



# Single Dad's Second Chance

**Author:** *Ariana Cooper*

**Category:** Romance, Billionaire Romance

**Description:** Billionaire. Single dad. Desperately alone.

I've got it all. Or so they say.  
Except for the one thing money can't buy.  
Enter Mia. My whip-smart secretary.  
Off-limits. Irresistible. Mysterious.

By day, she's my right hand.  
By night? I wish I knew.  
One chance encounter.  
One forbidden kiss.  
One broken rule.

Suddenly, she's everywhere.  
At the office. At home with my son.  
In my every waking thought.  
She's becoming our missing piece.  
But her past is catching up.  
Now I'm faced with a choice:  
My company? My heart? My son?

What if I can't have it all?

"Single Dad's Second Chance" – A sizzling workplace romance that blurs every line. Fans of single dads, forbidden love, and heart-wrenching choices, this one's for you!

**Total Pages (Source):** 66

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

1

HENRY

I finished my workout ten minutes early, hoping I'd be able to surprise my secretary at her desk. Hurrying through my post-run stretches didn't do me any good, though.

The one and only Mia Ferris wasn't at her desk.

And I pulled the top of my quads, being careless in my rush.

Dammit.

I limped my way down the corridor at the Dunn Enterprises building, leaving the empty area where Mia would normally be, typing away.

It was Wednesday, after all, and she tended to not come in until mid-morning. While it wasn't out of the norm for me—the CEO—to be aware of when she was in and at her desk, it probably veered to weird territory for me to memorize everything that brunette did. It couldn't be normal to plan my workouts for when she wasn't in the building, either.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying the company of a solidly dependable woman.

Employee. A solidly dependable employee.

As luck would have it, though, I wouldn't be so fortunate to bask in the warmth of

her presence now, anyway. She wasn't at her desk. And my father was seated in front of mine.

Holding back a deep sigh at seeing my father, Eddie Dunn, in my executive suite, I strode all the way into the room and let the glass door close behind me with a gentle click.

I loved my father. I truly did. He was the one role model I always tried to follow. He was the man I attempted to impress.

Before, when he was the CEO and I was only an executive, some might have teased and predicted that I was an ass-kisser, sucking up to the big boss at the top with the goal of taking over one day. Dad had made it abundantly clear since I began college that I'd be the next CEO of the business he started. It was a given. I'd never seen any need to stand out for the promotion I already knew I'd be getting when he retired.

Still, his opinions mattered. I wanted him to be proud of me. I took pride in knowing he saw me handling the reins of his company with care and intelligence. Every child wants their parents' approval. That held true to this moment as I lowered myself into the leather chair behind the huge desk I'd ordered to replace his. I planned to always work toward the reward of his approval and happiness.

Just so long as he kept his opinions relevant to work. To the business. Notmeor how I lived my life. Lately, that was all he wanted to harp about, and I simply wasn't in the mood for another one of his favorite how-can-I-nag-you-about-your-life talks.

"Morning, Dad." I shifted in my seat, wincing with the stretch of my leg.

"Morning." He lowered his coffee cup. Even though he was retired, he was familiar with this place and made himself at home whenever he pleased. His official role was over, but he liked to stay involved. "Hurt yourself?"

“I just worked out too quickly and rushed through the cool down.”

He chuckled, well aware of how impatient I could be. “You’re always rushing around.”

“You say that like punctuality is a flaw.”

“Punctuality is a strength—for normal people.”

I pointed at myself as I rubbed my thigh. “I’m not normal?”

“You’re not when you try to cram too many things to do in a day.”

I shrugged. “What can I say? Work hard, play hard.”

“You call running five miles on the treadmill every morning a form of play?” He arched one thick dark brow. Grays and silvers showed through his brown hair, but his face was only moderately lined with wrinkles, making him appear distinguished without looking old.

“Sure.” You forgot about the strength training before the run.

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t think you know how to have fun.”

That was a low blow. Of course, I was aware of the dynamics of “fun”. That was why I planned to stop by Mia’s desk. Debating the most ridiculous and asinine words to suggest for that daily word puzzle she loved was always fun. She was fun, regardless of the task or assignment at hand.

I sighed, tamping back the disappointment that I’d need to wait longer to see her. My father wouldn’t keep me for long. He understood that I had meetings and calls to

handle. My job had once been his, and he was clued in to the demands of the CEO's schedule. But chatting with him would cut into my time for planning other things, and I'd be behind for the rest of the day. If I was lagging with what I needed to accomplish, I'd miss out on those downtime moments with her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“Anyway,” I said diplomatically as I ceased rubbing my thigh and sat up more. I’d plow right past his critique of how “fun” or “unfun” my life was. Working hard had always been my priority, and I refused to think that was a weakness. “The new nightclub’s construction is almost complete.”

