



Protecting Her Heart: A Lesbian Billionaire And Her Nanny Romance

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: She saved my daughter... and stole my heart.

Rachel needed a job. I needed a nanny.

It was weird at first.

I mean, did I mention that I was also foreclosing on her business?

Yeah...weird.

I tried to ignore our attraction.

Now...even my little girl doesn't want me to resist her.

My daughter wants a second mommy

I can see us as a family.

She's in my every thought.

But I can't put Rachel in danger.

Someone is threatening me.

They want revenge.

I have to find a way to protect her.

They'll use her to get to me.

If this beautiful angel can see I have a soul, it might be in time to save mine... if we all survive.

Author's Note: This romance contains steamy scenes.

Total Pages (Source): 29

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One

Rachel

It's late by the time I get up to my apartment. Being the sole owner of a business, even one as small as the Cozy Nook, is draining. I've got to get everything cleared up for opening the next day before I can even think about going home, so it has to be about 9pm by the time I'm curled up on my tiny sofa with a cup of coffee and my paperwork.

I had barely graduated my business degree when my beloved Aunt died and left me the bookstore. Being a bookstore owner wasn't exactly my lifelong dream, but Aunt Joyce was the one who really gave me a sense of family growing up and I was never going to let her memory die.

So here I am. Owner of a bookstore that doubles as a late night kink club. Inheritor of so much debt that we can't make ends meet each month.

At least I have the apartment that came with it. I keep planning to redecorate, but every time I pull out a book of paint chips or start googling new curtains I can't help feeling that if the apartment looks any different it won't feel like my Aunt is right here with me anymore. Her cushions lend the place a sort of hominess, and if I feel grim then looking at the wallpaper I grew up with can make me feel happier.

Ever since I took the Cozy Nook over, I've been determined to make it into a place that my aunt would be proud of and that would make others feel as safe as she made me feel. It's LGBTQ-friendly and I've got a great staff who need the jobs and who

support me with making the shop as inclusive and welcoming as we can.

The problem is that being welcoming doesn't pay the bills, and Aunty sure left me a lot of those. Even the bondage events we run in the evenings aren't covering the backlog of debt that we're having to deal with.

I rub my eyes and set the pile of papers aside. I can't look at numbers any further or I'm going to scream. Instead I pull my coffee closer and start opening my mail, maybe I'll be lucky and some mysterious benefactor will have sent me an offer of patronage.

Bill. Bill. Newsletter. Letter from Lucille about her honeymoon. Bill. Wait, what's this?

I unfold the official looking paper and see that it's a notice from the company that holds my mortgage. There's a lot of legalese, but I can just about make out what it's saying. Wake Developments have been buying up all the businesses around this area and it seems like there's plans for making a super mall.

Now Wake Developments has bought my mortgage.

If I don't pay off all our debt in a month, then they're going to foreclose on me and they're going to take everything. A cold chill of fear and anger rushes through me at the thought of all the small businesses that these people have already shut down.

There was a tiny flower shop run by the sweetest old man who opened it after his wife died so he could surround himself with her favorite flowers and pass on the love and happiness that gave him. There was a coffee shop that an angry Polish woman ran and we'd gotten to the point where I could go in and we'd exchange curses in several languages and she'd give me double the pastries I'd paid for. There was an art gallery full of strange and wonderful paintings run by a handful of kids barely out of

their teens.

They're all gone.

Now they're coming after me.

They're going to close my shop, take away my aunt's heritage and make my workers jobless. How dare they? I can't believe anyone would be so cruel but I've already seen it happening. Just to make money.

I pull out my phone and dial Cody's number. She answers after three rings sounding muffled and out of breath. "Bad time?" I ask dryly.

"Not at all, how could you ask? Can you tell me what's happening in three sentences or less as fast as possible?" There's the sounds of a muffled voice in the background and I smother a laugh. Even though she's constantly couch surfing, Cody gets more sex than anyone I know.

"The Big Bad Corporate Machine is coming after our debts. I've got a lot of business talk to do. I hate it, and I hate everything."

"Sounds like you need to get laid," Cody says, which is her solution for everything.

"Sounds like I need to make more money is what it sounds like. Any tips for what I should wear to meet the capitalists?"

"That nice shirt you have in the light gray, the dark gray jacket and your black jeans. Looks stylish but not like you're trying to pander to them."

"Great. I'll let you get back to your thing."

“Her name is Elsie!”

“Goodbye, Cody.”

I hang up, feeling a little better. Cody is the person I always go-to for style advice. I’m all right but I just don’t care enough lately to really put together an outfit with any kind of panache, and Cody can look phenomenal if she puts her mind to it.

Tomorrow I’m going to go up to West Developments and I’m going to make them rethink their plans. They aren’t taking away from me what I’ve worked too hard to build up.

I pull out a fresh notebook and start jotting down numbers, working the calculator on my phone overtime. I have to go in there with something, so it’s time for me to work out how long it really will take for us to turn this thing around.

Maybe I’ll even convince myself that it’s possible.

Two

Tiffany

My alarm goes off at 5 am, as it does every day. I have my morning routine down to an art. Yoga, shower, dress for the working day, make one of my smoothies, print out Anastasia’s daily routine and pin it to her activity board. I then get her clothes arranged and by that point it’s about 6:30 and time for my to sip my smoothie and go through

h my work calendar to see what the day will be like.

Running a billion dollar business like Wake Developments is hard at the best of

times, and with the international conference coming up it seems like there's no end to the things I need to arrange.

My smoothie tastes sour this morning as I sit in the one early morning sunbeam that reaches our large dining table that we never ever use. I put more raspberries in it than honey and it makes my mouth pucker, but it would waste too much time to adjust so I gulp it down.

My name is in the news again. That's been happening a lot lately. Wake Developments Lays Off Thousands, Wake Developments Kicks Out Local Businesses for Super Mall, and so forth. I want to call every reporter who ever wrote one of those articles and ask them who their sources are.

We've had to make some layoffs, yes. But not nearly as many as a thousand. And I paid a lot of money for those local businesses to move on to better things.

But the big dog is always the bad guy in the press. I'm used to it. I'm just worried about what Anastasia will think.

Today, for instance, Mr. Blackwell from the latest batch of layoffs has been telling the press that they were bullied out of the company instead of the very generous severance packages that we paid everyone. I'm sure they'd all be very glad if I would do something in character for the devil character they paint for me.

"Mom!"

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It's early for Anastasia to be awake. I hurriedly gulp down the rest of my smoothie and go up the stairs to check on her. I am getting her privately tutored at the moment because it feels too dangerous to put her in a public school with the media storm going on.

This means that there's always something to do at home just like at work and I don't think I've ever been so terribly stressed in my life. Not even our nanny, Angie, can relieve the burden well enough for me to get space to breathe. I'm worried that Ana only plays with kids in the reading group that Anastasia takes her to.

If only Anabelle was still alive. If only there was someone I could talk to about how hard everything is and how it feels like no matter how hard I work I can never catch up with everything that I need to do.

I miss her every day.

I remember how happy we were when she got pregnant, how hopeful she was for the family that we were building together. I remember the tired laughter when we had to figure out which of us was going to get up when Ana cried and how Belle refused to change diapers for three months straight.

Life was good, life was the best it had ever been. Then one day she just fell down and didn't get back up. Blood clot in her brain. She died before the ambulance even arrived.

Anastasia was nearly two and I have been so lonely ever since. I love my daughter with all my heart but the only adult company I have left are my staff, and that's not

enough.

I peek my head into Ana's room and I can't help smiling a little at her outraged face. She's found the clothes I've set out from her and by the look of it her majesty does not approve. "Morning, honey."

"Mommy, this will not do," she says firmly. "I am not wearing my pink skirt with this."

The item referred to with such disdain is a black t-shirt with a dragon on it. I pick it up solemnly and put it back in the dresser. "Okay, what do you want to pick out then?"

"My princess top!"

"We're washing that, honey. You have to pick something else."

Out comes the pout and I have to stifle a giggle. Maybe I'm biased but I think my daughter is the cutest person on the earth. She starts rummaging through her dresser and the doorbell goes.

"That will be Angie," I say. "I'll go let her in, hon."

Angie is a pretty good nanny. She's small and red-haired and has a temper but that temper never comes out around Ana so it doesn't cause a problem. She has a bad habit of name-dropping that she was friends with Tasha Clark, the up and coming artist. She also keeps insisting that I need to get laid.

Sure, I'll get laid. The moment I can find someone who isn't just after my money, or that moment I realize that I can go on a date where I don't spend every second thinking about Anabelle. Then I'll get laid and be happy about it.

It's a common theme from my PA Jordan as well, bitching that I need to get laid, and I swear the next time one of them drops an ever so subtle hint that maybe I should get back out on the dating circuit, I'm going to fire someone. I check my phone and see the time.

Fuck, I'm late.

I let Angie in and cut through her latest story about her boyfriend. "I've got to run, Angie. Don't forget the itinerary and see if you can help Ana find something close to the princess top for her outfit today, okay?"

Angie looks a little annoyed but I don't have time to care so I run to the staircase and shout my goodbyes before grabbing my things and hurrying out to my car. There really is no rest for the wicked. Even if they're only wicked in the eyes of the media and a few disgruntled employees.

Three

Rachel

I open up the shop for the day and take a deep breath. The sun is shining in through the windows, and I'm in my happy place surrounded by books.

I try to hold onto that feeling as I get everything else ready. I know I'll have to turn everything over to Candy, my new assistant, soon. I try to linger as long as possible, but I can't keep Edna waiting.

Eventually, I know I have to turn it over to Candy or I'll be late. I tell her I'll be back soon and head up the street to the tea shop.

It's a cute shop. I usually like going there. There's quirky little kettles everywhere,

and it smells amazing. Still, I can't say that I love the reason why I'm here.

Edna smiles when she sees me. I wave and sit down across from her.

Edna is someone I met at my old apartment. She lives in an apartment that I used to be across the hall from. She's an accountant, and I'm very appreciative that she's doing me this favor.

"Hello, Rachel," she says as I sit down.

"Hi, Edna. How are you?"

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“Oh, I’m doing quite well, thank you.” She’s always been so polite.

“Should we get started?” I ask.

“I see you’re quite eager, so I think we should,” she says with a little laugh.

We start to go over my accounts. I have to admit, it doesn’t look great.

“Do you think I’ll be able to pay off these debts in a month?” I ask.

She pauses. “Well, you could, but I don’t think you’ll want to.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you fired your staff, these debts could be easily paid off.”

I don’t even have to think about my answer.

“Absolutely not,” I tell her.

She gives me a little smile. “I thought you might say that. Unfortunately, your nobleness has no bearing on your debts.”

It’s really not a noble instinct. I know that Abbie and Cody don’t do much for what I pay them. I just know that they rely on this work.

It would be a betrayal to get rid of them. It just wouldn’t feel right.

I know I have a responsibility to keep the shop open, but I also feel like I have a responsibility to them. I was really hoping the BDSM nights would help us with money.

I'll keep my employees on until the end. I can't let them go.

"What if we paid them off over six months?" I ask. "Could we keep everyone on them?"

Edna ponders this thoughtfully. "I suppose that would make it easier. It would be tight, but I think you could do it. But darling, do you have six months?"

I sigh. "I don't think so. But maybe I could pitch it. They aren't hurting for the money right now. Maybe they'll be sympathetic."

As soon as I say it, I know they won't be. Wake Developments isn't exactly known for their sympathy.

The head of Wake Developments is a woman named Tiffany Wake. Her reputation is well known.

She doesn't have a soft bo

ne in her body. She's tough and cut-throat. I suppose that makes sense. Her business is really successful.

Still, I couldn't do that. My business may suffer for it, but I care too much about people.

I think bitterly about what would happen to the bookstore if Tiffany Wake was in charge of it. She'd fire everyone and sell it to a big box store. She'd be laughing all

the way to the bank.

I don't want that fate. I'd rather have the trust and respect of my employees. I'd rather be proud of how I conduct my business than have a big bank account.

But maybe I do need a dose of that. A small voice in my head reminds me that I've let my bank account get a little too anemic lately. Something needs to change.

Edna and I draw up a plan for how to approach this. I'm hoping that being straightforward will help. If Tiffany is as tough as people say she is, she may appreciate someone coming at her on that level.

