in the oven.

“There are my girls,” Richard announced as he appeared, sweatpants back in place, shirt unevenly buttoned, and his hair slightly disheveled. He still needed a bath and a change of clothes.

“Just in time to lick the bowl,” Paris said, holding up her spatula coated in dough.

“Oh, yeah.” He dipped a finger into the dough and licked it. “Mmm. Salted caramel? My favorite.”

“Just a little treat for you,” I said.

Suddenly, Paris fell silent, her eyes teary.

“What’s wrong, *mon cœur*?” Was she hurting? Had baking been too much for her today?

“I want to see Daddy’s scar,” she mumbled, her small fingers hovering near the bandage under his shirt. “Is it like mine?”

She had never been curious before—she scarcely liked looking at her own.

Having seen both scars, I said, “They’re almost identical. Are you sure you want to see?”

She nodded, and Richard agreed. He pulled his shirt up, revealing his scar.

“See, my love? Very similar to yours.” I pointed toward it.

Paris then lifted her own shirt, and after glancing at it, she said, “They are the same. Can I get a tattoo over it when I’m big? Like a heart around the scar?”

Richard’s eyes widened. “Uh, let’s wait until you’re twenty-one before you ask again.”

“Okay,” she shrugged. “I’m off to my treehouse.” With that, she happily walked away.

“You know, if you give her that black card when she’s sixteen, the first thing she might do is get a tattoo,” I teased, running my hands up behind his neck.

“Right. No black card. I get it now. There’s a lot to learn about being a dad, isn’t there?” he shook his head.

I laughed. “Parenthood can be equally challenging and satisfying. Still want another child?”

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He wrapped his arms around me, enveloping me in his embrace. After a brief pause, where he sniffed my neck, moaning something about vanilla, he said, “Yeah, I want another. Whenever you’re ready, cupcake. You see, I missed everything the first time. The baby inside of you, holding that bundle of joy, hearing it say dada, and taking its first step—I missed it all.”

Tears threatened my eyes at hearing that. “I’ll think about it.” But I already knew my answer. Of course he’d get his way.

“Listen, about the phone call I just got?”

“Is everything okay?” I asked and took the cupcakes out of the oven.

“There’s something I want to give Paris.”

“You’ve already given us so much.” I used a toothpick to test for doneness.

“Not everything. Not yet.” His tone suddenly turned serious.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I want to talk to you about something,” he said. “I want Paris to have my last name.”

The words struck me in the heart. Not because it hadn’t crossed my mind before—but because it represented love and belonging.

“I know she’d like that,” I managed between the lump in my throat and my trembling

hands.

“Good. There’s just one snag. Since Paris’s birth certificate is from France, Adrien signed it. He is still on record as her parent with a custody agreement with you. So we would need him to sign away his parental rights.” He scoffed. “Had I known, I would’ve forced him to sign before sending that five million.”

“But you saw how he was—more than willing to let Paris go. Surely he’ll sign without a fuss?”

“My lawyers have reached out already. He replied today, demanding all three of us fly to see him in person for his signature.” He shook his head. “The asshole.”

“Okay. First of all, I cannot believe you had your lawyers move forward without telling me.” I crossed my arms, glaring.

“I’m telling you now. I was excited about the idea, and I called them when we first arrived here from the hospital, wondering what it would take. Before I approached you with this idea, I just wanted to do all the background research, but things snowballed from there.”

So many emotions percolated inside of me. From elated that this man loves my daughter so much to give her his name, to frustrations over his blunders, which I can only attribute to the fact that instant fatherhood could not be easy.

“Please, don’t be mad. First-time father here and I’m making mistakes, learning as I go. I’m sorry.” He tugged at my forearm when I still didn’t say a word. Flashes from the past came at me. Had this been Adrien, it would have escalated fast into yelling, shoving, and definitely not an apology from him.

“Remember, we’re partners in this. When it comes to Paris, we need to talk about

everything together.”

“I know. We will. But we’re here now.”

“And I can’t face Adrien again. It would only confuse Paris. We told her he’s not her real father—how can I make her see him now, the same man who never even liked her?” I blurted out, then noticed the anguish in Richard’s eyes. “I want her to have your last name, but involving Adrien makes it complicated.”

“I know it does, and I don’t like it either. We’ll figure it out together, though, right? Come here. Tell me we’re okay.” He drew me into his embrace and I melted there.

“We’ll be okay, I hope.”

“You know how I’ve wanted to take you away to France, anyway. I’m getting the itch to travel now that we’re almost out of the recovery window, and I promised Paris a trip. So, what do you say? Can I whisk you two away on my private jet for a trip to Paris? And while we’re there, I’ll figure out how to deal with Adrien. I have some ideas.”

The night of Chelsea’s wedding, he’d once proposed a getaway to escape it all. Now, another trip was on the table—this one taking us back to where it all began.

22

NAMESAKE

RICHARD

We wrangled Paris from our car up the stairs and into my private jet. It stood ready, a sleek pale blue against the gray stormy sky, with the Buchanan family crest in gold,

black, and red emblazoned on its tail. We would not let a bit of rain disrupt our plans.

A call came in after we stepped onboard the jet. I paused in the doorway and quickly answered. My assistant confirmed she'd made all the arrangements exactly to my specifications. Ending the call, my jaw tensed about it.

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Vivian met my eyes as I entered the cabin. “All good?” She asked, while the flight attendants collected our wet umbrellas and coats.

I pressed a kiss to her temple and spoke in a hushed tone. “Everything is arranged. Adrien won’t be a problem much longer.”

“I won’t pry into the details. You’ve told me what I need to know for my part in the plan. I just hope it all goes off without a hitch.”

“It will. I’m treating this like any other business negotiation—which I’ve handled hundreds of times. Trust me, I always win.” I had to, for Paris’s sake. She nodded, leaving the specifics to me. I appreciated her trust more than she realized.

Over the past few weeks, my plan took shape to thwart Adrien’s threats. A special party would take place. Adrien would be there. My staff made sure all the guests were invited—including one very important individual, the final pressure point and key to the entire plan.