He sighed, setting his coffee down. That long exhale was a breath of defeat. If he hoped to have a heart-to-heart talk about my work-and-personal life balance, he’d have to wait for another time. Besides, I’d hooked him with that line. He wasn’t in charge here, but he was excited to see the company grow. “It seems like they only broke ground months ago.”

It’d been almost a year now, but I understood what he meant. Dunn Enterprises began with importing and exporting. Then it shifted into consultation services. And now, since the last couple of years, we’d made headway into the hospitality and entertainment sector of the economy, owning a growing chain of nightclubs.

“It’s amazing how quickly the brand can spread.” Dad smiled, looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows behind me that offered a view of the cityscape. “Just three years ago, these nightclubs were a whimsical what-if.”

“Now, we’re opening our third club. And it’ll be even bigger and better than the first two.” A wide grin spread across my face. It was impossible to hide my glee, and I didn’t try to mask it. We deserved this success. I was due this win. I’d worked long and hard to get everything in line for the new Dunn-owned nightclub to open in Miami. Striking out in a touristy area like that would be a goldmine.

“Sure, it will.” Dad nodded as he rubbed his chin. “The location alone will ensure its

popularity.”

“We can’t only rely on beaches and sunshine to draw tourists there. This club will stand out among the other establishments of nightlife. We’ll make it unique.”

“What’s the tentative name, again?”

“Fifty.”

He scrunched his face. “I’m still not sure... That’s just a number! Not a name.”

I shrugged. “I’ll always consider your opinion, Dad, but I’m sure. We hired extensive research and market analysis. I’m counting on the best of the best.” I always did. Dad started this company from nothing. He was just a regular, ordinary man who became a bona fide businessman, pulling in billions. I’d never dishonor his life’s work and throw it away or set any endeavor up for failure. However, I realized and accepted that some business deals required more risks than others. With every risk I took, I debated the pros and cons. Statistics and stone-cold numbers played a big part in backing up the shoulds and shouldn’ts of choices.

“The name is trendy. It fits. It makes sense for the specific geographical location of the club.”

He nodded, cringing. His reluctance would fade once Fifty opened.

“The branding is already taking off. And the PR department has been using that name for months already, generating interest before the club opens.”

“Good. Good.” He chuckled. “If the marketing experts claim that a number is a good name, then who am I to argue with them?”

Exactly.

“What else remains to be done?” he asked.

I hired out and delegated most of the work, but he knew I preferred to handle some decisions personally. “Finer detail things, including staffing.” Reclining in my chair, I settled in as comfortably as I could with this slight muscle strain. “I want different talent to star there.” Fifty wouldn’t be a strip club, but dancers would be a highlight. “New and unique dancers.”

“I’m sure the scouts you’ve got looking will find someone.”

I shrugged. “But I worry it’d be more of the same old.” I wanted something that would stand out. Every club and every dancer offered the same old. It couldn’t be impossible to want to use the same old but with a different twist.

“You’re a fine one to talk about the same old, Henry.” He pursed his lips again.

Here we go. I should’ve known he’d circle back to nagging me.

“All you do is work.” He held up a hand to stop me from replying. “I am glad you keep yourself busy working. You have always been a go-getter. Like me. But you can’t work all the time. You need to take a break.”

“I take breaks.”

“Breaks that don’t include going to the gym.”

“I take Jason to the arcade every week.” My weekly arcade night with my son would always be a staple in my routine.



He nodded, ceding me there. “Yes. And I give you credit for being there for him. Despite your hours in the office, you have been an active, present parent for him.”

I had to be, because I was Jason’s only parent. I’d learned how to be a working single father from him. Dad raised me on his own, and I turned out fine, hadn’t I?

“But I want more grandkids,” Dad said simply. He tacked on a sheepish smile with the sentiment. “When I was younger, I always wished I had a sibling. Jason’s already seven. He needs a brother or sister.”

On one hand, I should’ve felt annoyed that Dad was projecting his past desires onto Jason. But on the other hand, I knew what he meant. When I was a boy, I wished I could have a brother or sister. It’d always been me and Dad since my mom passed away when I was so young. Now it was the same cycle over again, me and Jason. Another father-and-son duo. Or I supposed it was the three of us—Jason, my dad, and me.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“You need to make time to live a little, Henry. I know you’ve been busier than usual with ‘Fifty’ opening soon.”

I smirked at his air-quotes with the new club’s name.

“But you’ve got to make sure you live a little more. Get out there. At least try to meet someone, because I know you would rather have a bigger family to come home to.”

He was accurate with his assumption that I wanted it all, that I missed having a partner and the chance to have another kid. A big family had always been an out-of-reach pipe dream. But it didn’t change my views on putting myself out there. The thought of dating irked me. When Jason’s mother dumped me—and him—and ran, it hurt.

Dating sounded messy and time-consuming.

Focusing on work, on the other hand, was safe. It was uncomplicated.

A click of the door distracted me.

There you are.