I plan to be honest. I can't pay it now, but I do have a plan to pay that will work. I hope that's enough to work. I hope she sees that I'm prepared and ready to combat this.

Edna and I finish drafting my plan for Wake Development. She gives me a hug and wishes me luck before she heads back home.

I feel a knot in the pit of my stomach as Edna leaves. Her leaving means it's time to go down and beg Wake Development to take my offer.

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I head down there, getting more and more anxious as I go. I nervously run my hands through my hair and walk into the building.

I go to the reception desk. “Hi, my name is Rachel Morgan. I’m here to see Tiffany Wake.”

The receptionist nods. “Please, have a seat. Miss Wake will be with you shortly.”

I go over to the chairs arranged around the lobby and look around. The office is just as intimidating as I thought it would be.

I feel so out of place. Not only do they do business differently from me, but they also just look different. It’s like they’re an alien race. Or maybe I’m the alien.

I curse myself for wearing mom jeans when everyone else is in a suit. It would have looked weird to wear to the bookstore and tea store, but I feel way more out of place here.

Maybe I should have made time to go home and change.

A door opens, and a gorgeous redhead strolls past me into an office. I feel my heart skip a beat.

That may have been the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. From the brief moment I saw her, I noticed her flaming red hair and emerald green eyes. I could also tell she had an incredible body under her stuffy, yet fashionable, business suit.

She looked stressed out, but even stressed, she was a stunner.

The receptionist picks up a phone and talks into it for a moment before hanging up. She looks over at me.

“Miss Wake will see you now.”

Four

Tiffany

Today is categorically awful. It's only barely begun and it's already a nightmare.

Already my personal assistant, Jordan, has had to contact me about more threats we've received in the mail. The police are stopping by later and I need to speak to them.

On top of that, we have seven new entrants in our international conference. That means we have to handle travel and accommodations on top of getting more translators.

And, as if that wasn't already the cherry on top of a bad day, I can't get my new supermall development in motion because there's a bookstore in the way. I need to foreclose on it, but it hasn't budged yet.

I get into the office later than I want to and settle in. I'm already going through the list of things I need to do when I get a call from reception.

I put the call on speaker. “Yes?” I answer.

“Miss Wake, Rachel Morgan from the Cozy Nook is here to see you.”

Perhaps my day is looking up. That's the bookstore I need to get out of my way.

"Send her in," I say before hanging up.

If I can get this taken care of, I can get started on the development earlier than expected. It's nice to be able to iron out kinks.

When Rachel Morgan from The Cozy Nook walks in, I'm taken aback.

I had expected someone older. It's the type of store that seems like it should be run by someone at least middle aged.

Rachel is young and quite beautiful. She's all curves and has long, dark hair. Even though she's dressed in what look to be mom jeans, I can tell she's stunning.

"Hi," she says. She extends her hand. "I'm Rachel Morgan."

"Ah, yes, Miss Morgan." I shake her hand. "Tiffany Wake. I understand that you want to discuss The Cozy Nook. Please, sit." I gesture to the chairs across from my desk.

She sits down, looking a little nervous. I can't blame her. I know I'm intimidating. If she lets me foreclose, she can just get this over with.

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“So, I understand I have some debts with your company,” she begins. She sets her folder across her lap.

“Yes, that’s right,” I say. She isn’t telling me anything I don’t already know.

“Well, I have a plan here for repayment,” she says, opening the folder.

I raise an eyebrow. The bookstore shouldn’t be all that profitable. It has way too many employees and not enough customers.

“You can pay off your debts with my company?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says, nodding. “I just need a little more time...”

I raise a hand, cutting her off. “I’m not interested in hypotheticals, Miss Morgan.”

I’m getting annoyed with this. It’s becoming one of those conversations. I want results. This bookstore isn’t going to get me any results.

“Can you or can you not pay your debts?” I ask.

“Well, I can’t pay them right now,” she says. “But I can pay them back over a period of six months. I have a foolproof plan in place for that!”

“If you had a foolproof plan, then your bookstore would have no debts to begin with,” I explain. “I don’t want your debt repaid in six months. I want it repaid this month. If you can’t do that, then I don’t think your business is very viable.”

She looks like she's a mixture of flustered and embarrassed. I almost feel bad, but we need to get down to brass tacks here.

I know she thinks I'm being a bitch, but I'm giving her respect. I'm not fooling around with her by entertaining a plan that I don't want to accept.

She seems to be ignoring my gesture. I can already tell she's a bleeding heart type. That's probably why her business isn't doing well.

"You don't know anything about my business," she says.

"And apparently you don't know anything about mine."

I see a flash of anger across her face.

"Are we done here?" I ask.

"No! You aren't listening to me," she insists. She goes on to say more but I hold my hand up again to stop her.

"I am listening to you, Miss Morgan. I'm just not agreeing with your proposal. I am uninterested in agreeing to a payment plan. I want the debt repaid. If you can't repay, we will foreclose on your store."

"But..." She sputters, trying to continue.

"Do you have the funds to pay off your debts by the due date. Yes or no?"

"You're not—" I cut her off.

I'm getting tired of playing these games with her. She's just wasting my time at this

point.

I hate it when people waste my time.

“It’s a no. Goodbye, Miss Morgan. You’ll be receiving foreclosure paperwork after the due date passes.”

I turn back to my computer. I want to signal to her that I am in fact done with this conversation. If she starts getting rowdy or refuses to leave, I’ll call security.

But I’ll allow her to leave with grace. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her start to move like she’s going to leave.

Good. Then we won’t have an issue. She can close her business with dignity. If she can get funds in six months, perhaps she can reopen elsewhere.

She puts her papers back in the folder and gets up. She angrily stomps towards the door. Before she leaves, she turns back to me.

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“You know, you’re just as cruel as I’ve heard.” She says. “You are cold-hearted and I hope for your sake that you aren’t like that in the rest of your life.”

She storms out, slamming the door behind her.

I roll my eyes a bit at that. She’s throwing a temper tantrum like a child.

I get back to my work. The foreclosure date is coming up fast. Now that I know we’ll get the property, I can start prepping the supermall.

Five

Rachel

I shake with rage as I leave the building and stand outside for a while trying to calm myself down. As I take deep breaths to rid myself of my anger, a wave of despair crashes over me in its place. What the hell am I going to do now?

I can’t believe what a cold bitch that woman is. She clearly has no regard for anyone’s welfare other than her own. How can she be so dismissive when people’s survival and livelihoods are at stake?

I feel sorry for her staff, but then my shoulders slump and I sigh. She might be a bitch but at least her staff can be paid without putting her company in the red. Maybe I should warn my girls, tell them they need to start hunting for better jobs with bosses who deserve them.

I walk slowly back to the shop. bookstores have always been my favorite places in the world, and I feel calmer and at home among the stacks and shelves of bright colors and imp

ossible worlds. Besides, there's nowhere else I can go.

I push open the heavy wood door and a rush of warm air hits my face. I inhale the scent of new books, sandalwood, and the sugar cookies the new girl baked this morning.

I look around the shop. It's busy for mid-morning, and I watch a few people browse the shelves waiting for something to jump out at them. It's always fun to see the difference between customers and how their browsing habits sometimes have clues to their personalities. I smile as a teenage boy hovers awkwardly around the fantasy section, glancing around to check if anyone is watching before pulling down one of our new vampire graphic novels and hotfooting it to the checkout.

I wave to Cody behind the counter and smile again as Abbie's lyrical voice rings out from the children's section, where she's already half an hour into today's children's reading corner. I'm suddenly filled with determination. This is our home, and I have to be able to do something to save it.

I grab my cell phone from my pocket and make to call Lucille. She's one of the most level headed of us all, and she always knows what to do. If I just tell her everything, she'll be able to help me fix this.

I dial all but the last digit before I stop. I forgot that Lucille and Sara are away on their honeymoon, gallivanting around Hawaii with the boys. I'm desperate, but I can't ruin their honeymoon.

I sigh and put my phone back into my pocket. I suddenly feel more alone than ever. I

must look utterly hopeless because Cody appears beside me with a cup of coffee and a concerned expression in her eyes.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, squeezing my arm gently.

I try to smile but it comes out more like a grimace. I’m just not sure how to put into words the dire straits we appear to be in. Fuck.

I inhale sharply causing Cody to look at me with more alarm. Are we going to have to close? Am I going to have to let the girls go and give up on all of my dreams? On my aunt’s dreams?

I take a sip of my coffee and try to think about how I can put all of this to Cody. I don’t want to make her worry, but I just don’t know how I can struggle on by myself.

I’m so absorbed in my wallowing that I barely register the high pitched scream, or Abbie’s shout of alarm. Looking up, I see a man grabbing at the arm of a little girl sitting listening to story time.

No.

I look around frantically for anything I can use as a weapon, but the only thing within reach is my broom. Oh well. Better than nothing.

I grab the broom and throw myself over the counter, trying to get between the guy and the door. The little girl is shrieking and I yell to Abbie to get the other kids away before charging forwards and aiming my broom at the stranger’s face with all of the rage and despair I’ve been storing up for the past few days.

It smacks into his jaw and he stumbles in shock. I raise my makeshift weapon high and bring it crashing back down again, hitting him on the head and shoulders, trying

not to catch the girl in the process. My assault startles him and his grip loosens on the tiny girl, who throws herself onto the ground and out of his grasp.

I hit him again and hear a feral roar as Cody comes charging up beside me. She's grabbed her now cold cup of coffee and throws the liquid into his face, following it with the mug itself. She kicks out at him and he stumbles backwards.

I shove him with the broom again and again, and finally he gives up, turns tail and runs from the shop. I'm sweating and breathing hard from the exertion and have to lean on the broom while trying to recover. Good old trusty broom, always here for me.

I look around to make sure the kids are okay, noting with pride how Abbie, Candy and Jess have managed to round up all the patrons and push them towards the back of the shop out of harm's way. Cody is still beside me, eyes wild as she dials the cops.

I feel something grip my leg and look down to see a pair of big brown eyes staring up at me in fear and confusion. I reach down and hug the precious little girl hard.

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“It’s okay sweetie, the bad man’s gone now. Hey, do you want a cookie?” I lead her over to the counter and sit her next to the till, rooting around underneath for my secret cookie jar.

The little girl, Ana as she so firmly tells me, doesn’t take long to recover from her ordeal. She manages to grab four biscuits at once and between big bites starts telling me all about herself. I learn about her nanny, who doesn’t seem to have re-emerged from behind the bookshelves since her charge was almost kidnapped, her school, her friends and how much she desperately wants a parrot for her birthday.

She’s moved on to her favorite Disney songs and what she’s going to name the 12 rabbits she is pestering her poor mother for when the door opens behind me. I stiffen and reach for the broom again but relax as I realize it’s just the police.

“Mommy!” Ana exclaims, and I turn around again. My heart drops.

Of all the things Ana has told me about herself, she’s neglected to mention the most important thing. That, of all people, Tiffany Wake is her mother.

Fuck.

Six

Tiffany

I stop speaking to draw breath and sneak a look around the conference room. My contractors sit around the table, nodding and occasionally taking notes. I’ve always

prided myself on my ability to engage a room.

I've just moved on to profit margins when Eva, one of my assistants, pushes her head into the room.

"Ms. Wake? Um, you have a phone call."

I pause and shoot her a look. "Tell them I am in a meeting and will call back."

She shifts uncomfortably. "But Ms. Wake, it's the police. It's about your little girl." Her voice lowers towards the end of the sentence, but the moment I hear police I am already out of the door.

I listen as the police tell me about the incident at the bookstore, and I find I can barely breathe. Not Ana. Not my baby.

I rummage in my purse and unearth my car keys and run from the office. I slam into one of the glass doors with my shoulder in my hurry, but don't even feel the impact. I dimly hear someone calling after me but don't stop.

Once in my car I realize I'm shaking. I grip my steering wheel hard and try to calm down, but all I can hear is the officer's voice swirling around in my head.

"Ms. Wake, it's about your daughter, Anastasia. We have been made aware that while she was at a public event earlier today a stranger attempted to abduct her. We need you to come with us."

I choke out a sob and press the heels of my hands to my eyes. My baby almost got kidnapped. My baby was getting kidnapped while I sat here and joked around with contractors about whether our project is on track and how soon we can crack open the champagne.

I shake myself back into the present. I can despair later, but right now I need to get across town. I need to get to my daughter.