Adrien may have outmaneuvered me at the hospital, but this time, he wouldn’t hold the advantage. I ran a hand through my damp hair and sighed. With a flight ahead of us overnight to Paris, no sense worrying about it now.

The nanny and tutor arrived on board and settled in. The flight attendants made sure Paris got a grand tour of the jet, her eyes wide with wonder.

On the flight deck, she met Captain Reginald, and politely asked him, “Can I see Paris from the sky?”

“Eventually, but not until we’re a little closer,” he said.

“What about the Eiffel Tower?” She didn’t miss a beat.

“You’ll see that too once we’re flying over France. But between now and then, mostly you’ll see the ocean below, until it gets dark outside, then you might see stars above.” He smiled at her inquisition.

“Can I learn to fly?” She peered at all the controls.

“Sure. When you’re old enough,” he chuckled.

“Was Paris named after me?” she continued with endless curiosity.

“I think it was around long before you were, but we can pretend someone named it after you,” I interjected, saving Reginald from having to answer that one.

“Okay, we should probably let the captain get ready to fly. What do you say to him?” Vivian curtailed more questions.

“Bon voyage!” She waved, and the captain handed her a cute pin that read Junior Captain in raised letters over a pair of wings—her badge of honor. She had Vivian pin on her right away.

“Thank you. I know you’re eager to get there. Don’t worry, I’ll keep this bird in the air and keep you safe, little miss,” he assured her, tipping his captain’s hat.

Back in the main cabin, Paris spun slowly in a little circle, taking in every detail. The jet was exquisite—one of the last major purchases my father made before he passed. Polished, rare wood surfaces mixed with plush ivory leather filled the interior with brightness and warmth. The luxurious seats made you feel as if you were sitting on a

cloud, or even dozing off, which we hoped Paris might soon do as darkness fell.

Vivian gave me a hesitant smile, squeezing my hand as if to anchor herself. I pulled her in for a quick, reassuring kiss.

“We’ll be there before you know it,” I told her.

“Kissing again? Why do mommies and daddies always have to kiss?” Paris giggled and plopped into a seat and made a beeline for the window.

We hadn’t yet sat her down to explain “us,” choosing to keep displays of affection to a minimum around her. Still, Paris seemed to understand, knowing that Vivian and I shared a bed, and we had been living together as a family since we left the hospital. She never questioned it, which I took as a sign that she wanted to belong to a family. Mine. And this trip would make that happen.

I planned to make it official soon—beginning with changing Paris’s name, and then working on making Vivian a Buchanan, too.

“Hey, this pillow has a B on it,” Paris exclaimed as she picked up the royal blue velvet pillow and traced the gold-threaded monogram with her finger.

“B for Buchanan,” I said, and eased into the seat beside her.

“Can I be a Buchanan?” She asked, jolting me. Vivian and I traded glances. She sent me a nod of approval. We hadn’t planned on talking to her about it here, but...

“Would you like to be one, like me?”

She scratched her head.

“Ma chérie, what that means is that you’ll be Paris Buchanan. No longer Paris Bardeaux,” Vivian calmly explained.

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“I want to be like Daddy. I can’t wait to be a Buchanan. I feel like a princess,” Paris exclaimed.

“Not quite. But you are my daughter. Close enough,” I winked and gathered her for a quick hug, swallowing the lump in my throat. I couldn’t wait for the day to erase Adrien’s name from her life and replace it with mine.

“Mr. Buchanan and guests, please buckle up for takeoff,” the captain addressed us over the speaker.

“Okay, let’s get buckled in.” I leaned over to help Paris with hers, double-checking that she was secure.

Vivian sank into the seat across from us, a smile lighting up her entire face. And her eyes—God, those blues—met mine. They were soft, hopeful, no longer shadowed by exhaustion or worry. The hospital felt like another lifetime. All that stress, all that fear—it was finally behind us.

I reached for the hand of this woman who had invaded my heart and soul, who had made me feel more alive than I had since I took my first million-dollar risk long ago. I could sense my old workaholic life fading away, replaced by the new life I’d always dreamed of.

By the time we soared into the sky, Paris buzzed with excitement. Her face pressed against the window, and a pair of tiny headphones looped over her head.

“I’m flying to the city I’m named after,” she repeated, as if talking to the plane might

make it believe her.

“Yes, you are. Think the city is ready for you?” I grinned.

She tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Maybe. I even brought my glitter pens. I can draw a picture for it.” Soon, she was sketching an airplane in a sky filled with sunshine. Below it were many tiny houses and a tall structure that, in her imagination, probably came alive as the tower.

In the back row, the tutor and the nanny sat at the ready for us whenever we needed them. Yet the cabin felt like it belonged only to me, Vivian, and the child who carried both of our hearts.

The flight was smooth, and before dawn, we arrived at our destination. A car whisked us away to the George V, where I carried a drowsy Paris into our suite. Gently, I set her in the center of our bed while Vivian and I settled on each side, exchanging quiet whispers.

“This isn’t quite like our first night together,” Vivian teased, glancing at the sleeping little girl between us. “But I’m so grateful we’re here. Thank you for this trip. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said the words I could never get enough of. I reached an arm over both of them, resting on her waist. They were everything I wanted, right here with me.

A few hours later, as soon as Paris stirred, we all woke, eager for the day ahead. In our robes, we sat out on our private terrace enjoying cappuccinos, croissants, and fruit—a delightful breakfast delivered by room service. Yet, what enchanted Paris most were the panoramic views of the city; she barely sat, continuously standing by the rail, and gazing out.

“I think the Eiffel Tower is calling my name,” she declared, starting our day out with laughter and joy.

“Well then, we better get you there,” I said. We dedicated today to us and sightseeing, while tomorrow we’d deal with Adrien.

Our suite at the George V was every bit the luxury I was accustomed to—grand crystal chandeliers, gilded accents, and long drapes that swept the marble floor. But watching Paris twirl barefoot in her sundress, croissant in hand, transformed opulence into pure magic.

Vivian finally emerged from the bathroom wearing soft cashmere and tailored pants with sensible walking shoes, her hair loosely braided in an effortless, radiant style. I longed to kiss her then and there.

However, Paris was already bouncing with energy. “Can we go? Please? The sun is shining and I want to see the tower.”