The door opened and she walked in. I wouldn’t need to go out of my way to stop by her desk. Mia was here.

And just like that, her presence suggested that focusing on work could get very complicated.

I held my breath, suffering through the gut punch of raw desire that hit me at the sight of her. This slender, curvy woman put up with my secretarial needs, but she inspired... something more. I took in the full look of her, curious how no two days ever seemed the same. Her short brown denim skirt wasn't office appropriate, but the bright fuchsia blouse evened it out. She always pulled off a put-together appearance but with a dash of bold eccentricity, too.

"What do you think, Mia?" I asked, feeling like a god among men when she lifted her green gaze to meet mine. The tingle of awareness that rushed through me with her direct eye contact never failed to stun me.

"What do I think about what?" she asked. Even though she was merely replying to my question, it felt like something so much more. I wasn't sure when I started to hang on her every word, but I had.

"Hi, Eddie," she said as she approached, papers in hand.

"Morning, Mia." He smiled at her, familiar with her for longer than I was. He'd hired her before I became CEO.

"Do you think that I need to live a little?" I asked.

She set the forms on my desk and propped her hip against the edge. As she crossed her arms, her long brown waves tumbled over one shoulder. She stacked her elbow over her hand, then brought her free one up to rub her chin and look overly pensive. "Live a little?" She looked me over with the hint of a mischievous smile on her lips. "Yeah, you are getting old. Stale and halfway fusty already."

Dad laughed.

"I just turned thirty-three last week," I protested, knowing full well that she was

teasing.

“And how long did it take you to get past that hangover from one glass of wine at your birthday dinner?”

I rolled my eyes and lost the fight to smile. She could poke fun at me all she wanted. Because it was mutual. I wouldn't spare her. “Like you're one to talk. Always saying you need more sleep to feel human. You're practically a spinster cat-lady now with how much you 'live it up'.”

“Hey, cats are cool.”

“Dogs are better.” I wasn't sure how much longer I'd be able to hold off from Jason's requests for one.

She rolled her eyes, used to one of our many silly sources of random bickering, like dogs versus cats or acceptable pizza toppings. “If all you do is work, you'll be old and lonely before you know it,” she sing-songed as she pushed off the desk and walked toward the door.

“That's what I'm telling him,” my dad said.

“You're calling me old, too?” I retorted.

“No, but you will be lonely,” he argued.

“Nonsense.” I watched Mia at the door, smiling at my dad and me arguing before she slipped out. I never felt lonely when she was near.

She paused, turning to wave before heading back to her desk. It was too short of an interaction, but that was fine. She'd be right outside my door, like always. I'd find

another reason to talk to her.

I lowered my gaze, both amused and annoyed that if I ever had any time to “live a little”, I wouldn’t mind doing so with her.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

2

MIA

Spinster cat lady?

I huffed a laugh to myself and dared a peek over my shoulder at Henry in his office with his dad. I wasn't surprised to find him still watching me through the window. Feeling the heat of his stare wasn't anything new.

You havenoidea...

Calling me—a cabaret dancer—a spinster cat lady was an oxymoron.

I spent my days here, working as the secretary on his floor, but my nights were spent at Danger, the night club where I entertained as a burlesque-slash-cabaret dancer. In that respect, I was no different from Henry. He was a workaholic, always hard at it in the office and then busier yet being a father to Jason. And I was a workaholic, never failing to show up here to pretend to be a typical office worker when I probably needed more sleep from a long night of dancing.

Burning the candle from two ends used to be a fad. Now, for me, it was a drag on my existence.

When will I ever feel caught up?With life. With money.Ever?

Stifling another yawn, I pasted on a smile as Jen came down the hallway. The

executive assistant to Owen, the COO, wouldn't want to see me looking so tired. She was a busybody, always a mother hen, and I didn't need her to fret about my being exhausted.

I was tired, but my expression lingered from what Henry had said. Hearing him mistake me for a spinster cat lady rubbed me the wrong way, but it wasn't like I could correct him about why I lacked a social life.

I wasn't quick enough to wipe the frown off my face, though.

"Oh, Mia. Mia, Mia, Mia." Jen sighed, furrowing her brow as she paused me in the hall. "You're too young to be looking that beat." She glanced at her watch. "It's already ten o'clock."

I smiled and shrugged. "Nothing a little coffee won't fix."

"You've got to get a handle on that habit of yours." She wagged her finger at me good-naturedly. "It's wonderful to be such a diehard bookworm, but maybe you should set a timer."

I laughed lightly, glad she still bought my lie about why I was often sleepy. I wished I could have late nights of staying up reading, too engrossed with a story to quit for bedtime. Because working two jobs like this was a daunting future to maintain. "Maybe one of these days," I replied chirpily as I headed back to my small office.

"Do you have an idea for what book we can do for next month's book club meeting?" She beamed at me.