I've never driven this fast in my life. I'm usually such a careful driver, but now I have to swerve to avoid a cab as I shoot out of a side street in front of it. The driver laying on the horn doesn't even register with me.

I skid to a halt in front of the bookstore and park haphazardly outside. I'm sure I'll get a ticket, and when the couple of police officers standing outside the shop see my shoddy parking job, they raise their eyebrows.

"My daughter! Where's my daughter, please, I have to see my daughter right now!" I plead, desperate, before they have the chance to admonish me.

One of the officer's gestures to me, and I follow him inside.

"Mommy!" My heart clamps within my chest. I've never felt such relief in all my life.

I push past the officers and scoop Ana up from her spot on the counter. As I hold her in my arms, I start to cry tears of pure relief.

"Why are you crying, mommy?" Ana looks up at me, all big brown eyes full of concern.

"I'm not," I reply, sniffing and trying to wipe away my tears while keeping hold of her. She struggles to get down but I'm not ready to let her go just yet.

"Mommy, you haven't sai

d hello to my new best friend."

I look up at the woman Ana is pointing to and have to hide my astonishment. I'm not expecting to see the beautiful dark-haired woman who invaded my office earlier today.

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“Rachel saved my life from the bad man.” Ana grins a gap-toothed smile at me and my heart melts just like it always does when I’m with her.

I look back at Rachel, swallow hard and pulled her into the hug too.

“Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.” I whisper to her, as she awkwardly hugs me back.

“Of course, I wasn’t about to let him make off with her,” she replies, and I sniff and nod again.

“Where’s Louise?” I remember suddenly, looking around for Ana’s nanny.

“She quit!” Ana’s voice is ridiculously bright considering the news she just imparted on me, and she reaches surreptitiously for another cookie.

“She...quit?”

“Yep! Or maybe she’s still hiding. Anyway, she was useless when I was dying and then she started crying because you didn’t tell her she’d have to fight off angry men when you gave her a job. She thinks that was naughty of you, mommy.”

I hear a giggle beside me and look up to see Rachel averting her gaze. She spots me looking and quickly hides her smile with her hand.

This is a disaster. I have so many meetings this weekend and there’s that whole conference coming up that I’m supposed to be chairing. What the hell am I going to

do about childcare now?

I squeeze my eyes shut in horror. It took months to find a nanny that Ana liked, or at least wouldn't scream for murder when she was left with her. I don't have time for this at all.

"Thanks again," I say to Rachel, my head already swirling with thoughts about how I can make this work.

"No worries. Like I said, I'm always first in line to save a child. Especially one as adorable as Ana."

I nod vaguely as Ana claps her hands in glee. I turn to leave but the thought strikes me almost instantly. I should thank her properly.

I whirl back around, and Rachel looks startled. "How much?" I ask her.

Rachel looks confused. "What do you mean, how much?"

"How much do you want? For a reward? For saving Ana?"

I spell it out as clearly as I can, but the woman still looks confused. I don't have time to stand here all day.

"I'm going to give you money. How much do you want?"

I wince at the abruptness of my words. It comes out far harsher than I intended but at last the realization dawns on her face.

It's my turn to be confused when the confusion on Rachel's face turns into anger.

“Excuse me? How much money do you want? Are you serious?”

I’m not sure what I’ve done wrong. I open my mouth to say something, but she cuts across me.

“I don’t want your money, thank you very much. I did exactly what any other remotely decent person would do. Now, perhaps you should take your daughter home.”

She turns and walks away, and I feel worse than I ought to at her cold tone. I’m not used to saying the wrong things and having people be mad at me. Or people turning my offers down.

I look down at Ana, who looks sad now that Rachel has left us. I jiggle her slightly in my arms until she smiles again, and take her out of the bookstore.

I try not to think about how attractive Rachel is when she’s angry.

Seven

Rachel

I stomp around in the back room for a while in an angry sulk. How dare that bitch imply that I only saved that precious little girl so that I could grab money from her mother?

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Cody comes to check up on me and I ask her to shut the shop down for today. It's a bad move and we need all the patrons we can get, but I don't think I can deal with anything else for a while. I'm so tired and strung out.

When Cody reappears, she doesn't take my pleading to be left alone for an answer. She drags me out into the shop front and tears threaten to fall from my eyes when I see what the girls have done. They've closed the shop and created a pillow fort in the children's section, with steaming mugs of hot chocolate just waiting for us.

"Thanks girls," I whisper as Cody guides me to sit down next to Abbie.

Abbie hugs me gently and Candy hands me a mug. Jess heads over to us and sits down on Cody's other side, brandishing takeout menus.

"We'll have a nice, quiet evening and eat a whole mountain of food. And then tomorrow is a new day."

"Yeah, hopefully with no kidnappings!" Abbie chimes in, and despite myself I manage a small smile.

"You were all really great today guys. I don't know what I'd do without you." I say, swallowing hard as I look around at the little bookstore family.

We're all so close, even the girls who aren't here right now. I always try so hard for them, and I know just how hard they work for me too.

"You know, we wouldn't be here without you either." Cody says quietly. The other

girls nod vigorously, and Cody takes a sip of hot chocolate before continuing.

“Well you know I haven’t had a home since I got kicked out and it’s hard sometimes, just living on people’s couches and never having any space of my own. It’s such a huge relief every day when I get to come in here and do something I love, with awesome people. And I’ve almost got enough to rent my own place!”

Candy squeezes her hand before taking up the buck. “Yeah and I’ve had to pay the rent all alone since my roommate upped and left without a word. I’m trying to find someone to take over the lease but it’s not easy finding someone who wants to share a tiny flat in a dodgy neighborhood, especially when you throw a baby into the mix. I’d be so screwed without this job.”

Abbie and Jess hasten to add their own reassurances at how much the bookstore means to them, how much they rely on it. How much they rely on me.

They’re trying to be supportive, and I appreciate it all, but I’m feeling the pressure even more now. All these girls are relying on me in order to provide for themselves, and their families, and I’ve just gone and thrown money away because I was offended.

How could I have been so stupid?

I excuse myself, smiling in what I hope is a reassuring way in response to their looks of concern, and head to the office. I’m freaking out and have to take a few deep breaths to steady myself. I’m tempted to crumble under the immense responsibilities I’ve taken on, but I know what I’m going to have to do.

It doesn’t mean I like it.

I scroll through the registration details for the kids who come to story time until I

reach Ana's name, and find the emergency number her nanny gave when they first started coming to the readings. I dial the number, crossing my fingers and hoping that it will be Tiffany who picks up.

"Tiffany Wake. I'm afraid I'm rather busy right now. I can call you back or if it's business related, call my business line and you can arrange a meeting or call back with my assistant."

"Tiffany. Wait. It's Rachel, from the bookstore."

I pause awkwardly, and there a silence that forces me to expand further. "You know, we met earlier. The whole thing with Ana..." I trail off, unsure how to continue.

"Yes, Rachel, of course I remember you. Forgive me, I wasn't expecting your call." Tiffany makes a much smoother recovery than I would, and I swallow hard as I try to forget how icy and beautiful she is.

"No that's okay. I wasn't expecting to call." I laugh self-consciously and am glad when she joins in too.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry, Tiffany. I'm sorry I got angry and turned down your really very generous offer."

"Oh, that's okay. You don't have to apologize. I'm sorry I gave you the impression that I thought you were only after cash, and I really am so grateful for what you've done for us."

We both laugh awkwardly again. The silence is too much to bear, but she breaks it before I can.

"You know, the offer still stands. If you want it." Her offer is tentative this time, and

I can't help but smile.

"I... I'd rather not be paid for doing the decent thing and saving a child." Even as I say it, I groan inwardly. I need the money, so why can't I just accept it? What was even the point of this call?

"How about a different kind of deal?" Tiffany says suddenly.

"What do you mean?" I reply, curious now.

"Instead of me just giving you money, how about you work for me instead? Listen, that nanny was useless and it's proving harder than I thought to find a new one. I just need someone to take care of Ana for me when I'm at my meetings and trying to organize this damn conference."

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My silence must seem reluctant, because Tiffany plows on.

“I’ll pay you of course. But I’ll also give you your extension, the one you asked me about for your bookstore this morning. The six months you need.”

I don’t need to be asked twice.

“I’d love to. When can I start?”

I hang up the phone and suddenly feel so much lighter. This could be the answer to my prayers.

It’s just an extra bonus that I get to hang out with Ana... and Tiffany.

Eight

Tiffany

I awake the next morning feeling unrushed, for a change. There’s no need to hurry this morning. I have the morning free in order to introduce Rachel to Anastasia’s schedule.

Rolling over, I’m surprised by the wave of anticipation that courses through me. I’m actually feeling eager to see Rachel this morning. There’s something about the sultry bookstore owner that won’t let my attention go.

“Mommy, mommy!” Anastasia shouts, as she races into my room and launches

herself on the bed. The mattress jostles, as she scrambles under the comforter and cuddles up next to me.

“Good morning, sweet girl.” I smile down at her, wrapping my arms around her slight frame.

“I’m so happy you’re here this morning, Mama. We should have a special breakfast to celebrate,” she sque

als with delight.

“What kind of special breakfast would you like?” I ask her, noticing the time on my nightstand clock. There’s still a little over an hour before Rachel should be here.

“I want waffles with strawberries and whipped cream on them.” Her dark eyes are big and round with anticipation and excitement.

“That sounds delicious. Let me get dressed and then we’ll get started.” I scoot her out of the bed and she runs out the door and down the hall towards the kitchen.

By the time I’m dressed for the day and make it to the kitchen, Anastasia already put strawberries and whipped cream on the counter. She’s pulling the eggs and milk from the fridge as I come round the corner.

“Looks like you just about have everything ready. Maybe you don’t need my help.” I pat the top of her head.

“Oh, mama, you’re silly. I’m too little to use the hot waffle iron.” She makes an exaggerated eye roll, as if, of course, I should already know that.

Together, we mix the batter and I let her plug in the iron. I let her help me cut the

strawberries with a small knife, making sure she keeps the sharp end away from her fingers and doesn't point it towards herself.

As we work, she proceeds to give me, in excruciating detail, an account of every single tiny thing she's done so far this morning. Even though I've been here the entire time, there's some part of her that is desperate to make sure I know what's going on in her life.

I'm worried that maybe the attempted kidnapping is weighing on her psyche more than I initially thought. Maybe the fact that I've been spending the majority of my days at work and not home with her, has her missing me more than I imagined.

Of course, I need to work, but maybe it would be possible to spend less time at the office and more time at home with Anastasia. It worries me that she feels so insecure. I make a silent promise that once the big conference is over, I'll try to spend more hours at home.

We're just finishing up our breakfast, and I'm standing from the table to take the dishes to the sink when the doorbell chimes.

"Is that Rachel?" Anastasia squeals ecstatically, jumping down from her seat, her legs already at full speed before her feet even hit the ground. I've never seen her this excited about a nanny before.

"Do not open the door until I get there," I holler after her.

Her small body is vibrating as she bounces on her toes, waiting for me to unlatch the deadbolt. When the door finally opens, she screams Rachel's name and hurtles herself into the surprised arms of the woman standing on the front porch.

It's been a long time since Anastasia has felt so comfortable with someone. I'm

touched that Rachel's presence has such a positive impact on her. The impact it has on me, however, is a little more unsettling.

Rachel looks even more gorgeous than the last time I saw her. She wears dark jeans that hug the curve of her ass in the most delicious way. The blouse she has on is a dark eggplant color that accentuates the fullness of her breasts.

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Her mahogany tresses frame her face in thick subtle waves, and my fingers twitch with the need to get tangle among the strands. Her lips are painted the same color as her top and I have the sudden desire to press my own to them, eager to find out if they taste as sweet as they look.

My body heats up and I have to swallow down the desire in my throat before I say her name. “Rachel, it’s nice to see you again.”

Her eyes meet mine, and for a brief moment, I see my own feelings mirrored in them. “Thank you. It’s nice to see you, too.”

“What about me? Is it nice to see me, too?” Anastasia asks.

“It is so very nice to see you. The highlight of my entire day.” Rachel says enthusiastically, giving Anastasia a quick tickle. She laughs hysterically and wiggles around before Rachel sets her back down and she runs into the house.

“Come on in.” I say.