I reached for my coat, and we set off.

We rode the elevator to the very top of the tower. Paris held my hand tightly, her small body vibrating with wonder as the entire city spread out beneath us. On the other side, Vivian clung to my arm, shivering.

“I’ve never been to the top before. I always chickened out at the last minute,” she admitted.

“Not today. Hold on as tight as you need because I’m treating you two to the full Parisian first class experience.” I kissed her temple.

Once there, Paris peered around in awe. “It’s like I can see the entire world! Can I see

New York from here?”

I chuckled and knelt beside her. “Almost. See that way... to the North? That would be London out there somewhere. And over here...” I picked her up and carried her over to the sign stating Sud for South before pointing roughly southeast. “In that direction would be Egypt.”

She gasped. “I can see pyramids from here?”

“They’re still too far away, but it’s in that general direction.” I laughed, then carried her to face west, explaining that New York was that way. Though she didn’t entirely understand, her nod was all that mattered.

After the tutor and nanny took over entertaining Paris, I noticed my lovely Vivian gazing out over the city. I wrapped my arms around her from behind.

“I’ve mostly been a student, then a mother, never really a tourist here,” she murmured. “The view is spectacular.”

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“Yes, it is. And you’re beautiful,” I replied, nuzzling into her neck. My words brightened her cheek with a rosy hue.

After snapping countless photos—and even letting Paris try her hand at using my phone—we eventually descended, promising her we would come back again.

We strolled through the Champ de Mars gardens with Vivian’s hand in mine while Paris skipped ahead. Near the base of the tower, beneath its iron framework glowing in the sun’s golden light, I quietly pulled Vivian to a stop.

She turned toward me, the soft light in her eyes reminiscent of the spring sky. Her lips parted slightly as, beneath the monument that had witnessed our very first night together, we shared a kiss. Slow and deep, full of meaning. Her fingers curled into my coat, and my heart pounded out of its cage.

This was exactly as it should have been—from the very beginning.

“I love you, Vivian,” I whispered, gazing deeply into her eyes.

“I love you too.”

“More kissing?” Paris interrupted, head tilted inquisitively. I laughed and swept her up in my arms as her giggles filled the air.

“Well, they call Paris the City of Love, and it is rather romantic. And I love your mother, and I love you, my darling girl.” What was this feeling taking over my body? My heart light, I couldn’t remember a time when I ever felt this buoyant. The heavy

despair that had enveloped me for years after my breakup with Janet seemed like a distant memory.

I wasn't naïve enough to think that challenges wouldn't arise as Vivian and I worked through our situation and parenting, but I was overly confident we could overcome them—together.

“Okay, who is ready for lunch in the Montmartre?” I asked, and off we went, continuing with our itinerary for the day.

Our car left us at the base of the stairs leading to the streets of Montmartre. Paris attempted to count each one, but soon lost track on her way to one hundred. I carried her the rest of the way, pretending I wasn't out of breath. Scaling all of those steps wore Paris—and us—out enough that she sat nicely through a leisurely meal at a sidewalk café Vivian fondly remembered from her previous time here.

We dined on French onion soup, steakfrites, croque-monsieur, and finished with chocolate crepes topped with Chantilly cream. Throughout the meal, Vivian's soft moans of content set me on edge—in a good way and stirred something wild in my heart.

Paris immediately fell asleep in my arms as we met our car and driver on Rue Lepic. But the day was far from over. In the afternoon, we visited Parc Zoologique de Paris, where I had arranged a private tour so that Paris could marvel at the wild animals. Once she realized where we were, her energy renewed—her eyes wide with wonder as she absorbed everything.

While the tutor and nanny answered her endless questions about each creature, Vivian and I strolled hand in hand.

“This trip with you has been so different from my life before,” she said, looking up at

me. “Will it always be like this?” Pride swelled in my chest, knowing I could offer her and Paris experiences no one else ever could.

“If by that you mean surprises at every corner and spoiling you both, then yes. Nothing makes me happier, cupcake.” I kissed the back of her hand. “Do you love it here? We could live in Paris, you know.”

“I’ve always loved Paris, but I also miss home. Holly Creek, my shop, Paris’ school—a sense of normalcy. I feel like the charmed life we’ve been living since the hospital has been a grande voyage with you, and none of it is real. In New York, living in your penthouse, and getting to see plays and museums once you two felt better, was lovely. And now Paris? I’m waiting for life to pinch me and make me wake up from a dream because I know this can’t be our real life forever.”

“Sure it could. I can give you any kind of life you want, Vivian. Just tell me what it is and I’ll make it happen.”

She stepped closer, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Even if I want to go back to Holly Creek for a while? I’d love to return to my shop, to see Paris play with her little friends. Her birthday is in July, and she wants a slumber party. And you could be there with us—the dad at the barbecue.” Her eyes sparkled, and I knew how much it meant to her.

“Well, I do have a house to build there anyway, if that’s what you want.”

“I do. After this trip, Paris should return to her class at school and finish out the year. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for us, but I’d love to see you live in our world for a while. I think Holly Creek could do wonders for you, Richard.”

“If that’s where you two are, then that’s where I’ll be. Pleased to be the Master of the Grill.” I winked, relieved to get on the same page with her. “And of course, I’ll be

planning our next adventure with Paris somewhere new.”

“Of course,” she laughed.

We wrapped up the day at Angelina’s for their famous hot chocolate. By the time we finished, Paris had a bit of a chocolate smear on her nose.

“Come here, my little explorer,” I said, dabbing at her with my napkin to clean her up.

She declared, “This was the best day of my whole life, Daddy.”

Vivian glanced across the table at me with eyes that said just as much.

“Well, guess what? I have a feeling this will not be our last best day.”

Back at the hotel, Paris was sound asleep long before the elevator reached our suite. I gently carried her in, while Vivian pulled back the covers in the adjoining bedroom.

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Paris stirred once as I set her down, murmuring, “This is the best story,” before slipping back into slumber.

“Maybe today was too much. We still need to be careful with her condition,” Vivian whispered as we slipped out.

“I know. She was so excited today, though. The rest of the week we can slow down,” I assured her.