This was the problem with lies. They always spread and formed more layers to keep up with. "Oh, um. Isn't it Luke's turn to pick the book?"

She snapped her fingers. “Oh, shoot. I think it is, but with him almost on paternity leave, I’ll bet he forgot.”

“I’ll think of one if he can’t.”

She patted my arm. “Thanks, hun. You’re such a doll.”

I didn’t have time to read for fun. I wasn’t sure I had time to even pick a book to fake read for this meeting, but I would figure it out. Not only did I need to maintain the lie that I was always sleeping because I read too late at night, but I also enjoyed those get-togethers. Working for the Dunn group felt like being included in a family. Maybe the “family” was set at the office, but it felt homey and inclusive—both of which I lacked in life.

Note to self, find a short book to suggest. I sighed as I walked to my office. Like I need something else on my to-do list.

Even though my office was tiny and the window was itty bitty, I relished the closed-in feeling. I was never prone to claustrophobia, and I appreciated the utter privacy and isolation in here. When I was on the stage, dancing, I had to overcome the ickiness of being soon and vulnerably exposed. Here, in this tiny office, I felt secure. It was my place. These four walls were mine to decorate and hide behind.

“First things first,” I muttered to myself as I plopped back into my chair. Rolling it toward the desk, I picked up my pen and scratched off the last line on my to-do list. I had a mental one that ran nonstop, but to keep on track here, I jotted it all down.

Drop off latest forms to H.I. I scraped the tip of my pen through the item. Below it was the chore I hated the most.

Check bills and finances.



With another sigh, I unlocked my computer and ran through my personal finances. Wednesdays were slower days, and I never felt bad to use the spreadsheet on this computer to keep an eye on my bank account. It was always short on funds. Just like I did every first Wednesday of the month, I revisited the dread that I would be working to the grave trying to pay off these damn loans. At the rate I was going, I would never save up enough to expunge my record, pay off the delinquent student loans, and pay back the credit card debts my ex incurred years ago.

There was simply no end in sight. After marking all my payment dates in and seeing how much more I'd need to make to skimp by, I dropped my head to my arms on the desktop and groaned.

It didn't have to be like this. I could make more money. I'd never be able to go back to school and get my law degree to work in the legal field like I'd always wanted to.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

My wage here at Dunn Enterprises was manageable for a standard cost of living, but it wouldn't ever get me out of debt and able to breathe. My income from dancing at Danger was certainly higher than what I made here. It paid well, and the offer to take more shifts was there. In fact, Gina, the dancer manager at Danger, was desperate for me to do more hours.

But I can't leave. On a heavy, exasperated sigh, I sat up and sought out the picture sitting on my desk. In the photo behind the frame was a shot of me with Henry, goofing off at last year's company picnic. He was caught laughing, licking the whipped cream off his face from where I'd smashed a pie in his face. I was snapped cracking up and fending him off from pushing another cream pie at my face. Behind us, Eddie, Owen, and Jen were bursting with laughter too. What started as a volunteer shift at the pie table at the company and family affair turned into a hilarious moment. It often ended up like that. Henry was my boss. Owen was too. We all worked together, but being included in this workplace was the only semblance of a family life I'd ever truly had.

I fit in here. Kind of. I couldn't give it up to work only for Gina, dancing.

I can't leave you. I picked up the frame, rubbing my finger over Henry's face. Since Eddie made him the CEO, we'd been friends. Henry and I just meshed. We could finish each other's sentences. We knew how to avoid each other's pet peeves. Henry was...

I sighed again, unwilling to imagine a life without seeing his stern expressions of concentration and being tempted to make him smile or laugh.

My phone rang, jarring me from my musings about never getting ahead or feeling caught up with debts. Seeing that it was Gina, I took a guess at what she wanted and answered.

“Hello, darling,” I replied dryly, still looking at the photo I kept on my desk.

“Hey yourself, babe,” she greeted, chipper as ever despite her deep, husky smoker’s voice. “Want to dance tonight?”

I knew it.

While it should’ve made me happy to know I was in such high demand, I felt... cheap and untethered. No one ever knew who I was. The guests who appreciated my dances didn’t know it was me on that stage. A mask concealed me.

At least here, at the office, they knew the real me. The woman and the name. That feeling of being wanted and included was a good sensation here.

For not the first time, I wondered what Henry would do if he knew that I moonlighted as a dancer. He was always so prim and proper. Dashing and handsome in impeccable suits, his hair neat and nothing about him askew, Henry was a rich and influential person, so intelligent and successful.

And I’m not. I never will be.

“Yeah, sure,” I told Gina.

Why not take a chance to make a little extra money when I was down?

The reminder that Henry and I were leagues apart always stung. He was wrong to assume I’d be a spinster cat lady. But as I listened to Gina rave about how many tips I

could probably bring in tonight, I hated that Henry didn't really know me at all.

The real me who was drowning in debt and so desperate to belong.