I give Rachel a tour of the house, showing her where all the rooms are and important medications, first aid kit, along with Anastasia’s favorite books and stuffed animals. Once she has the layout, we sit at the table and I explain to her the details of Anastasia’s daily routine.

By the time we’re finished, it’s nearly noon. “I really should be going,” I say, standing from the table. “I have meetings this afternoon.”

Anastasia, who had been coloring quietly up until now, bursts into wildly overdramatic tears. “No, mama, don’t leave! I’m too scared from yesterday for you to go to work today!” She inhales shakily, as huge tears streak down her round cheeks.

My gaze darts from my daughters’ tear-filled eyes to Rachel’s face which is etched with concern. My shoulders sag. This isn’t a battle I’m going to win.

For the first time ever, I call into work and have Jordan postpone all my meetings. “Why don’t we go get some lunch?” I say. Anastasia sniffs, wiping her eyes with her fingers, before she grabs mine and Rachel’s hands and leads us to the door.

Nine

Rachel

I’m still mad at Tiffany for her behavior regarding paying off the debt and her callousness at offering me money for saving Ana. Watching her interactions with her daughter, however, are making it increasingly difficult to keep my mind wrapped around that anger.

Tiffany is actually kind of sweet, which surprises me, to say the least. It’s so blatantly clear that she only wants what’s best for Ana, and my heart melts just a little towards her.

The car ride to the restaurant is uneventful. Ana chatters away as Tiffany drives. The conversation between them is simple, with Ana asking about Tiffany’s work and new projects that are coming up.

It’s surprising to see that Tiffany speaks to Ana, not only with deep affection, but as if she’s an actual human being, capable of learning and understanding. I’ve noticed at the bookstore that so many parents speak to their children in such a ridiculously

condescending way, as if they're too young to merit any real respect.

That's always been something that irks me beyond belief. I find that I'm glad Tiffany isn't one of those parents. Kids are people, too. They deserve to be treated as such.

Before I know it, we're pulling into a small Italian restaurant near the town square. Tiffany helps Ana out of the car and the young girl immediately latches on to both Tiffany's and my hands, pulling us towards the door.

"Come on, Rachel. This place is the best," she says cheerfully.

"I hope you like Italian. This is Ana's favorite restaurant, and with how upset she was earlier, I thought this would be best." There's genuine concern in Tiffany's voice, as if she really wants me to enjoy it here, as well.

"Italian is fine," I reply, unsure what her angle is. I don't want to believe that she's really interested in my opinion. Then, I might have to change my mind about her completely, and I'm not ready to do that just yet.

As we walk through the door, we're greeted by two Italian women. They're older ladies, the lines on their faces telling the tale of the long lives they've lived. They share the same gray head of hair and perceptive eyes. From the way they talk, I'm sure they must be sisters.

Their eyes light up when they see Ana walk through the door. Their accents are thick as they each hug her and take her face in hand, kissing both of her round cheeks. They repeat the same movements with Tiffany, and when they see me, their eyes dart from Tiffany's face and back to mine several times.

"This is Rachel," Tiffany says, waving her hand between the women and myself. "Rachel, this is Francesca and Luciana."

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, holding out my hand.

They both look at my hand as if they’ve never seen one before. Sharing the kind of look that holds an entire conversation, they hold each other’s gazes for a moment before turning beaming faces towards me.

“It is so very nice to meet you,” Francesca says as she wraps her arms tightly around me. She kisses both my cheeks before relinquishing me to Luciana who does the same.

> They usher us to a booth in the back corner and before I even have time to blink, they’re piling the table full of rich smelling breads and creamy pastas. My mouth waters as the delicious aroma wafts to my nose.

The conversation is easy and relaxed, the atmosphere friendly and comfortable. Ana is too busy stuffing her face to do much else, but as Tiffany and I sit across from each other, I find myself opening up to her more than I would have expected possible.

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“I was just barely a teenager when my dad died, and I went to live with my aunt,” I say solemnly.

I tell her how my aunt raised me, all through my teenage years. Which, quite possibly, makes her the biggest saint in the world. Teenagers are hard enough to deal with, but add grief and a world turned upside down... I’m amazed that either of us survived.

Even after moving away to college, she was always the one I came home to. She was more of a mother to me than my own birth mother had been. I don’t know why I tell her all this, but when I finish, she shares something about herself in return.

She explains to me about her life at Harvard. You’d think she had a life of privilege there, but being a woman, and a lesbian as well, meant that she had to work even harder to prove herself to every male classmate, every male professor, even to her own family.

“Looking back at it now, I can’t believe I put so much effort into being able to beat everyone at beer pong and pool, just to make a point. After I took all their money, they had no other choice but to respect me.” She laughs heartily and I find myself grinning at her in response.

Ana looks up from her plate. Her lips are spread in a wide, sauce covered smile. “This is so much fun! Mama, can we go shopping now? We can buy stuff and have even more fun!”

“Oh, sweetie, I have so much work I need to do,” Tiffany starts to say.

Ana's eyes immediately fill with tears and her lower lip begins to quiver. "You know what, miss?" I pull her attention to me. "I bet if we go shopping, just the two of us, we can buy all kinds of stuff that your mom usually won't let you get. I bet we could have lots of fun together."

"Really?" Ana searches my face, before glancing back at her mom. Tiffany nods her head with a smile.

"Could we get gummy worms," Ana says slyly, gaging Tiffany's reaction from the corner of her eye.

"Sure, maybe even chocolate bars," I say as if that's the most illicit thing imaginable.

That causes Ana to giggle, and she finally agrees to let Tiffany get some work done. Tiffany sends me a warm, grateful smile and mouths the words, thank you. I smile back as my heart does a little flip flop in my chest, and a fuzzy feeling wraps around me.

Ten

Tiffany

I get home early and manage to catch dinner with Ana and Rachel. I quickly get lost in my thoughts. Over the past week, I've really noticed how badly I needed someone competent to look after Ana.

In the past the nannies have been less than competent. I feel like none of them really cared. Rachel obviously cares about Ana.

I don't need a nanny that will love my daughter like their own, but it is nice having someone who cares and tries with her.

Rachel is a hard worker. I respect that. She's more than earning her pay with me.

I also can't help but enjoy spending time with her. I've been finding more and more reasons to come home early lately.

Not only do I love seeing my daughter, but I also get to have dinner with Rachel. I have to admit that it's a pretty serious bonus.

These feelings have been keeping me up at night though. I haven't felt this way about someone since Anabelle.

I push down the thought. No. Anabelle was once in a lifetime. That part of my life is over.

I have never felt pain like I felt when I lost her. It felt like there was no more brightness left in the world.

But I had to go on for Ana. I couldn't let her world be over even though mine was.

I know she feels the loss. I see it sometimes, but she's managing it.

She does like Rachel though. She likes her a lot. And why shouldn't she like her nanny?

I just worry that it gets dangerous to get so attached. I don't know how long this thing will last.

This is all the more reason why I have to realize that these feelings for Rachel are a fleeting fancy. I can't disappoint my daughter like that. I can't take someone else away from her.

Still, I can't help but notice every little thing about Rachel. I tell myself that it's because she's so beautiful and she's around so much, but I don't know.

It could be that, or it could be something more.

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I don't want it to be anything. I need to give Ana stability. I need to give myself stability too.

I can't pursue just any beautiful woman. Truthfully, I'm not sure if I can pursue anyone.

My mind goes back to last night. We brushed hands and the room got so hot I had to fan myself. I thought I was going to faint.

I suppose not even I can deny the sexual tension between us. Like I said, she's absolutely gorgeous. I want her. I really do.

I get up after we finish eating and start to gather the plates to do the washing. Rachel helps me and follows me into the kitchen.

I can feel myself blush as she does. Suddenly, I become aware of every action I take. Every step, every breath becomes deliberate and awkward.

I hear Ana giggling from the other room as she watches me. Way to look out, kid.

She follows us and peeks at us through the door frame. Every time I go to look at her, I see her smiling face retreat behind the wall to hide.

She's not the best at being subtle, but she's so cute it's hard to get mad about it.

Still, I'm the mom. I try to give her a stern look when I catch her. I don't want to encourage too much spying.

We stack the plates beside the sink and I start washing. Rachel grabs a towel to do the drying.

I continue to be ultra-aware of what I'm doing. Even so, I'm nearly dropping the plates as I hand them to her. Shouldn't my deliberateness with this make me better at this and not worse?

Rachel smiles at me and shyly looks away when I hand her the plates. A few times, I even catch her staring.

I can't help but wonder if she's feeling sparks too. I shove those feelings down. I don't want to get attached.

As we work, I hear a little voice start to sing from the doorway.

I turn and see Ana poking her little head in and starting to sing "Kiss the Girl" from The Little Mermaid.

I love my daughter, but I do not appreciate her trying to wingman me right now.

"Anastasia," I say sternly. I try to give her the most mom look I can muster.

Rachel is turning bright red. She looks pretty cute when she blushes.

"Okay, Ana, time for bed," Rachel says. She starts to chase after her, shooing her with her hands.

I watch the two of them go. They look like they could be a family.

I turn back to the washing, embarrassed. I start to wash, but I put the plate down and start laughing.

All of this seems so absurd. I feel like a schoolgirl with a crush.

I feel like the child in the situation. My own six-year-old seems to be more sure about it than me.

Oh, to be young and carefree. I almost forgot what that's like.

For a moment, all the cares and worries in the world, fade away. I'm just laughing in my kitchen about my kid trying to get me to play the field.

I laugh harder than I have in a long time. I laugh harder and harder until there are tears streaming down my face. I try to keep it down so Rachel and Ana don't hear.

Rachel will think I lost my mind, and Ana will feel empowered to pull this again.

I wipe the tears from my eyes as the laughter subsides. I giggle a few more times and go back to washing. That felt good. Really good.

I try to think back, but I can't remember. I don't know when the last time I laughed was.

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I know I had plenty of laughs with Anabelle, but I'm not sure it's happened since.

I smile to myself and suppress a few more giggles as I work. Maybe there will be more laughter again soon.

Eleven

Rachel

I shoo Ana out of the kitchen. I start heading upstairs with her.

I can't believe she started singing that song while Tiffany and I were doing dishes. It's so embarrassing. I want to scold her, but I guess now I know I'm not crazy for thinking something is there.

When she settles back into bed, she has a huge smile on her face. I can't punish her when she looks so happy.

"Ana," I say, trying to sound stern. "Do you know why what you did was wrong?"

She giggles in response. This kid is going to be the death of me.

"Ana, honey, I don't want you to get your hopes up about something that isn't going to happen," I explain. "Life isn't always like it is in your cartoons."

"But my mom is happy," she says. "And people who make each other happy should be together!"

I pause for a moment. I can't exactly argue with that logic.

"That's true, but making each other happy doesn't necessarily mean people will be good as a couple. Friends make each other happy too!"

"So you just want to be friends with mommy?"

Well, that's not necessarily true, but I can't tell her that.

"I want you and your mom to be happy. I'm happy that I get to hang out with you, kiddo."

"You should marry her," she insists. "I want mommy to be happy. You make her happy."

I try not to blush. Maybe I should be asking Ana for dating advice. She seems to have this all figured out.

"Sorry to disappoint you, kiddo, but it's not going to happen. B

ut your mommy is happy and we can hang out together and have a good time."

"She's happier when she's with you. She's around more when you're here."

My heart skips a beat. I wonder if that's really the case.

In any case, I have to shut this down.

"Good night, Ana. Sleep tight and dream about someone else you can play matchmaker with." I reach out and ruffle her hair.

She giggles and gets settled into bed. I go to turn off the light. She starts humming the song again.

“Ana!”

She giggles and stops. I sigh and turn the light out. I shut the door behind me.

I head back downstairs to Tiffany. She’s finishing up the washing. She turns and smiles at me.

Her face is red, but she doesn’t look embarrassed. I feel myself getting flustered.

Ana is right. She does look happy. Could this really all be because of me?

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“Hi,” I say. I don’t know how else to break the awkwardness between us.

“Hi,” she says back. “I’m sorry about my daughter. She can be a little wild sometimes.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I just don’t want her to get her hopes up,” I say with a nervous laugh. “We don’t want her disappointed, right?”

There’s a flash of something across her face. It looks like disappointment, but I tell myself I have to be imagining it.

“Right,” she says with nervous laughter of her own. She set down the plate she’s holding to dry.

“Hey, do you want a glass of wine before you go?” She asks. “I’m sure you’ve had just as stressful of a day as me.”