In our room, I wrapped my arms around her from behind, and swayed with her, gazing out at the sparkling city below. In the peaceful quiet, the rhythmic ticking of the antique clock on the wall matched each beat of my heart.

Vivian turned toward me. “I’m trying not to worry about tomorrow—just staying in this bubble with you.” Her eyes brimmed with hope, caution, and longing.

“My plan will work, I promise. One way or another, after tomorrow, Adrien will be nothing more than a forgotten name.”

She rested her forehead against my chest, but it wasn’t long before our lips found each other. Her hands fisted in my shirt, and she clung to me with everything she had.

This woman and our daughter—this family we’d built from heartbreak and healing... They weremine.

I’d protect them with everything I had, especially here—where our story first began.

GARDEN PARTY

RICHARD

I knew the moment we turned onto the narrow street lined with stone walls and ornate wrought-iron gates that Vivian had caught on. She straightened in the passenger seat, gazing out the tinted window at the familiar avenue of old-world Parisian mansions.

“I’ve been here before,” she exclaimed. “I’ve visited this neighborhood a few times. Adrien’s parents own a mansion around the corner.”

I nodded and smoothed my hand over my lapel. “Yes, they do. It’s a few doors down from the Buchanan mansion. When we were younger and spent time here, Rex and I used to play with their sons, although Adrien was the baby, much younger than the rest of us, so I didn’t know him as well.”

She raised her brows. “I can’t believe you knew them? You’re just now telling me?”

“My parents and Adrien’s have been friends for years. Jeanne and my mother were on the same arts foundation and even chaired other charities together for a while,” I explained. “But ever since Miriam settled with Mr. Astor in New York City, she’s been less present here.”

Her gaze narrowed, not in anger, but in surprise. “You never mentioned that.”

“As I devised this plan, you said you only wanted to know what part you needed to play today, which is the most important one of all.” Leaning in, I pressed a kiss to her lips as the car came to a stop outside the tall gates. “We’re going to get through this together, okay?”

The driver of the car ahead opened the back door, and we saw Paris rush out first. Her blush-pink tulle dress caught the sunlight like spun sugar, and her soft gold ballet flats shimmered as she stepped onto the cobblestone pathway. She patiently waited with her nanny and tutor by her side.

Our driver opened my door next, and I assisted my lovely date as she stepped out. Vivian gathered her long French blue skirt in one hand, the soft silk fluttering around her legs, while draping a cashmere shawl over her shoulders. Although the weather was perfect for the occasion, I had already promised her my suit coat should any rain come our way.

“Fuck, you’re breathtaking,” I said, holding her hands and leaning in, whispering into her ear. “Regal—as if you truly belong in this mansion with me.”

“The Buchanan mansion, I presume?” she asked as we broke apart, her eyes drifting upward to trace the ivy-covered columns of the limestone facade.

“Technically, it’s now the Buchanan-Astor mansion. My mother and Mr. Astor are hosting a garden party today,” I replied casually, adding, “I thought we would enjoy an afternoon out. You wanted closure. I wanted Adrien to finally face consequences. It’s easier to confront a snake like him in the open when you’ve already set the stage.”

She stared at me for a long moment before slowly nodding. “I hope you’re right.”

“My instincts tell me I am.”

She laughed softly. “That’s reassuring—and mine tells me to trust you... as if I have any choice. So, come on then.”

Paris piped up, “Daddy, is this a castle?” as she fell in step between us, gripping both

our hands.

“You could call it a petite castle, one of the finest properties in the heart of Paris. I promise to give you both a grand tour later.”

We passed through the gates and along a winding path beside the house until the garden revealed itself like an impressionist painting of a delightful Parisian day.

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White umbrellas sheltered linen-covered tables adorned with floral centerpieces, champagne flutes, and bite-sized pastries. A string quartet played under a white gazebo, their melody light and fluttering in the sunny spring air. Miriam moved gracefully among her guests in a crisp ivory sheath dress, her husband Mr. Astor by her side, exuding his usual quiet authority.

Before long, Paris' nanny and tutor swept her away to join a few other children painting in the shade of a tree. She glanced back with a fluttering wave.

Vivian watched her go before looking up at me. "She's so happy."

"She's safe and healthy, too," I said. "That's what happiness looks like. Now, beautiful, can I show you off as we parade through?"

I offered my elbow, and she accepted it, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride with her by my side. I led her through the garden, introducing her to some of Miriam's acquaintances—curators, patrons, and even a French senator who lingered for a bit too long kissing her hand, prompting me to step in a little closer.

Vivian exuded graciousness, poise, and effortless elegance, gaining many appreciative glances from Miriam's friends. "Did I tell you yet how stunning you are today?" I murmured, lightly brushing my hand down her back, and resting at the lower part of it, as we savored the finest French champagne beside the ornate archway leading to Mother's rose garden.

She looked up with a grin. "It's because this gown is exquisite, thanks to your black card."

“I merely provided the means—you brought the dress to life. Gave it shape. A rather pleasing to look at silhouette.”

Before she could respond, she fell quiet, her gaze drifting toward a woman approaching through the garden. “Jeanne’s here.”

Tall, poised, with salt-and-pepper hair swept back into a neat chignon, Jeanne embodied grace, accented by her pearl earrings and matching necklace—exactly as one would expect from a renowned Christian lady.

We moved closer as Adrien’s mother welcomed the various guests. At the sight of Vivian, her face lit up.

“Vivian, my dear, come here,” Jeanne called out warmly, arms open. “What a lovely surprise.”

“Hello, Jeanne. It’s wonderful to see you,” Vivian replied, and they embraced, greeting with cheek kisses while Jeanne stepped back to admire her. “You look radiant. The years have only increased your beauty.”

“You are lovely, and too kind,” Jeanne replied. “When you visited Adrien last year, Paris was five then. She showed me her drawing of a unicorn spaceship.” Jeanne recalled with a wistful nod.

Vivian grinned. “I remember. She still draws those from time to time.”

“I have missed her terribly. The divorce was such a disappointment. I did not agree with it. But Adrien has never listened to me. You were the best thing that he ever had. Is Paris here with you?”