3

HENRY

Even though I planned to head out tonight and hit up some clubs, it wasn't for the purpose of what my father wanted. He wished I'd meet a woman, but I bet he'd never, ever approve of a clubbing twenty-something. He wanted me to live more and work less. And, well, tonight would be a combination of both.

I felt terrible that I'd missed celebrating Owen's birthday last week, but neither of us could manage to get away then. My best friend and COO at Dunn Enterprises was just as much of a workaholic as I was. He lacked a nagging parent reminding him that he wasn't getting any younger.

It was a week late for Owen's birthday, but we were going out to check out some more clubs that my scouts hadn't gone to yet. My biggest goal was to find unique talent for the new club. Fifty needed the best of the best. The hottest dancers. As Miami's newest attraction, it needed something spectacular. So far, my scouts had sourced the mediocre, same old. Tonight, Owen and I would combine work and pleasure—going out to scout ourselves and also so we could get a drink for his belated happy birthday.

“You really think a place like this”—Owen paused outside the seedy dance club, gesturing at the neon letters in the sign—“will have decent employees?”

I considered the stupidity, and desperation, of my ill-thought-out idea of coming here tonight. His deep grimace and furrowed brow showed his skepticism. A healthy

amount of skepticism. The Ain the club's namesake, Danger, was tilted to the side so precariously that the neon letter seemed to be hanging on by a thread. Even if that sign didn't look ready to crash and fall on whoever entered the seedy-looking, almost derelict building, the sidewalk we stood on didn't entice me to set one more step closer. Broken glass from beer bottles littered the area where the pavement and brick wall met. Weeds waved in a slight breeze, taking root from the significant cracks along the way. The stink of body odor and marijuana mixed emanated from the pile of nasty clothes left in a heap toward the side of the entrance.

I shrugged, curious at this point. "I asked one of the valet drivers back at the building where one of the hidden gems of a club was."

A few more people passed us, heading into Danger, and we stepped aside so they could reach the door. They seemed oblivious to the junky exterior, striding inside the windowless place.

"And he said this place wouldn't disappoint."

Owen wasn't convinced. Or perhaps he didn't feel risky tonight. "It's already disappointing me." Again, he indicated the exterior. "Any dancer worth a modicum of pride wouldn't come somewhere like this."

I swatted his arm as I headed to the door. "Come on. I'm intrigued, at least. Maybe he told me to come here as a prank." Those valet drivers loved to pull one on me when they could.

Owen chuckled, following me in. "Maybe."

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

The small vestibule where I paid for our cover was dark and cramped, but I supposed for a temporary waiting place, it served its purpose. That stink from outside didn't follow in here, and with simple dark carpet and black-painted walls, it seemed cleaner and well-maintained.

"Enjoy the show," the attendant behind the small window said as she held up the card device for me to sign after paying for our entrance.

"Something like that," Owen muttered behind me.

I shot him a look and opened the second door to enter. "We'll give it five minutes. Then we'll move on to somewhere else."

"Yeah, yeah." He walked alongside me, also scoping the dimly lit interior and checking out the surprisingly full house. Many guests sat around tables. Others had seats at high-top tables. It seemed we were late getting here because it took us a good few minutes to snag a couple of chairs. They were closer to the stage, and since the cushions were still warm, I deduced that we only had these chairs because someone must have recently vacated them.

"Where else would you like to go for your belated birthday?" I asked when we sat.

"Eh, this is fine."

Not.

He continued scoping out the crowd, doubtful and concerned about being here,

somewhere clearly below his standards. Danger fell short on my standards. I didn't go out clubbing or to catch shows often, but I owned clubs and was familiar with how one such establishment should be run. Fifty would be a combination of a traditional nightclub and a cabaret venue, which was different from the other Dunn clubs. It was all the more reason I felt the need to impress, to really make it look good with the dancers. While Owen might be a tougher judge, I was able to tune out the details about the place and focus on waiting for the show to start. I was here to see the dancers, not to critique a club that wouldn't be in the same league of competition of a Dunn club.

"We won't stay long. Just to see if anyone catches my eye."

"Since you have such expertise in selecting dance and entertainment staff," he teased.

I smirked and shrugged, being a good sport about it. "The scouts are bringing in nothing new." I wasn't an expert, but I was a man. And I could be impressed just the same as all these other people who'd paid to come in here. "Maybe the scouting agency is too stuck on protocol and only considering a select few."

"I know what you mean." He nodded, sitting back in his chair. "I watched half of those videos with you, and it's all meh."

"Most of the audition videos seemed..."

"Immature?" he guessed.

"Yeah. It seemed like they were cheerleader tryouts or the dancers were ballet fanatics." While I was sure all the people the scouts found were talented in their own rights, they didn't spark any intrigue.

"Hey, before the show starts." He lost his dubious expression and got serious for a

moment. “I saw your dad in the office earlier. What’d I miss?”

I shook my head. “Nothing?”