“Oh! Um...” I trail off. I feel like I’m getting into dangerous territory here. There’s undeniable tension between us. Even Ana noticed it.

Oh well. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

“Sure,” I say with a smile. “That sounds great.”

She smiles back and goes to pour me a glass of wine. I sit down and watch her as she does.

She's so gorgeous. I could never get tired of watching her. I start to imagine doing some adult things with her now that Ana is down for the night, but I quickly push the thoughts away.

I have to stay focused. The wine might be counterproductive to that, but I can't let myself get too into this.

"Ana didn't give you too much trouble, did she?" she asks as she sets a glass of wine down in front of me.

I take it and take a sip.

"Oh no. She was great," I say. "She's just precocious."

"That's a nice way of putting it," she says with a laugh. "Precocious. Really, she's a bit of a troublemaker. Strong headed too. She likes feeling like she's in charge of everything. Wonder where she gets that from?"

We both chuckle at that. She swirls the wine around in her glass. I take a sip.

Somehow, even under the kitchen lights, she manages to look stunning.

I go to set my glass down and miss the coaster. My glass tumbles over on its side. I jump up.

"Oh gosh! I'm sorry!" I exclaim. "Here, let me clean this up."

I go to grab the glass.

"It's fine, really," she says. She goes to grab the glass too.

Our fingers brush. I feel sparks flying between us. I look up at her.

She's looking back at me, breathing heavily. She takes a step forward.

I'm so intimidated and turned on. She looks like a hunter ready to catch her prey. I find myself unconsciously moving towards her.

She quickly strikes. She wraps her arms around me and pulls me into a passionate kiss.

I'm breathless and surprised by the action. The kiss feels incredible.

She pushes me up against the counter as she deepens the kiss. I can already feel wetness growing between my legs. I want her so badly.

I think back to the BDSM demonstrations I've seen at the club. I have to admit, I've imagined they'd be a bit like this. She's certainly taking control, and I'm putty in her hands.

She pulls away for a moment and I immediately miss the way it felt when we were kissing.

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“Why don’t we take this upstairs?” she says in a husky voice.

I nod eagerly. She takes my hand and leads me towards her bedroom.

Twelve

Tiffany

I lead Rachel back up to my bedroom. My head is spinning.

I can’t believe I kissed her. I can’t believe she kissed me back. I can’t believe we’re about to do what we’re about to do.

I try to seem confident as I walk up the stairs to the bedroom. I have to stay quiet and try not to wake Ana. Thank god the walls are well-insulated. She shouldn’t hear anything.

I don’t think I’ve ever been this turned on in my life. Or if I have, it’s been a long time. Not since Anabelle.

But something about Rachel just attracts me to her. I know that’s she’s an absolute knockout, but it’s not just that.

There’s something deeper there. Something that makes me wet just thinking about her.

I can’t deny that we’ve been having crazy amounts of sexual tension lately. So much

that I've been wanting to push her down and fuck her basically every moment I'm around her.

I want her. I want to possess her. I want to feel her body against mine.

We haven't even started yet and I feel like I could already orgasm at the slightest breeze.

I look back at Rachel. She's just walking, but she makes it look sexy. Her eyes are half open in a lust-filled haze.

I look forward again. We're almost there. Then I can tear her clothes off and fuck her silly.

I pull her into the bedroom and pull her close to me again. She feels so unbelievably good against me. She practically melts into me.

I kiss her and run my fingers through her hair. Her tresses feel soft and luscious between my fingers. I've wanted to do this to her for a long time.

Rachel presses herself into me and lets me take the lead. She's soft and warm with curves in all the right places.

I bring her over to the bed and pull her down onto it with me. We lay facing each other, still kissing.

Her hands tentatively begin to feel my body. They rest on my hips and lightly trail down the sides of my legs and up my ribs.

Her touch is electric. The longing looks and secret desires between us are all coming to fruition. I can hardly believe this is happening.

I begin to feel over her body as well. She feels just as nice as she looks. She has an incredible body, even though she tries to hide it with her mom jeans.

I push her onto her back and get on top of her. Her legs fall open for me. I get in between them.

Even this early on in our romp, she's submitting to me. The way she's naturally falling into that dynamic is intoxicating.

It's making me want to see just how far I can take this. I already knew I wanted to fuck her, but now I know that I can boss her around a bit along the way. Every little thing she does is only further turning me on.

I have to admit that I love being able to dominate my partner. Nothing turns me on more.

I already want her so much. Now I can have her in my favorite way. It's making my head spin.

Every touch leaves me breathless. I don't think I've ever wanted anything more than I want to fuck her right now.

My pussy aches for a release. I know hers does too.

I press my leg in between hers. She gasps and immediately starts grinding on it, trying to find a release from the friction. I love the feeling it makes.

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I kiss her harder, wanting to get all of my passion out through affection. She arches her back up towards me, pressing her breasts against mine.

I free one hand from underneath her and go for her breast. I squeeze and feel it over her shirt. She moans into the kiss.

I love it when I can make a girl do that.

I kiss her neck. I can smell her perfume. It's the best thing I've ever smelled.

I start to shove her shirt up

her body, wanting to get at the skin underneath it.

Her skin is soft and warm. I can feel goosebumps form as I run my hands over her.

I'm quickly growing tired of waiting. I start to get her clothes off as quickly as possible.

I'm too impatient and turned on to worry about sensually stripping her right now. This is all based in desperation.

I pull my clothes off as well, not wanting things to be uneven. When she's naked, I take a moment to sit back and admire her. She's even more beautiful than I imagined.

And I imagined that she was pretty beautiful.

I take her wrists and pin them above her head. If she's going to act like a sub during foreplay, I'm going to make sure she follows through with it.

I start to kiss down her neck and rub my body against hers.

For the first time in a long time, I'm able to put my fears and anxieties aside. I'm not thinking about work or nannies or development plans.

I'm totally present with her. And it's making all of this feel even more intense.

I wish I could live in this feeling. I almost don't want to finish. When we finish, it will be over.

But for now, I get to stay right here. I get to have a beautiful woman pinned underneath me. She's completely submitted to me, and I'm going to give her the time of her life.

I give over to all of my instincts and act purely on feeling. I don't think. I just do.

The way she's rubbing herself against me makes me think she's doing the same thing. She wants the release as badly as I do.

But right now, I'm the one in charge. She'll orgasm when I say it's time.

Thirteen

Rachel

As I lay naked underneath Tiffany, all I can think about is how much I want her.

She has my wrists pinned above my head. I writhe naked underneath her. Her body

rubs against mine and sends shocks of lust and pleasure through me.

I had always been a little curious about the acts the other girls talked about at the club at the Nook, but this is more mind-blowing than I ever thought possible.

With Tiffany, it feels natural for me to fall into a more submissive position. I feel submissive naked underneath her with my arms pinned above my head.

I know she would stop if I asked, but I don't want her to stop. I want her to keep going.

I spread my legs more to give her full access to my body. I want her to have her way with me. She sits up a bit keeping me pinned and smiles as I move.

She reaches into the drawer next to her desk and pulls out a pair of wrist restraints. She secures my wrists in them and then attaches them to the bed.

With both of her hands now free, she runs her hands over my body. She lightly runs her nails down my torso and sits back on her knees.

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The teasing is almost too much to handle. She knows what I want, but she's not giving it to me yet.

She keeps doing this, stopping occasionally to squeeze my breasts and play with my nipples. I didn't know sex could feel this great.

I've had the occasional fling and a few college romances, but nothing has compared to this. I'm certainly not inexperienced, but I feel like all of this is entirely new.

She reaches down between my legs and begins to finger me. Her other hand continues to explore my body.

The movement is so simple, but so electric. I always thought that I would be the best at getting myself off, but she's pleasuring my body in ways I never have.

I try to take note of what she's doing, but the sensations are completely overwhelming. I wonder to myself why nobody else has ever made me feel like this before.

I thrust my hips against her hand, wanting more of her. She obliges and I feel her fingers fill and manipulate me.

When I go to the BDSM nights at the shop, I've always been curious if it felt better. Now I know it does. It's so much more passionate and intense.

I haven't felt this way in past relationships. I haven't opened myself up in those relationships either. I've always closed myself off.

After watching first-hand how messily my parents' relationship fell apart, I knew I didn't want that for myself. I wanted to be independent and take care of myself. I didn't need to open up to anyone.

I made a few exceptions in the past, but no one has ever made me feel like this. I was comfortable with being alone. I thought that was my fate. Now Tiffany is showing me how much more you can feel with someone else.

I'm completely at her mercy. It's a position I never thought I would be in.

Still, it's just sex right now. Nothing more.

But damn is it good sex. Definitely the best I ever had.

There's something more as well. I know it wouldn't feel this good if there wasn't more there.

I'm offering my body so wholly to her because I trust her. And I trust her because I'm feeling myself falling for her.

I like her. I like her a lot. And I desperately wanted her to make me feel just like this.

Now I'm getting my wish. And I'm about to have the best orgasm of my life.

She continues to finger me and play with my clit until I come. I feel the familiar knot of tension release as wave after wave of pleasure rips through my body.

It's something that feels almost familiar, but I know it's not. I've never had an orgasm this good in my life. I want to keep going, but my body is spent.

I pant heavily, laying on the bed after the orgasm. She gives me a kiss and undoes my

wrists. They ache just a bit from where I pulled on the restraints. I rub them out of instinct. I sit up in bed and kiss her.

“That was amazing,” I say, breathily.

She kisses me back. “Now you can do it to me,” she says.

She turns away from me and bends over on all fours. She looks back at me and smiles. She looks incredibly sexy from this position. I have a fantastic view of all of her goods.

And I know exactly what she wants me to do.

I lean forward and begin to eat her out. She moans and grinds her hips against me. I use my tongue to tease her clit and add in some fingers to thrust in and out of her.

I can tell how much she’s enjoying this. I do my best to show her as good of a time as she’s shown me.

When she finishes, she finishes just as hard as I did. She moans loudly and her body spasms through the orgasm.

When she’s done, she falls on her side, panting. I cuddle into her. She wraps her arms around me, holding me.

I give her a kiss and she kisses me back. This kiss is just as passionate, but less urgent. We’re silently thanking each other for the good time.

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I try not to think too hard about what we just did or what it means. I'm worried if I do, I'll start to feel nervous or shy. I just want to lay here and kiss her. I want to focus on the way her body feels against mine.

We keep kissing and holding each other. I don't know what will come next, but this may have been the best night of my life.

Fourteen

Tiffany

Light from the morning sun streams past my blinds, causing me to stir in my sleep. The weight of a delicate arm resting across my chest confuses me, until I realize it must be Ana sleeping in my bed after a bad dream. "Sweetheart, I told you there aren't really monsters under the bed."

"Hmm?" A different and deeper voice, not belonging to my daughter, questions me. "What are you talking about Tiffany?"

Memories of last night come flooding back to me as I turn to meet Rachel's sultry and sleepy eyes. Her plump lips are turned down into a frown, and I remember kissing them last night as she whispered my name. "Nothing, I just forgot you were here."

"Last night wasn't memorable for you?" She seems slightly offended, and I have to re-phrase.

“Oh it was.” I smirk, placing a kiss against her forehead. “Go back to sleep.”

She does, smiling in her delirious state before settling back into the bedsheets.

I lie awake next to her, my heart suddenly pounding as I realize what I’ve just done. My stomach turns as I imagine Annabelle in Rachel’s place, and I close my eyes to erase the image of the sleeping woman from my mind.

I haven’t been this close to another woman since Annabelle’s passing, and it frightens me. Last night I let Rachel in, and I let her witness parts of me I fully intended to keep hidden for the rest of my life. Guilt weighs me down but I try my best to slip out of bed without waking Rachel.

I have to get out of here. I quickly throw on a pants suit, not bothering to brush my hair as I rush out the door. When I pass Anastasia’s bedroom, I continue on without looking back, knowing she would be disappointed in me too.

After a hectic car ride, filled with several sighs and internal debates about whether or not to turn back, I finally arrive at my office. “No calls.” I can’t stand to look the secretary in the eye as I hurry to my desk, but I hear her call after me as I speed by.

“Of course Mrs. Wake. I’ll have Jordan block your schedule.” She types something on the computer, calling my personal assistant on the phone before I slam my office door closed harder than I intended.