“Yes, she’s over there painting right now. But I’d love for you two to spend some

time together visiting in a little while.”

Jeanne’s eyes drifted past Vivian, searching for Paris. “Yes. I would like that very much. I regret not keeping in touch better over the years.”

Turning her attention back to us, her eyes rested on me and her smile brightened further.

“And you,” she said, stepping forward and taking my hands. “Richard Buchanan. I have not seen you since you were, what, twenty-five?”

“Something like that. How are you, Jeanne?” I gave her the customary kisses on the cheek.

“I am fine. You know my charities keep me busy. My, but you have become a remarkable man. I read the article of you in the Financial Times. Your father would be proud.”

“Thank you,” I said, a peculiar lump in my throat as I glanced at Vivian.

Miriam joined us then, drifting in on a wave of perfume and clutching champagne flutes. Cheek kisses were exchanged once more.

“Jeanne, can you believe our children are all grown?” Miriam said wistfully.

“I was so sorry to miss Rex’s wedding. As you know, every Christmas we spend with the children at our orphanage in Nepal. God bless the little ones.” Jeanne punctuated her words with a sign of the cross.

Extending her hand, Miriam said, “It’s been years since I last donated to your orphanage. I’d love to contribute again.”

“I’m seeking a particular donor for our new library. How wonderful would it be to have it named after you?”

“The Miriam Library? Yes. Let’s hit up Mr. Astor before you leave today.” And that’s how the elite got things done. Money talked.

“Very kind. Richard, your mother has always been the most generous—” Jeanne began, but halted abruptly upon spotting someone I’d been expecting from across the way.

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Adrien appeared, striding into the garden with the air of someone overcompensating for what he lacked. Slate suit, sunglasses, hair slicked back in a way that screamed “too much effort to pretend he wasn’t a cheap nightclub owner” among these guests.

He stopped mid-step at the sight of Jeanne.

Then he noticed Miriam.

Then me and Vivian.

His jaw tightened.

“Adrien,” I called, raising my hand before he could spin around and escape. “So glad you could join us.”

“Adrien?” His mother could hardly believe he was here, aghast and clutching her pearls.

He hesitated, then had no choice but to approach.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” Jeanne said with a tight smile, and I was sure she whispered a reproach in French as Vivian stifled a snicker, being able to understand the language.

“Well, I, er... received an invitation from Richard,” Adrien mumbled before shifting his gaze to Vivian, his eyes trailing down her form. My fists clenched, and I fought to restrain myself from hitting him. I growled in frustration, while he merely smirked

with no real warmth reaching his eyes.

“Jeanne, if you wouldn’t mind... I fear I’ve invited you here for more than just a social visit,” Miriam explained, gesturing to the interior. “Why don’t we all move into the conservatory? We can speak more freely there, and I’d love to show you the progress my gardeners have made with propagating lavender.”

We all followed her inside. I took up the rear, just in case Adrien decided to bolt. I couldn’t help but smile at my brilliance at how this plan all came together.

A while back, when I had asked Vivian for more details about our first time in Paris, she mentioned her history with Adrien. She had indicated meeting his parents. It reminded me of something Miriam had shared about how embarrassed Jeanne had been when authorities raided Adrien’s club. Her Christian friends were particularly disappointed to learn of his involvement. That memory was the seed that had set this entire plan in motion.

I knew that if we met with him on his terms, he would manipulate us, teasing us with what we wanted—his renouncement of rights—until he got what he desired, potentially millions more from me. Although I would gladly sacrifice everything for Paris to be mine, there had to be a way to circumvent his threats. I hoped today would be a success.

As soon as we entered the conservatory, Vivian didn’t hesitate. She reached into her clutch and pulled out the paternity document—undeniable proof that Paris was my daughter.

Vivian took a deep breath and explained our situation to Jeanne. She recounted how we met. Detailed Paris’ urgent need for a kidney, and how I was proven as her father. How I stepped in to save her while Adrien hesitated and avoided her calls for days. Vivian also mentioned that Adrien often neglected to provide financial support after

the divorce and had rarely contacted Paris.

The most shocking revelation to Jeanne came when Vivian told her that upon learning the paternity results, Adrien demanded that she repay all the money he'd sent and more or he would sue.

Vivian played her part in this confrontation perfectly. Miriam, too, was on board with the plan the moment I had called and told her of it.

Jeanne took the document, scanned it quickly, and brought a hand to her mouth, while Adrien seethed with anger. She conceded, "She is not yours, Adrien. Never was."

Adrien hesitated. "I only found out recently."

I interjected, "There's more. I'd like to give Paris my name. She's a Buchanan, blood and bone and kidney. But to do that, we need Adrien to renounce his parental rights." I clarified the entire reason for our gathering here today.

Jeanne, a tireless advocate for children's causes, agreed. "Bien sur, of course. As sad as it is not to have Paris in our family, I would never want to keep her from her rightful one."

"Perfect. I happen to have the papers here." I gestured to the stack that Miriam had received via courier from my lawyers. On the garden table in front of us, I spread them out. When I extended the pen to Adrien, he scoffed and stepped back.

"What are you doing, Adrien? Sign your name. Do the honorable thing." Jeanne demanded, gesturing sharply toward the pen.

Vivian turned to her. "He threatened to stall the name change. I believe he wanted

money.”

“What? Extortion? How could you?” she seethed. “That wretched club of yours does not make enough?”

Adrien snapped back, “You know how my business interests suffered since the raid, and you do nothing to support me.”

“I would never support that filth that you call a business. First you divorce a wonderful woman, then let them move to the states, leaving her as a single mother to take care of herself and her child. And now, when that girl can become a part of a well-respected family, you dishonor us like this? But why am I not surprised? You have been a disgrace ever since you opened that vile club.” A stream of French words followed.

Adrien flinched under her anger—a reaction I recalled now. How none of those Bardeaux boys ever dared defy their strict, formidable mother. Sadly, she might be the reason he abused Vivian, having grown up with a strict mother like her.

Jeanne fixed her fury on her son. “You bring shame upon me. You always have—from your dirty club to this...”

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Adrien's face flushed. "You don't understand."