He arched a brow. “Nothing at all? I know he likes to stop in often, but it seemed like he was on a mission.”

“The usual whining about my working too much and never settling down. He?—”

The lights dimmed further, distracting me from talking with this cue that the show was about to begin. Music played low in the background, but it cut out for a newer tune to take over.

I faced the stage and watched as the first dancers came out. All of them looked fine—more than fine—and it was abundantly clear that these were no amateurs. Danger’s exterior was shoddy and suggested grave neglect, but the flashy, ornamented costumes these professional dancers wore implied that the managers put all their focus and priority on them. They came out with well-practiced choreography. Not a single one missed their step. Every one of them hit their marks and moved effortlessly, like this grand entrance number was something they were simply born to do.

“Holy shit,” Owen said beside me.

I nodded, too riveted with my gaze on the show to reply.

Holy shit was right. Between the lighting and the satiny, flashy clothes the dancers wore, I was instantly wowed. Every woman moved gracefully. Smiles were pasted on without a flinch while the upper half of their faces were covered by intricately designed masks. Their bodies swayed perfectly to the beat of the music, lulling me to want to watch them all at once yet also study them separately.



Relying on the valet's advice to come here, I hadn't bothered to actually look into what I was watching. I had no clue what the program was, if they'd stick with a more play-like performance in a naughty musical fashion or deviate into something entirely original.

I wasn't caught up in trying to figure out what we were watching. I was too busy being impressed with the dancers.

Turning toward Owen's profile, I noticed a similar look of awe on his face. He grinned, gazing at the stage, but he glanced at me with a smile of surprise.

"It seems the valet was right about?—"

He went slack-jawed at something on the stage, and I faced forward again.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

Someone, not something, captured my friend's gaze. I fell right into the same trap.

A taller woman entered, flanked by two more dancers behind her. They moved in sync, but a clear deference was shown to the taller one. She was in charge—of the number, of the show, of stealing my attention.

Instantly, with the first glimpse of her strutting further onto the stage, she captivated me. I was sucked in, spiraling into an addictive lure to watch her carry her body through the music. Her hips swayed seductively, slow, then fast. Her arms and legs were extensions of the music, interpreted through faster beats and changing tempos. All the while, her chin stayed up defiantly, as if she dared us all to watch.

This wasn't a woman, but a seductress. A goddess. A vision I couldn't tear my gaze from for a millisecond.

I didn't "live it up" often. Going out and catching all the latest wasn't my style. I was a businessman, bound to my job and ensuring that I impressed my father, but I was human too. I'd partied a bit when I was younger. I'd gone to clubs and shows many times.

I'd seen my fair share of women.

But not her. Not this one.

"Goddamn..." I shared it on an exhale, stunned stupid at the sight of this dancer as she moved off to the side, nearer to where Owen and I sat, while more dancers entered the number after her.

This much closer, I was treated to a more intimate view of this exquisite dancer. Roving my gaze over her, I took in every inch of her supple, smooth flesh, so glossy and glowing under the lights. Muscles moved, proving her athleticism and strength. Her figure taunted me, those curves barely contained in her costume. Her breasts trapped behind the beaded corset, her ass partly revealed from the high cut of her bodice. All of it. All of her. She drew me in until I was trapped and unable to look away.

“Goddamn,” Owen agreed with me belatedly.

I nodded, numb and mute. Taking my stare off her would be a crime, and I couldn’t make my eyes move. Like a moth to the flame, a fly to the honey. I was reduced to a primitive creature, magnetized to this woman.

None of the others mattered. They fell into the background, mere buzz and white noise behind her. The music filtered into my mind like a haze, seeping in and lulling me to hear the beat and see her display it with her body.

“That’s why this place is a hidden gem,” Owen said, chuckling over the awe in his own voice. “I mean, damn, that woman is fine.”

Again, I nodded without a word, unable to speak yet and unwilling to leave the foggy spell of this woman seeming to dance for me.

Her eyes locked on mine. Despite the crowded seats, all the people watching the show, she seemed to single me out. Me. She was gazing at me among all the others out here.

The lights cut between us. The blinding brightness of the multicolored streaks irritated my vision, interfering with my ability to see her clearer. To make a connection. To really peer into her eyes and let her accept that I was devoted to

witnessing her dance, no one else's.

But I didn't have a chance. She turned, obeying the beat and rhythm of her dance. Given a view of her shoulder, then her back as she spun and moved further back into the crew of dancers, that tether between us was broken.

"Her." I was obsessed, instantly needy to find this woman. "I want her."

Faintly, I was aware of Owen nodding next to me. He dodged and leaned with me, tracking that one woman's dance. "The dancer on the end too. She's good."

I had eyes for no one but that one. The taller one in the magenta and green costume with the defiant lift of her chin.

The star.

She could be my star, at Fifty. Hell, she was the sort of woman to entice a man into wanting her to be theirs, period.