Though I’m surrounded by paperwork, there’s no possible way I can get anything done. An attempt to work on the mall project just sent my mind reeling with thoughts of Rachel. Between the intensity of last night and the fear I felt before I fled this morning, I’m at a loss for what to do.

Tossing my papers aside, I get up and begin to pace around the room. “I can’t get any

closer to her,” I decide out loud. “What was I thinking when I fell for the enemy in the first place?”

Not only did I delay the shopping mall plans by offering Rachel that extension, but I hired her as my nanny and let her get too intimate with me and with Ana. If she had just accepted my initial payment for saving my darling daughter in the first place, I wouldn’t be in this mess. Now, I’m stuck trying to prevent the inevitable doom of both our business and personal relationships.

“Tiffany, is everything okay in there? You’ve been stomping around for an hour now.” It’s Jordan, knocking

softly at the door as he awaits my answer.

I contemplate making a snide comment about how this is the first time I’ve seen him come near my office this week, but I reconsider. “I’m fine, just keep pushing all my calls until I tell you otherwise.”

I can practically hear him rolling his eyes through the door. “Will do, just don’t forget about your meeting with the board later today, we can’t push that one.”

As soon as his footsteps fade, I go back to pacing. An idea finally hits me, and I know what I have to do. I begin a long text message to Rachel, addressing all of the issues I identified about our doomed relationship. All of the issues I identified in the past hour are listed, and I end with the fact that we have to keep things professional.

I sigh as I read over it and think about staying professional with her, at least until the conference where we will part ways amicably. She’s a good person, but it just won’t work between us. Besides, Rachel will get to keep her store and I’ll have the international business I’ve been working for.

Just as I'm about to hit send, I hear another knock at my door. "Jordan, I told you I don't need your help right now." I hold my head in my hands and delete the entire message in frustration, knowing I never planned to send it anyways.

"Tiffany Wake, this is Officer Jenson." My heart beats wildly in my chest, and I instantly fear for Ana's safety.

"Is my daughter okay?" I throw the door open, my eyes wide as I imagine the kidnapper coming back.

The young officer nods his head, his blue eyes shining. "Yes, ma'am, she's fine. I actually came to talk about your safety."

"My safety?" I shake my head, incredulous. "I'm standing right here there's nothing wrong with me."

He seems amused. I invite him in and he takes a seat at the table across from my desk. "The other officers and I are concerned about the amount of threats you've been receiving, and we think it's best that you increase security."

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My blood runs cold within my veins. These threats weren't a problem at first, I even planned for disgruntled business owners to be upset about the shopping mall plans. But over the past few days the severity of the threats has gotten worse.

"The officers assigned to your case think it would be best if you have some of us present for that conference. Several threats were made in reference to the conference, and we can't be too careful."

This is yet another reason why Rachel and I would never work out. There's too much danger involved in these threats, and I couldn't bring myself to put her in jeopardy. I shake hands with Jensen and agree to the security protocol, hoping none of these threats turn out to be promises.

Fifteen

Rachel

Over the past week, things have cooled off considerably between Tiffany and me. It's hard to say for sure whether or not we even had something real, but I definitely miss having her around. Sure, we may have had our moments of passion, but I haven't heard so much as a word from her since she hurried away without a goodbye that morning.

I've been taking very good care of Ana, but Tiffany barely seems to acknowledge my efforts. I set a beautiful table each night with a home cooked meal, but Tiffany's plate always goes cold and uneaten. Even in the mornings, she will leave as soon as I arrive while coldly denying my daily request for coffee.

I admit that I'm pretty naive when it comes to relationships, but I'm smart enough to know when someone doesn't want me around. She may not want me as a romantic partner, but she needs me as an employee. As I clear Ana's clean plate from the table, I consider giving her mother what she wants and forgetting that the other night ever happened.

The attentive child must sense my sadness because she jumps up from the table and points to the television. "Do you want to watch a cartoon with me? It always helps me when I feel sad."

I smile at her warmly, shaking my head after both of our eyes settle on Tiffany's vacant seat at the dinner table. "Thanks for the offer, sweetie, but I don't think that's a good idea. I have to finish cleaning up and put your mother's dinner in the fridge again."

Anastasia pouts, her beautiful big eyes glistening with tears. "Mom never comes home for dinner anymore."

The words hurt my heart. I somehow feel like Tiffany's unexplained absence is my fault, and I do everything I can to ensure Ana knows it isn't hers. "She probably just got caught up at work, she has a huge shopping mall project to finish."

The irony of my statement isn't lost on me, and I chuckle at my choice of words. Never in a million years did I think I would be in the Wake household, defending the woman who once threatened to shut down my business. Nonetheless, I pull myself together for Ana's sake and begin to pull out some Tupperware containers.

As I pick up Tiffany's untouched plate, Ana runs up to tug on my sleeve. "Wait, not yet. Can we wait a little bit more?" She looks as if she's about to cry.

I can't so no, and I also can't leave this food sitting out all night. "Of course we can.

But in a few minutes we have to move it to the fridge so it doesn't go bad."

Ana nods, thanking me before running off into her room. I sit back down at the empty table and debate the consequences of pouring myself a glass of expensive wine as I stare at Tiffany's plate. The longer I stare, the angrier I become.

The constant back and forth of having strong feelings then getting denied is exactly why I don't do relationships. I'm already doing everything I can for Tiffany's daughter, and the woman can't even thank me by showing up for dinner to please Ana. Just as I resolve to call Tiffany and give her a piece of my mind, I notice that my phone isn't on the counter where I left it.

"That's funny, I could have sworn it was right here a second ago." I speak to myself softly as I retrace my steps, but I still can't find it. Not even a second later, I hear a dial tone coming from down the hall.

Confusion washes over my face, and my mind is littered with flashbacks from the attempted kidnapping. Could someone be inside the house putting Ana's life in danger? I bolt to her room, only to find the young girl with my phone in her hands.

"What are you doing? I was looking for that phone, young lady." I sit on the floor next to her and end the call she started.

"I was just trying to call my friend." She looks downcast, but still she hands me the phone when I ask for it.

"Well you're not going to have much luck with this number." The youngster has dialed an assortment of random keys, none of them even close to resembling a phone number. "It's a little late to be calling a friend anyways, they're probably in bed like you should be."

“I know.” Ana sighs, hugging a stuffed animal close. At this point, I’m pretty sure there’s more to the story that she’s not telling me.

After a moment of silence, it dawns on me. “You were trying to get a hold of your mother, weren’t you?” I try my best to remain calm, though the simple fact tugs at my heartstrings.

Shyly, she nods and buries her little face into the stuffed cheetah’s fur. “I was only trying to help.”

“Help what?”

I can see a light blush forming on her face as she answers. “I want you and mommy to be happy together again. I miss her too, so I thought that if I said I was scared she would come and eat with us.”

I wish that Tiffany possessed half as much empathy as her daughter. “It’s not good to lie, even if it would make your mom come home quicker. Besides, she doesn’t seem to like me very much.”

“She’s happy when you come to our house! She said you make her smile, just like my other mommy used to make her smile.” Sadness accompanies that last part, and I decide that I’ve had enough.

On one hand, I’m overjoyed to hear that Tiffany shared my feelings at some point. On the other, I’m purely enraged that Tiffany keeps leaving Anastasia to deal with her mother’s passing alone. “Don’t worry honey, I’m going to call Tiffany right now.”

I g

ive the child a hug before storming into the hallway with the phone. Once Tiffany answers, I waste no time. “Look, you can stand me up any day of the week, but when it comes to your child you have no excuses for not coming home.”

“Excuse me?” Tiffany is already angry, and rightfully so. I hope my harsh words knock some sense into her.

“You heard me. I don’t care what happens between us, fighting or not, you need to be here for Anastasia.” My breathing is ragged, and I take a while to calm myself as she answers.

“How dare you tell me what’s best for my daughter. I hired you to care for her, not to lecture me. Besides, I’m busy at work with shopping mall plans.”

Her words cut deep. I notice she doesn’t address our relationship or lack thereof, so I bring it up again. “Do you think the other night was a mistake?”

She chuckles darkly. “Rachel, obviously you were a mistake. I should have just given you the money and left the first time.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing, and I have to move to another section of the house so Anastasia doesn’t see me getting upset. “You’re just as heartless as I’ve always suspected.” Tears begin to roll down my cheeks as I wrap my free arm around my stomach.

I don't even wait for the cold response I know is coming, and instead I call up Cody and Abbie to vent about what just happened. "Can you believe her?" I rant after giving them the details.

"I'm so sorry." Abbie sighs.

Cody yells towards the phone in the background, showing her support. "It will all work out, you're a sexy lady who can get any woman she wants!"

I laugh hard, almost spilling that expensive glass of wine I finally poured for myself. A few minutes into the conversation, Ana pads into the living room with her blanket. She's probably heard everything I've said, and I pull her onto the couch to comfort her.

"Are you and mommy fighting?"

"Guys, I'll call later." I wrap her in my arms and soothe her, but before I can hush her, a loud crash from outside causes both of us to stiffen.

After peering out the window and begging Ana to run to her room, I inch closer to inspect the source of the sound. Something tells me I'm about to be in serious danger, but I'm not going to go out without a fight.

Sixteen

Tiffany

How dare Rachel talk to me like that! I slam my phone onto my desk, surprised that the force doesn't shatter the screen. That woman has no idea what it's like to be a single mother. She has no idea what it's like to lose the only person you've ever loved and be left to pick up all the pieces when they're gone.

She's a debt ridden twenty-five-year-old for fuck's sake. What does she even know about responsibility to others? I have a child to care for. A child, whose needs I have put above my own for years. She has no idea what that kind of sacrifice means.

Even as I'm thinking all of this, there's a small part of my mind that keeps trying to remind me that Rachel does know what it's like to lose the important people in her life. Her father. Her aunt.

She's struggling to keep the bookstore together so the girls she employs there don't get left out in the cold with nowhere to go. In her young life, she's given up a lot to take care of the people she loves.

I don't want to think about that now, the need to be angry with her is too strong. Letting the anger gnaw and fester, I sit at my desk fuming as I scroll through email after email. The screen blurs in front of me, and I don't really see the words glowing across the screen.

The door burst open and I jump as three women come barging in. Jordan is hurrying behind them. "You can't go in there. You don't have an appointment. You have to wait outside."

They ignore his orders and charge towards my desk. One woman, her short dark locks sticking haphazardly out from under the beanie that covers her head, flops down in the chair across from me and swings her feet up on the desk. The heavy boots she wears thump across the wood as she crosses one ankle over the other.

"Excuse me! What do you think you're doing?" I sneer at her.

She sniffs the air and glances around as if my office is far beneath her status of... what... band groupie fresh off the tour bus. The other girls stand in front of the desk looking down at me.

The honey blonde glares at me from behind thin framed glasses, one hand propped on her hip. The red head looks down her straight nose at me with fierce green eyes, ready for a fight. I stand from my chair, putting us closer to the same level.

“What exactly can I do for you ladies?” I ask casually, waving Jordan back. He huffs a little before stepping towards the door.

“We’re Rachel’s friends,” the red head says haughtily.

“I’m Abbie,” says the blonde. She hooks a thumb in the direction of the red head. “This is Jess, and this is Cody.” The one in the beanie sends a wry smirk my way.

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“What exactly is it that you’re doing, messing with Rachel like that?” Demands Jess.

“I don’t see how my relationship with Rachel, or lack thereof, has anything to do with the three of you,” I say calmly, sitting back down. Effectively dismissing them, I add, “Now if you’ll excuse me.”

“No,” Jess says. She looks at me and I notice a sheen of tears in her eyes. “Rachel is the nicest, most loving person I’ve ever met. She bends over backwards every damn day to take care of us and make sure we all have a place to go where we can feel safe.”

“You have no right to hurt her the way you have,” adds Abbie, placing one hand on Jess’s shoulder.

“We love her, and we’re willing to do whatever it takes to make sure she knows how much we appreciate her.” Cody eyes me, gauging my reaction.

I eye them all speculatively, before letting my shoulders sag, and the weight of my actions come down on me. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt her. Rachel has been nothing short of amazing these last two weeks. She didn’t deserve the way I treated her.

I’m devastated by the pain that I’ve caused her, but before I can say any of this, my phone beeps with an incoming image. I glance down at the screen and my heart shatters in my chest. My breath hitches in my throat and a strangled sob burst from my lips.