"I understand perfectly," Jeanne retorted, her tone icy. "You are not that child's father. You never were. And I will not let you stand in the way of her real family."

"You sign these, Adrien, and you can walk away," I urged him, almost sorry for him. Then I remembered he had five million dollars of mine, and that sympathy quickly went away.

Adrien shifted his eyes from me to Vivian and then to Jeanne. Realizing defeat—having been deeply humiliated before his mother—he signed the document.

Jeanne snatched the pen from his hand, folded the paper, and with one last look of disgust, commanded, "Leave."

He exited without even a backward glance. I quickly texted Mr. Astor, instructing him to monitor Adrien and ensure he didn't approach Paris in the garden before departing.

For a moment, we all stood in silence after he had disappeared down the garden path.

Jeanne handed the document to me. "On behalf of my family, I must apologize for his disgraceful behavior," she said, her tone calmer.

Vivian dabbed at her eyes with her fingers, then smiled. "Would you like to see Paris now?"

Jeanne's face softened. "Yes, please."

"I'll join you," Miriam replied. I was grateful she would, if only to watch that Jeanne treated Paris well during the visit.

I sent a quick text to the nanny, and within a minute, Paris skipped across the lawn with a crown of pink and purple flowers in her hair.

"Grandmère?" she cried, running up to Jeanne without hesitation.

Jeanne scooped her into her arms, kissing her cheeks. "You remember me?" Jeanne asked, voice trembling.

Paris nodded. "I drew you a rocket-unicorn picture, and you gave me chocolate."

Jeanne laughed through her tears. "I could never forget you, ma petite. I never will."

"And you know Mimi too?" Paris asked, tilting her head.

"We've been good friends for many years," Miriam explained.

The nanny stayed close by to watch over things, so I took Vivian by the hand, and we left the trio to their conversation. We stepped inside and found a secluded corner where I could wrap my arms around her. Only then did we let go of the tension the situation had created, finally relaxing into each other.

"That went better than I expected," I remarked.

"Is it really over, Richard? Or do you think Adrien might reappear in our lives?" she asked, still concerned.

“It’s over. He’s relinquished his rights. He has nothing left to negotiate with. The Bardeaux family is too proud, and we exposed him in front of his mother—almost like a modern-day tattling. I remember how easy it was to get the Bardeaux boys in trouble with their mother when we were kids by tattling about their mischief.” I gave her a sly smile, which made her chuckle.

Then I sobered. “I feel sort of bad, though. Learning that he was abusive to you and after seeing Jeanne’s treatment of him just now... I think the guy had it rough. I’m glad Paris has nothing more to do with him.”

“Me, too. Well, Mr. B. You certainly were quite the strategist in this plan. I can add that to your long list of admirable qualities.” Her eyes sparkled up at me.

“How about that tour of this place? We could find a cozy spot for ourselves for a while, and I’ll show you more of my admirable qualities,” I offered.

She kissed me with a hunger that left no room for doubt. “This day was everything I needed.”

I kissed her hand and led her down the hallway to the nearest bedroom. “It’s only the beginning.”

And it was.

Because we had everything now.

Trust. Peace. Love.

And each other.

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HAPPY TEARS

RICHARD

On our final day in Paris—the city of romance—we savored every moment. After a week of sightseeing, wandering hand in hand down quaint streets, and discovering hidden corners with our daughter in tow, it felt like something out of a dream. After a leisurely boat ride down the Seine in the morning, we'd promised Paris one last glimpse of the Eiffel Tower.

While the nanny and tutor whisked our little darling to the very top again, Vivian and I strolled slowly through the park below, our arms entwined as we paused often for tender, lingering kisses.

“This has been the most enchanting, romantic time of my life,” Vivian confessed, her eyes sparkling with emotion.

“Mine too,” I whispered, my heart swelling with love.

“I’m looking forward to getting back to Holly Creek, though. The past several months have been unbelievable. We’ve been through so much.” She sighed softly.

“We have. But we still have much to look forward to. A lifetime together—if you

want.” I tested the delicate waters of hope.

Her radiant, deeply touching smile warmed me. “I’d like nothing more.”

“Knowing that...” I paused, then knelt beneath a blossom-laden tree, withdrawing a velvet box from my pocket. She gasped as I opened it, and inside sat a magnificent six-carat diamond ring. Its facets caught the sunlight and shimmered with the promise of forever. I chose six because that’s how old Paris was right now.

“I don’t have a grand speech worked out. Just marry me. Marry me, Vivian. Because in every dream of mine, in every lifetime, I’d choose you, us, our daughter, and our future. Fucking marry me with all your heart—be my wife. Bemine.”

Tears glistened in her eyes as she covered her mouth. “Oh, Richard... Are you sure?”

Her hesitation was not quite the enthusiastic yes I had hoped for. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life,” I continued earnestly. “I can’t imagine a future without you and our little one. But if you need a moment to think, I understand—just know that I long for our family to be complete. You’re my future and I?”

“Shh, Richard, I don’t need time. My answer is yes. I would love to marry you. We should have been together with our beautiful daughter long ago. We’ve wasted enough time apart, haven’t we? I don’t want to spend another day without you. I want us to be a family, too. So my answer is yes, Richard. I’ll marry you.”

Amid kisses, heartfelt embraces, and tears of joy, she slid the ring onto her finger. I shared with her my decision about the six carats of the ring, and I cradled her close against the backdrop of the Eiffel Tower—a living testament to our love. Soon, we found a bench where I seated her on my lap and interlaced our fingers.

“You’ve filled my world with happiness. You and Paris,” I whispered. “When would

you like our wedding to be?”

“Whenever. I don’t really have any plans beyond spending this summer in Holly Creek,” she said.

“You know, Miriam will go crazy over our wedding. That could take another year with her meddling, not to mention all the drama and aggravation wedding planning entails.”

“Oh. I almost forgot about that.” Her shoulders shook with laughter.

“How about this? I’ll give you a choice. We could return to New York City, let Miriam dive into planning our lavish wedding, or we could embrace spontaneity and tie the knot as soon as tomorrow.”