"The taller one. I want her."

Owen laughed again. "You and every other man in this place."

"I've never seen anyone move like that," I commented, hating that she was masked. "I've got to find her after the show. Maybe we can approach her backstage after the show."

"To ask her to work at Fifty?"

I frowned, glancing at him when the masked dancer I couldn't get out of my mind eased further to the other end of the stage, out of my line of sight. "Yeah." I'd offer

her something more competitive than what she made here. I had to.

He smirked. “You sound so smitten.”

I rolled my eyes. “I want her to come work at Fifty.”

“That’s it?” he challenged.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

If he was asking if I was aroused, or attracted to her, I'd have to admit I was a dead man to say no. She was gorgeous. Sultry, seductive, and so skilled at moving her body that it was impossible not to notice her and desire her.

At the same time, though, the idea of envisioning myself with a woman like this felt... wrong.

She's not Mia, though. Lately, if I had any idea of enjoying a woman's company in bed, it was Mia's face I had in mind. Of hearing her laugh and seeing her smile. It didn't seem right to so instantly desire this dancer when I was so hooked on Mia. Mia was just a dream, though, an imaginary what-if that could never happen. Having anything other than a work relationship and moderate friendship with Mia would never be a reality.

Right?

She worked for me, and that alone made her off-limits. Dunn Enterprises enforced strict ethics rules at the office.

I'd have more luck scoring with this dancer than I would with the secretary who was often the highlight of my day.

Owen laughed again, interpreting my silence as an answer. I cleared my throat, stuck on the thought that I could be dishonest to Mia, somehow, by lusting for this stranger dancing so sexily on the stage. "Yeah, that's it. I want to ask this woman to dance at Fifty, that's it."

“Uh-huh.” Owen gestured at her, still at the other side of the stage. “You get talent like that at Fifty and it’ll be an overnight success.”

All through the show, I kept my eyes on her. It didn’t matter if she went from one side of the stage to the other. She stole my focus. With that mask covering her face, a sense of mystery clouded my judgment. I wanted to see her. To talk to her. To get her to consider working at my club, not here at Danger.

Finally, after the show, Owen and I hurried through the crowd either moving toward the exit or to the bar. I wasn’t sure where a backstage entrance might be, but we had to be getting closer. We wove through guests. We sidestepped the waitstaff cleaning up the aisle. Lights hadn’t been turned all the way back on yet, and with the dimness, it was tricky to see far ahead.

Reaching a pair of burly security guards, we settled in to ask, cajole, beg, and request for entrance to the back stage.

“Listen, no one, and I mean no one, is getting back there,” the beefier man said.

“Then can I speak to your manager?” I asked.

Owen joined in on this tactic. “Can you give our information to the dancers’ manager?” He held out a card. “We’d just like to speak with one of the dancers.”

The guard’s partner huffed a laugh. “Yeah, sure.”

The first man glanced at the business card. “Dunn?”

I pointed at myself. “I’m Henry Dunn. And we’d like to speak with that dancer or whoever represents her.”

They had to listen. They had to cooperate. Because I knew already that I wouldn't be able to get that woman out of my mind. Owen was right. If she danced at Fifty, it'd be a bigger success.

"I can pass this info along to Gina," the first man said, flicking Owen's business card between his fingers. "That's the best I can tell ya, Mr. Dunn. I'll let her know that y'all are interested in one of her dancers."

"Not just any of them," I clarified. "That tall one in the magenta and?—"

"Yeah. We know. Everyone wants her." He chortled, elbowing his coworker. "But hell, man, you ain't the first."

I sighed, knowing and hating that fact more than I had any right to.

I had no dibs on that woman. I didn't even know her. But with a strong and inexplicable neediness, I was certain that I wanted her near me, working at Fifty, no matter what.

I wanted her near me.

4

MIA

I came into work the next day, wishing it was like any other ordinary day.

But it was not. It couldn't be. Not when my stomach was full of nervous knots and my mind felt jumbled with panic. My heart raced and my thoughts were scattered. At the core of my predicament remained the shock from spotting Henry and Owen among the many guests at Danger.



Never before had my “worlds” collided like that. In one neat, tidy compartment was my life at the Dunn Enterprises office and in another, separate compartment was the role I had at Danger. Those two things weren’t supposed to mix. They weren’t intended to mesh.

“Hey, Mia,” Jen said cheerily as she passed me in the hallway.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“Oh!” I jumped, unusually startled by her breezing through so quickly. Normally, I was more aware of my surroundings. I came here and had a finger on the pulse of this place. “Hi!”

She laughed lightly, amused. “Yikes. How come you’re so jumpy this morning?”

“Uh, nothing. I’m not jumpy.” I laughed a little more, forcing myself to go along with her laughter. “Maybe just too much coffee.”

“You and your late nights of reading,” she teased, shaking her head as she walked on.