“What the hell?” Asks one of the girls.

The number the text came from is unknown. The image is of Rachel and Ana. They look terrified. Rachel has her arms wrapped protectively around my baby girl and a pleading look in her eyes. Ana’s eyes are glistening with tears and her cheeks are red and streaked.

I can tell from the photo that they’re still at home. The kidnapper is there with them. He must have broken in somehow. How did he even know where we live?

My mind is a swirl of panic and questions as I dash from my office yelling for Jordan to call the police. The startled expression on his face barely registers as I charge past him. There’s no time to stop and explain.

The stampede of feet echoes behind me, but I don’t slow down. I race from the building slamming into my car as I struggle to get the door open and get in the seat. I barely get my seatbelt fastened before I’m careening from the parking lot like a crazed maniac.

My heart races in my chest as the street passes in a blur outside the windows. What if I’m too late? What if he hurts them before I get there? How will I ever survive losing Ana?

I don’t want to believe that’s a possibility. How could someone deliberately hurt a small child? My heart breaks at the thought. People do it all the time. Every day you read about that kind of thing in the news.

Even after losing Annabelle, the possibility of losing Anastasia never once occurred to me. Now, that’s the only thing I can focus on.

Seventeen

Rachel

I'm startled by the sudden crash, but tell myself not to be so silly. A racoon has probably gotten into the dumpster on the sidewalk outside the house.

I kiss Ana on her soft hair and tell her to stay put while I go to see what's happening. I just reach the kitchen door when it's suddenly flung open. The door handle hits my stomach and I'm pushed backwards into the wall, slumping down onto the floor.

Through my surprise I dimly register that Ana is screaming. I struggle back to my feet and come face to face with the guy from the bookstore. Fuck.

I make to charge at him but he's clearly learned his lesson from my earlier attack, and I stop short as he waves a long sharp kitchen knife slowly in front of my face. It catches the light, glinting dangerously.

He walks slowly towards me, pushing me backwards. I hear Ana whimpering behind me, and past the guy's shoulder I see a smashed window where he must have broken in.

I hit the back wall hard and reach down grab Ana's hand, trying not to look away from the man in front of us. She's sniffing and whimpering and I see his eye twitch in annoyance. I'm suddenly terrified that he might hurt her to get her to be quiet.

No. Nothing is going to happen to this little girl on my watch.

I crouch down beside her and pull her into my side, covering her face with my arm. I rock her gently, trying to calm her down.

"It's okay. Everything's going to be okay, I promise," I whisper to her.

“You should relax, girlie. I’m not gonna hurt you... yet.” He winks at me and my stomach churns.

“Please don’t hurt her,” I whisper, but it only makes him laugh.

“Sit there and keep quiet. You’ll both be fine as long as you do as I say.”

He spots my cell phone on the coffee table and grabs it. He takes some photos of me and Ana huddled together in the corner, humming as he fiddles with the phone.

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I gauge the distance to the back door and wonder if we can make it, but dismiss the thought almost immediately. He is closer to Ana than he is to me, and if I try to pull her up and run the knife will catch her almost immediately.

“Done!” He

proclaims proudly, and then stares at me.

He seems to be waiting for me to ask him what he’s doing, so I oblige. I put on my best damsel in distress voice, hoping he won’t see us as any kind of threat. Ana is curled into my side, still shaking with sobs but mercifully silent.

“I sent that bitch Tiffany Wake some photos of her darling little girl over here. That should get her back here soon enough. She’s gonna learn what happens when you mess with good people, when you make good people angry.”

I wisely decide not to object to his insistence that he is a good person. Instead I try to engage him in small talk, hoping to find some common ground or get through to him. He doesn’t rise to it.

Next, I try to reason with him but that only seems to make him angrier. He starts pacing across the living room, muttering about how he’s going to teach Tiffany a lesson she’ll never forget. He’s too enraged to take any notice of what I say.

I sniff a little and try to keep myself from crying. I don’t want Ana to see that I’m upset and get even more scared. I wonder if I can grab my phone off the table without him seeing but he turns around and, reading my mind, picks it up and puts it in his

pocket.

Time crawls past, and I try to keep Ana as still as possible so that he doesn't notice us too much. I wonder if Tiffany has called the police, or if he sent her a message saying that if she does so she'll be sorry.

Ana fidgets beside me. I hold her firmly by the arms to keep her sitting down but she squirms and wriggles. I'm worried she'll wriggle free of my grasp and try to run from the room.

"Hey, excuse me? She needs to go to the bathroom." I try to attract his attention and he slowly turns around.

"So?"

"Please, just let me take her to the bathroom. You really want to be standing in a room reeking of piss?"

He stares at me for a long moment, and I try to make us look as least intimidating as possible. Finally, he gestures for me to get up.

I pull Ana into my arms and walk as directed to the bathroom.

"I'm right out here. Don't try anything you'll regret." He warns me, and I nod slightly.

We enter the bathroom and I lock the door. I put Ana down and scan the room, my eyes falling on the tiny window high on the back wall. It might be a squeeze for me, but I can boost Ana out, no problem.

I crouch down and put my finger on my lips, signaling for her to be quiet. Ana nods

seriously, her eyes wide with fear.

I unlock the window and open it as wide as it will go. It's high up, but I can manage to get Ana up there and I just hope she doesn't hurt herself falling out on the other side. I don't have any other choice though.

I crouch down next to her again, put my lips right up against her ear and whisper the plan to her. "Listen to me, Ana, you have to be super brave and do as I say. I'm going to push you out of that window okay?"

She shakes her head violently, and goes to speak, but I put my hand over her mouth in warning.

"Ana I'm sorry but you have to. Tuck your head in when you roll, like you do in gymnastics, and when you get up you run as fast as you can to the nice neighbors across the street and tell them what's happening. The ones with the new puppy, you remember them?"

She nods, crying now, and I scoop her up and stand on the rim of the bath. I've just got her up onto the windowsill when I knock a bottle of shampoo onto the floor with a clatter and we both freeze.

There's a moment of silence, and then the guy starts banging on the door and screaming. He knows.

I panic and push Ana harder. "Go, sweetheart you have to go!" I urge her.

She whimpers but manages to get out of the window until she's clinging to my arm and dangling outside.

The door starts to buckle from the man's weight against it, and I wish more that

anything else that I could just tell Tiffany how I feel before this madman gets to me.

I wish I could tell her that I love her.

Eighteen

Tiffany

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I screech through three stop signs and a red light, barely even noticing them. I'll be in trouble if a cop sees me, but there's nothing I care about more than getting home and saving Ana and Rachel.

"Jesus!" Cody screams from the passenger seat, clinging to the door as I round a corner, almost colliding with the car coming out of it. The other driver lays on the horn, but I don't slow down.

We skid to a halt outside my house and I mount the car onto the pavement. I don't even turn off the engine, already opening the door before we even fully stop. I see a couple of curtains twitching in the neighbor's houses but make a break for my own.

My stomach lurches when I see Ana dangling from the window. I feel sick and stumble, but Abbie's hand on my arm steadies me. We rush forwards and I manage to catch Ana's swinging legs.

"Baby it's mommy, it's okay, mommy's here!"

When she hears my voice, Ana stops struggling and drops down into my arms. We fall to the ground and I squeeze her hard. We're both sobbing now, and I push her hair out of her face and look at her hard.

"Are you okay? Ana, are you hurt?" I urge her, and my mind fills with relief when she shakes her head.

"Rachel," she whimpers, pointing to the house. Just then, there's an almighty crash and someone screams.

No, not someone. Rachel.

“Go, I’ve got her,” Jess grabs Ana and pulls her away from the house. She clings to Jess, sobbing hysterically. Jess already has her phone out and is dialing 911.

I turn to the other girls, who all nod to me, and then race into the house.

The kitchen is a mess of glass and broken crockery, and my beautiful big window overlooking the park is smashed. We follow the noise through the living room and into the entry hall.

A man is pounding and kicking at the door to the bathroom, yelling in rage and slamming his body against it. The door is starting to buckle under his weight, and I hear Rachel screaming from the other side.

“Hey! You fucking dick, what do you think you’re playing at?” Okay so it’s not my greatest plan ever, but I have to get him away from Rachel.

As the intruder turns to face us, I gasp. I recognize him and my heart constricts in my chest. Todd Wilson, one of the staff members I had to let go when the company hit a rough patch almost a year ago.

I know there’s bad blood and I’ve even seen the interviews some of my ex-employees have given to the daily rags who thrive on sad faces and sensationalist gossip, but I never thought that someone could be so angry with me that they would hurt my family.

Todd lunges forward and as I see the steely glint of metal in his hand I realize he has a knife. I duck beneath and around him, and he stumbles slightly in surprise. As he turns to face me again, I’m ready.

I channel all my rage and my terror for my daughter and the woman I love and punch him hard in the jaw. He staggers backwards but Cody is waiting for him and brings her knee up sharply into the small of his back. He cries out in pain and drops the knife.

Jess quickly kicks the knife away as Cody brings Todd down and then sits on his back to keep him there. His screams are muffled by the thick carpet in the hall and Jess glares smugly at him.

I turn and knock softly on the bathroom door.

“Rachel? Rachel, it’s Tiffany, it’s okay to come out. Are you okay, Rachel, I’m so sorry?”

I’m babbling into the wood of the door when I hear the familiar sound of the lock being pulled back and Rachel rushes into my arms. She’s sobbing and I cling to her, needing her to know how I feel.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry and I love you and I’m so sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry and I love you too and I thought I’d never get to tell you how much I love you because I thought I was going to die.”

Our apologies run over each other, loud and messy. Rachel tries to draw back to look at me, but I refuse to let go.

“No Tiffany, listen. I got Ana out through the window but I don’t

know where she is. I told her to run, we have to find her.”

I shake my head, still not loosening my grip. “No, no, it’s okay Rachel. She’s

outside.”

“We pulled up as she was getting out. She’s with Abbie now,” Jess adds, rubbing Rachel’s back soothingly.

“I love you so much. You mean so much to me,” I whisper to Rachel, and she laughs weakly.

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“I love you too. You have no idea how much I love you and Ana.”

“Oh yay, this means I have two mommies!”

I turn around sharply at Ana’s voice, afraid that she’s escaped Abbie, but breathe a sigh of relief when I spot the police officers swarming into the house. Abbie is behind them, holding a squirming Ana.

The police take over from Cody and drag Todd off the ground and into the waiting police van. I reach out to Ana and scoop her into my arms. Rachel wraps her arms around us both and kisses Ana softly on the head.

“We’re going to need you all to stick around to be interviewed,” once of the officers announces to the bookstore crew, who all nod seriously.

“Sit down. I’ll call somebody to fix that window,” Jess orders, nudging me and Rachel to the couch.

Abbie has already located the broom and starts sweeping up the broken glass and crockery. I try to object and tell her she doesn’t need to, but she just grins at me and carries on tidying.

After Cody gives her interview, she finds our takeout menu drawer and asks Ana what she wants. Cody orders food for all of us from two different places and sees the officers out when they finish.

I huddle on the sofa with my girls as the others bustle around us. Ana has finally

calmed down and sits quietly in the middle. Rachel grips my hand so tight it seems like she'll never let me go.

I sigh deeply, and hope she never does.

Nineteen

Rachel

After everyone is gone and everything is cleaned up, Tiffany and I plop down on the couch. We've put Ana to bed and, for now, don't have anything that requires our urgent attention.

I lean against her before I remember that we don't quite know what this is. I pull away, embarrassed.

Tiffany smiles at me. "It's okay. You can lean on me."

I sigh and go back to leaning against her. It feels nice after the night that we've had.

It's funny. I should feel so much more stress, but it all just melts away when I'm touching her.

Here goes nothing. I decide to take the plunge and ask what I've been wondering.

"What is this?" I ask while I'm still feeling brave.

She hesitates. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," I say.

“What do you want it to mean?” she asks. She sounds a little scared.

I almost have to laugh at that. Tiffany Wake is afraid of my thoughts on something. I would have never expected this to happen when we first met.

I reflect back on the events that have unfolded since we met. We’ve had our trials and tribulations. If this happened with anyone else, I would for sure think they came with too much drama and baggage.

But there’s something different about Tiffany. She’s just different than anyone else I’ve met before. She’s genuine and tough. She’s soft when she needs to be.