Her eyes widened in wonder. “What do you mean? Like elope to Vegas?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of flying to Denmark—where a couple can be united in marriage within twenty-four hours. Imagine being married by tomorrow night?”

“Really?” she giggled, a light excitement dancing in her voice as she considered the possibility. “Tomorrow sounds like the perfect moment to become Mrs. Buchanan.”

“I love hearing you say that.”

“Mommy, Daddy, look! I got a balloon and ice cream,” Paris cried out as she and the nanny and the tutor neared.

“I think I better ask Paris and make sure she says yes, too, don’t you?” I suggested.

“I have a feeling she won’t turn you down. She’s already in love with you as her father. I know she wants us to be a family.”

When she was close enough, Vivian shifted off my lap, and I picked up Paris. “I have something very serious to discuss with you, my little explorer.”

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“Okay,” she licked her dripping ice cream, on the verge of dousing the front of her dress in another minute.

“I would very much like to marry your mommy. Which means we would be a family.”

“But we’re already a family.”

“Well, yes, but the wedding makes us officially a family. Would that be okay with you if we have a wedding tomorrow? I’ll buy you and Mommy pretty dresses. I’ll wear a tuxedo, and we’ll all say ‘I do’. But only if you agree, if that’ll make you happy because we both love you, Paris. We want to raise you together and... maybe someday have a brother or sister come along, too.” I winked at Vivian. She squeezed my arm beside me as if in agreement.

Paris’ eyes sparkled as she gasped, “I want a brother!”

“So is that a yes? Can I marry your father tomorrow?” Vivian asked her.

Paris wiped her chin with the back of her hand, and in the periphery, I noticed the nanny reaching for a tissue in her bag. “Okay, that sounds fun. But can we still go on safari to Africa someday?”

Our laughter mingled with the warm afternoon air. “Yes, of course we can—as a family, the Buchanan family,” I said. “Because you’re a Buchanan now, right?” We still had some paperwork to get through back in the states to make it official, but in my mind, she was all mine.

She beamed proudly. “I am. Paris Buchanan.”

“So the next step is to make mommy a Buchanan. We do that by getting married tomorrow. And I can’t wait.”

The very next day, before we knew it, we arrived in Denmark. My assistants helped arrange everything remotely from New York. With kisses and hugs, I dropped Vivian and Paris off at address shop. The next time I’d see them would be in a quaint town hall, all dressed up and ready to marry. In the meantime, I found the nearest suit shop and purchased the perfect black tuxedo that spoke to the joy of the day.

Sitting alone in a small room within the town hall building, I waited to be called up to the judge who would officiate our wedding. I let my mind wander through the past—to the night I met Vivian, then forward to the disastrous day I was to be married to Janet. I shuddered at the thought of the horrible plans Janet and her lover had plotted. My life could have ended at their hands, and Paris would never have known the love of her real father.

That part of my life was in the past now. Today, I had a second chance at marrying, and Vivian was the love of my life. Out of the blue, she and Paris burst into my world, overwhelming me with emotions. The moment I saw Vivian, I knew I wanted her. Through Paris’ time in the hospital and the revelation that she was my daughter, I fell for them both.

Life gave me a second chance. It gave me a chance to save my daughter. Another chance at love. Today, I’d take every risk with my heart and say ‘I do’, fully aware of how precious and fleeting life could be.

A knock at the door announced it was time for the ceremony, and I more than was ready. I took a deep, steadying breath, filled with calm and happiness to begin this new chapter.

When I opened the door, it turned out to be Rex standing there. “Hey brother.”

“What are you doing here?” I held the door aside and let him in.

“Surprise! As soon as Vivian texted us about your wedding, Chelsea and I dropped everything to come.”

“And so did I.” A familiar female voice called out from behind him—a voice I would recognize anywhere. Rex stepped in, revealing Miriam behind him, accompanied by Mr. Astor. “Hello, son.”

“Mother, um...” Was she here to ruin our plans?

“Relax. I’m happy for you and Vivian.” She touched my cheek. “If marrying the mother of my precious granddaughter makes you happy and you’re doing it today, that’s all that matters.”

“Are you sure you won’t hold it against me forever for not letting you plan a huge wedding?” I side-eyed her skeptically.

“Are you kidding? Rex’s wedding planning took a year off of my life—no offense, Rex.”

“None taken.” He shook his head.

“I wouldn’t miss either of my sons getting married for anything, no matter where it is,” she admitted.

“Thank you, Mother.” I drew in a shaky breath as I fought back tears. This was my big day and my heart overflowed with every emotion. I grabbed her in a hug and whispered, “I love you.”

“You and Rex have been the best sons I could have ever hoped for,” she cried as well.

Rex cleared his throat. “It’s about that time.”

“We’ll be downstairs wishing you well, and watching your nuptials.” Tears filled her eyes and spilled over as she gently cupped both of our cheeks, switching her gaze between Rex and me. “I love you both. Your father would have been immensely proud of the choices you’ve made. Now, I need to fix my makeup before things start. Come along, Mr. Astor.”

On his way out after her, as an aside, he said, “Good job, men. I’m not sure I could have survived another year of wedding planning with my wife.”

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We all laughed and shook hands.

“We’ll toast to our lovely wives later tonight,” he winked before departing.

“I can’t believe you did that for me, Rex. Thanks, buddy.” I pulled him into a firm embrace.

“No, it was Vivian. She asked if we could bring Miriam here. She didn’t want her future mother-in-law to be upset if she missed the wedding.”

“Damn, now I wonder who has the better bride—you or me?” I teased.

“They’re both pretty amazing.”

“Fuck you, my bride is the best.” I joked.

“We’ll debate that another day. I’m happy for you, man. It’s great to see you smile again. It’s been way too long,” he said.

“I know. Thanks for putting up with my grumpiness these past few years, Rex.”

As we stepped out together, my eyes immediately found my bride and daughter across the way, both dressed in white satin gowns with flowers woven into their hair—the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen. It was like witnessing my own rare art—my Mona Lisa with her child.

I bit my lip and let the tears fall free, my shoulders shaking. Vivian dabbed at her

eyes and mouthed, “I love you.”

“Don’t cry, Mommy. This is supposed to be a happy day,” Paris said, blinking and wiping her own tears.

In a few powerful strides, I reached them and picked her up into my arms. “It is a happy day. The best. It’s okay to cry tears of joy today. I love you, my little girl, and I love your mother, too.”

“Are you ready to marry us, Daddy?” she asked, and everyone chuckled.

“Yes, Paris, I’m ready. And are you ready to marry me, Vivian?”

“Oh yes, Richard. I’m ready to become Mrs. Buchanan.”

The simple ceremony lasted a mere ten minutes, though I couldn’t recall a single word of it. All I remembered were the beaming faces of my daughter and my bride—they were all I ever wanted, and what a Buchanan desired, he surely received.

Want more Rex, Chelsea, Richard, Vivian, and Paris? You’ll see them again in *It Happened Again: A Second Chance for the CEO, Maisy and Brooks’ story*.

Read more about it on the next page.

EPILOGUE

IT HAPPENED AGAIN

Maisy Calhoun

In the elevator, alone, I sagged against the wall, finally able to relax my tense

shoulders. What a wedding. Rex and Chelsea had it all in their big city society wedding, no expenses spared, and I couldn't be happier for them.

Out of five hundred guests, I did a great job of keeping away from Brooks Bellamy, or maybe he did a splendid job of keeping away from me. Either way, it was for the best. Besides, he brought a woman with him as his plus one. Archer's date's sister, and she meant nothing to him, according to what Rex told Chelsea.

I acted like I cared less and danced the night away with anyone not named Brooks Bellamy. When I needed a break, I kept myself useful to Miriam, doing her bidding, whatever she needed me to do to ensure the reception went off without a hitch for my sister, no matter how inconsequential the task.

Brooks texted me at one point, though, and while the elevator climbed higher to my floor, I thumbed through the messages once again, reading every word.

Brooks: You're fucking gorgeous tonight.

Brooks: It hurts like hell to look at you.

Me: Then don't.

Brooks: Hard to avoid when you're the only woman in the room I see.

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Brooks: Meet me in the bar for a drink. Let's talk.

Me: About what?

Brooks: The fact that I miss you.

Me: Didn't look like it when you danced all the slow songs with what's her face.

Brooks: So you were watching me?

Brooks: Jealous?

Me: Hardly.

Brooks: You're lying. She's not the woman I want and you know it.

Me: Why do you think I danced with every man not you?

Brooks: To make me jealous, and it worked.

Brooks: Still there? Meet me.

Me: I'm busy.

Brooks: No. You're avoiding me.

Me: I can't go through this again.

Brooks: You miss me. Admit it.

Me: After New Year's, I head back to the ship.

Brooks: I'm painfully aware of your schedule.

Me: Keeping tabs on me?

Brooks: Yes. Always. I'll never stop until you're mine.

That one took my breath away.

Me: Well, don't.

Brooks: Meet me in the bar, look me in the eye, and tell me you don't want me.

Every glance his way made my heart flutter, but I never made it to the bar. Denial was the name of the game if I expected to walk back on that ship. And I was absolutely lying to myself if I thought I could attend this wedding and avoid feeling things for him again.

I shut off my phone and sighed, but it turned into an enormous yawn, exhausted from the day. It didn't help that one week away from the research boat proved jarring to my system. I'd gotten used to the feeling of floating on the vessel, the slight rocking sending me to sleep each night. On solid ground in New York City, I was almost unsteady, and sleep eluded me all week. Shouldn't be a problem tonight.

But as I stepped off the elevator, I teetered on edge in need of relief after reading our texts. Picturing Brooks so debonair in his tuxedo didn't help matters, and I imagined hearing his deep voice in my ear saying everything he texted or the way his possessive words struck me to my core the last time we were together. Definitely torturous.

I rounded the corner at the end of the hall and stopped short. No, this was torture.

Brooks leaned against my door with smoldering eyes. In one hand, he held a half opened bottle of tequila. In the other, over his shoulder, he held onto his tuxedo jacket. Around his neck, his bow tie hung with a few buttons undone, showing golden skin peeking through. And his forearms...oof. He'd rolled up his sleeves to his elbows, revealing taut muscles and veins.

Dammit. He looked as good to me now as he did on Buchanan Island over spring break—an unforgettable week together—but what a fiasco. I'd offered myself to him, my virginity, but he turned me down, wanting to wait until I returned from my year away. That led to an argument, and we failed to make up and find middle ground.

Then he proposed. I stood there on the precipice of my new, exciting career after college on a vessel exploring the world, and he asked me to stay and marry him? If he loved me, he wouldn't have been so selfish like that. He should have respected me, supported me and my opportunity to advance in my career, and for that, I left after graduation and put distance between us and any lingering feelings for him.

Until now.

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My bottom lip caught between my teeth, holding in a tiny whimper as he stalked toward me, a lion to his prey.

“I dare you,” he said, dark and sultry. “Look me in the eye, and tell me you don’t want me, Maisy.”

“I-I...” My throat constricted, unable to form the words, because he knew me too well, even after all this time.

“That’s what I thought. Now there’s only one thing I need to know.” The hand holding the bottle came up to my cheek, rubbing it, his eyes dark and intense, boring into mine. “Did you give yourself away to the professor?”

My chest heaved with a shaky breath as I shook my head, although I didn’t feel the need to explain myself. When two people are stuck on a boat in the middle of a vast ocean, working and living so closely together, yes, certain feelings emerged. But it wasn’t love with the professor, my boss. My virginity remained intact.

“Then unlock the door, Maisy, because tonight... you’re mine.” His growly commanding voice triggered me to act. I stepped past him and fumbled with the door, my hands shaking, but he took over, confidently reaching around me, taking the key card, standing so close. His aftershave became my oxygen, and his body heat, my cloak.

“Open it. Let me in.” His words feathered across the back of my neck as his lips softly brushed there. My panties soaked and electricity sparked down my spine. Goose bumps flared up everywhere. Not once did the professor’s advances elicit this

kind of response from me.

“Only for tonight. And Brooks,” I finally found my voice, barely a whisper. “This time, take all of me. All the way.”

WillMaisy and Brooks finally get their happily ever after?