And I have to admit, I can see myself in her family. Ana and I get along and I just love her.

I can’t go on without her. I’m in too deep. There’s no turning back now.

So I need to tell her. I need to tell her all the things that are going on in my head and in my heart.

“I don’t want to ever be without you,” I say. I look up at her. “That’s how I feel. I want to date you seriously. I can’t go back to how things were before knowing now how incredible you are.”

She looks frozen. I don’t think she breathes the entire time I’m talking. Then, she lets out the breath she’s been holding, and she smiles.

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“I feel the same way,” she says.

A knot of anxiety I didn’t know was there releases. I sigh happily and wrap my arms around her, getting more comfortable. I could definitely get used to this.

I’m happy I’ll be able to get used to this.

She strokes my hair, and, for a while, we just enjoy each other’s company. I happily melt into her while our breathing sinks up. It’s a nice break from the chaos that’s been going on recently.

But then I realize that I want more. I think she’s thinking the same thing.

My hands wander around her body and her hands wander around mine. It isn’t sexual at first. We’re simply getting used to each other’s body. We’re exploring what we now own through our relationship.

I’m hers and she’s mine. Nothing can ever change that.

She continues to do this for a while before slipping a hand underneath my shirt. Her hand wanders around my back and stomach before reaching up for my breasts. I chuckle and smile up at her.

“I think I know what you want,” I say. “I want it too.”

“Let’s go to my bedroom,” she says. She leans down to give me a kiss. “We’ll figure everything else out tomorrow.”

She gets up and offers her hand to me. She's so chivalrous.

I take her hand. She leads me upstairs to her bedroom. I feel like I'm floating on air as we walk.

When we reach the bedroom, she shuts the door behind us and pulls me in for another kiss. I happily kiss back.

We've never kissed quite like this before. It's new, but just as good as the kisses that were driven by lust. This one is driven by love.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her close to me. I'm frustrated at the results. These pesky clothes are keeping me away from my girlfriend.

I start to pull at her clothes and she pulls at mine. We quickly undress each other and toss our clothes haphazardly aside.

I pull her in for another kiss. She takes me over to the bed and we lay down in it. I cuddle up to her. Now we're close.

I look over her and she looks over me. Our bodies are tangled together. With her leg in between mine, I know she can feel how wet I'm getting. She smiles and gives me another kiss.

"Let's do something about this," she says as she reaches down to play with my pussy. She pushes me onto my back and spreads my legs.

She starts to slowly play with my clit, building up the pleasure inside of me. I didn't know it was possible, but it feels even better than it did before. I think it's because I'm more sure now.

I know I'm not going to lose her and she's not going to lose me. We're holding onto to each other for the rest of our lives.

And it certainly is a nice bonus that she knows how to make a girl feel good. While she's massaging me, she reaches over to her bedside drawer and pulls out a few toys. She spreads out a few dildos and vibrators on the bed.

She leans down and gives me a kiss.

"Now we can really have fun tonight." She says.

I don't know if it's that she's doing something different now or that the anticipation is making me hornier, but that might be the hottest thing anyone has ever said to me.

I spread my legs a bit more and thrust my hips up towards her. I know it probably looks lewd, but I'm too worked up to care. She's all mine and we're about to have the best sex of our lives.

Twenty

Tiffany

Rachel is thrusting her hips up at me. It's the most erotic thing I've ever seen. I try to keep my head on straight while I plan my next move.

Though I suppose if I don't remember everything, I can always try it later. The thought makes me practically giddy. I can't believe that the gorgeous, writhing naked woman in front of me is my girlfriend.

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The thought only makes me more determined to give her the best sex of her life. I want her to feel so good, she remembers this moment forever.

And I'll be there to make sure she does. I'm never leaving her side again.

After all of the craziness of tonight, I think we both need this. It isn't as urgent as it was last time, but we need each other just the same.

I would move mountains for her. I didn't think I'd feel this way about someone ever again. She's someone I trust enough to be with my family. Someone I trust to always love me.

And I'll always love her. I'll remind her of that every day. She'll never feel a bad feeling ever again if I have something to say about it.

I grab one of the dildos and start to slowly pump it into her. She moans as it enters her. She thrusts her hips down onto it, fucking herself with it.

She's wet enough that it slides in easily. How did I get so lucky that someone I love like this would be this sexy?

I lean down and kiss over her breasts. She arches her back up towards me. I gladly take the invitation and begin to suck on her breasts while I fuck her with the dildo.

This part is just to build some anticipation. I hope she doesn't think I've forgotten about her clit. That's for the grand finale.

I get her nice and worked up. Her moans turn me on more and more. Finally, I can't take it anymore, and neither can she. She pushes me over to my side. I slide the dildo out of her.

She takes a dildo of her own. This one vibrates. She turns it on a low setting.

“Don't think I've forgotten about you.” She says this in a breathy whisper before leaning down to kiss me. She runs the dildo all over my body.

It tickles me in all the right ways. I'm so overstimulated from getting her worked up that the slightest movement feels like an electric shock.

Now it's my turn to moan and writhe.

She pays particular attention to my breasts with the vibrations. She circles them around, getting closer and closer to my nipples.

Finally, she reaches them and runs over them with the dildo. I feel my nipples harden as she does. I als

o feel myself growing wetter and aching for a release.

She plays with my nipples for a while before bringing the dildo down to my pussy. She slides it into me, fucking me with it. The vibrations feel intense, and she quickly finds my g-spot.

She keeps going, make me want more.

I grind against her. The motion feels incredible, but, ultimately, it isn't what I want. These toys are fun, but nothing feels as good as she tastes.

I gently push her hand away. She takes the dildo out of me and sets it aside.

“I know what I want to do to you,” I say between kisses.

“What’s that?” she whispers back.

“You’ll see.”

I give her a few more kisses and give her breasts some attention. She makes happy little noises as I do.

I push her on her back and give her another kiss before sitting up. I scooch myself up the bed and straddle over her face. I lean forward for access to her pussy as well.

I use my hands to spread her legs. I wiggle my hips above her. She laughs.

I start to rub her clit.

“This is no laughing matter,” I say. Her breath hitches in her throat.

“I guess not,” she says between desperate pants.

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“Do you want it?” I ask.

“Yes. So much.”

I smile to myself.

“Me too.”

I lean down, putting my head in between her legs. I begin to eat her out. She lifts her head up in between mine and does the same.

In this position, we’re like a circle of pleasure. The better I feel, the better I want to make her feel, and vice versa.

I tease her and do my best to get her off. She does the same to me.

She finishes first, orgasming hard. She stops eating me out for a moment while she does.

I get off of her and massage her clit as she comes down. She looks happy and worn out. She smiles up at me.

“Now it’s your turn,” she says.

She pushes me onto my back and nestles in between my legs. She gets her head down and starts to lick me again. Her hands reach up and start playing with my breasts.

I have to give it to her, this is an incredible feeling.

I don't last too long like this. I was already on the edge, and this is more than enough to push me over. I finish and feel my body spasm as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me.

When I'm done, I pull her up close to me so I can hold her. I press my front to her back and spoon her. I hold her tightly in my arms.

If it were up to me, we'd stay like this forever. This post-orgasm haze, sleepily holding each other feels like a dream come true.

But maybe it's good that it's not up to me. Then we'd just be here. We'd be happy, but we'd never experience all the other happy things yet to come.

I sigh as I hold her. I can feel her breathing start to slow as she drifts off to sleep. I follow shortly after, hoping I'll dream of her.

Twenty-One

Rachel

I sigh happily as I survey the shelves in front of me. I put in a huge order for around a hundred new titles from up and coming LGBT writers last week and the books have finally arrived. I've spent all day arranging them into a new display at the very front of the store.

It's quiet just now, but I know it's about to pick up soon. We have a book signing taking place tonight, and then a new Domme is going to do a show at the after-hours club. Things are really picking up around here.

Tonight also marks the unveiling of our new bar in the after-hours club, and I'm excited to see what people will think. Thanks to Tiffany's investment I've completely remodeled the basement club and installed new equipment. It was closed for a month for renovations and tonight is the grand reopening.

Our stock has expanded drastically and we've been able to implement a new stock checking routine thanks to the new technology Tiffany bought for the place.

She suggested we hire decorators but I had a better idea. We bought gallons of paint from the hardware store and the bookstore girls and their kids, as well as all our friends and the kids who attend the story time sessions, all helped to paint the walls. The memory of excited shrieking, and the pleasure on the kids' faces when they sit in their children's corner now, make me beam with happiness.

"What's gotten you so happy?"

I turn around as I hear Tiffany's voice float across to me. I'm about to respond when Ana hits me with the full strength of her tiny body, making me take a step backwards.

"Mama Rachel we're going to eat pasta tonight! With cheese and carrots and strawberries!"

I scoop her into my arms and make a face. "Ew, strawberries in pasta? That sounds gross, young lady."

She beams at me, throwing her arms around my neck and hugging me hard. "No, silly! The strawberries are after the pasta but they're going to be the best bit, I can just tell."

Tiffany appears beside us and wraps her arms around us both. I reach up to kiss her softly on the lips, and lean back into her. I love being the little spoon with her, she

always makes me feel safe and warm.

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“Well? What’s gotten you so excited?” Tiffany prompts me again.

“Oh, just – this. The bookstore is thriving, everyone is happy. I have you.”

“Sappy girl,” Tiffany teases, kissing me again.

Ana breaks us apart and demands attention too. I laugh as I catch Tiffany’s eye, and we both swoop down to peck Ana on both cheeks. She giggles madly.

“You ready to go or do you need more time here?” Tiffany asks me.

This might be a big night for the after-hours club but I’m leaving it in Lucille’s capable hands. Tiffany is taking me and Ana for dinner at the new Italian place nearby that I’ve been dying to try for weeks.

“Nah, I’m ready. Just let me get my coat and say goodbye to the girls.” I leave Tiffany and Ana to make their way back to the front of the store and head to the office to grab my coat and purse.

I straighten a couple of displays on the way, and stop briefly to compliment one of our regulars on their latest book deal. I check my reflection in the mirror in the office, and carefully wipe away a smudge of lipstick from when Tiffany kissed me. I haven’t looked this happy in months.

When I reach the front of the shop again, I find Ana surrounded by the girls. Tiffany winks at me as she spots me, and I realize that Ana is once again telling the story of how she got me and Tiffany together... with some extra embellishments of course.

“And then I decided that because Mommy and Mama Rachel are both useless I’d have to steal myself to get their attention! So I did and then Mommy was crying because Mama Rachel couldn’t get out of the bathroom and then she did and then the police were there because there was some man there and he was yelling. But it was okay because Mommy got Mama Rachel out of the bathroom and was really soppy and then we got noodles.”

“Who told you we’re both useless?” I ask her defensively as the girls all laugh.

“Lucille,” Ana, Cody and Jess reply in unison.

Lucille shrugs sheepishly. “Well you are useless. If you’d have just called me instead of moping about for weeks I could’ve told you that.”

“Yeah, I was going to call you on your honeymoon and drag you away from your beautiful wife. Sure.”

“The beautiful wife thanks you for your restraint,” Sara chimes in, and we laugh again.

“See? I averted the first argument of your married life. You should be thanking me, not calling me useless!”

“Ahh well, the first argument of our married life happened at the airport when Sara told me off for giving the boys too much cake and promising Lucas a pony so really you only prevented our second argument.”

I snort as Sara swats Lucille around the head, but quickly rearrange my features into a more sympathetic expression when she turns to mock glare at me too.

“When are we getting the pasta though? It’s now, right?” Ana has grown bored of us adults teasin

g each other, and my stomach rumbling tells me that it agrees with her priorities.

“It is now, but you have to get your coat on.” Tiffany rolls her eyes at me before helping Ana shove her arms into her coat.

I hug all of my girls in turn, squeezing Lucille extra tightly. “You’re the best,” I whisper to her.

“Not as good as you. You’re doing a really good job Rachel, I’m so proud of you.” She whispers back, returning my squeeze.

Despite Ana’s insistence that pasta needs to happen sooner rather than later, she insists we wait while she hugs all the staff members too. Then, she runs ahead of us to the door, before running back and grabbing our hands.

As she leads us out of the bookstore and down the street, I look over and meet Tiffany’s eyes. She smiles at me, and my heart flips in my chest.

I’ve never felt so happy and safe.