Reading. Yeah, right. My late nights were full of dancing at Danger, but no one was supposed to know that here.

“Yep.” I laughed once more. “That’s me...”

Jumpy was an understatement. I felt like I was creeping down the hallway, intimidated by the prospect of facing Henry. He was my boss. Of course, I’d face him again. But doing so today, after making eye contact with him last night at the club, had me super uneasy.

Did he recognize me? Will he realize it was me when he sees me today?

I had a hunch my mask hid me well. It had to have because when I came backstage, Gina had approached. She was all smiles and full of giddy energy to tease me about the two “suits” who’d come to get behind the stage for the sole purpose of talking to me.

“One gave the bouncers his card.”

I accepted the small stock paper, feeling my stomach tense at the glossy print of Dunn Enterprisesinked on it. It was Owen’s card, but it was evidence that my eyes hadn’t been playing tricks on me, that it really had been Henry and Owen seated out there and watching me dance.

If they would go so far as to give Gina their card for setting up a conversation, that had to mean they hadn’t identified me. If they had, they’d just speak with me here.

And the why of it all. I spent half of my restless nights wondering why they’d want to come backstage and talk to me. Then I spent the other half staying up worrying why they were even there.

Henry had never come to Danger before. Neither had Owen. The only person from this “life,” my life in the Dunn office, who knew I was a dancer was the sitter Henry hired to watch Jason. Laura had been Jason’s babysitter for years, and she only knew that I moonlighted as a dancer because she’d come there to help celebrate a niece for her bachelorette party. That was years ago, and all this time, she’s kept it a secret. She swore never to tell Henry or Eddie, and I believed her.

But now...

I heard Henry’s voice as he greeted another worker down the hall.

Plastering myself to the hallway wall for a second, I cringed. Why? Why did you have to come to Danger on a night I was dancing? Why?

It wasn’t that shameful, being a dancer. Yet it seemed like a big, dark secret that would forever change my identity here. A deep embarrassment threatened to rise up and take me over whenever I thought about how my coworkers would perceive me if

they knew I was a dancer at night. I wasn't a stripper, but I revealed a lot of skin. I wasn't a hooker, but the dance and routine could be overly seductive.

Covering my face in my hands, I drew a quick breath and prayed I'd hang on to my secret.

"Mia?"

Shit. Henry never called out for me, which meant he had already stopped by my office and hadn't found me there. And if he was actively seeking me out, I couldn't be standing in the hallway for a paltry hiding spot.

I resisted the instinct to whine or run away, unnerved with this foreign anxiety. This was Henry. He was my friend before he was a boss, or so I thought. But how to reconcile what felt like two identities was a mystery I had no time to solve.

I shouldn't even be embarrassed. It's a job that pays better than this one. I'm not... selling myself, but...

Shaking my head, I pushed off the wall. My side gig was just a job. I needed the money, and it was easy for me to do. I'd always had a natural knack for dancing and an instinctive talent for finding a rhythm and moving to it. Wearing a mask for some of the routines made me feel more protected, but as I walked down the hall to find Henry, I cringed at why I felt like I had to be secure at all.

So what if Henry knew? So what if Jen realized I stayed up dancing instead of reading? Who cares?

I bit the inside of my cheek. I cared, and today simply wasn't the day that I'd grow up that much more and get over this secret shame.

“Mi—Oh!” Henry crashed into me, going too fast around a corner that I was also hustling along. At this rate, I wasn’t sure whether I’d made my mind up, whether I wanted to hide from him or confront him with a greeting to get it over with.

He’d solved that dilemma for me by bumping into me. He was moving so fast that he nearly plowed me over, but he caught me. The firm touch of his fingers on my upper arms both chilled and seared me, and I worried he’d be able to read me well enough to spot how nervous I was.

“Hey.” He softened his smile, gazing at me like he often did. Like he could be calmer, knowing I was around. At first, I thought it was because he valued my hard-working spirit around here. I’d come to learn that he simply liked my company. It was mutual—except for now.

“When did you get in?” he asked at the same time I blurted, “I didn’t know you would be in now.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

Good grief. I laughed, for real this time, because this was how we were. If we weren't finishing each other's sentences, we were accidentally talking over each other.

"I just got here. I had a couple of things to do with Jason." His smile rose more at the mention of his adorable son. They were like two peas in a pod, both with charming smiles and quick wit. That boy would certainly grow up to be a hell of a heartbreaker.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, always quick to worry where that boy was concerned. He'd wormed a quick route to my heart within the first week of meeting him, and he'd never lose that spot.

"Oh, yeah. Just fine." He tilted his head to the side a bit. "And hey, it's arcade night. He's really excited."

"Me too." With every second that passed and things flowed so normally between us, my hopes grew higher that my big secret was still safe. That he would remain clueless and not realize I was the woman dancing on that stage last night, that I was the performer he couldn't tear his gaze from.

Just like that, I was taken back to the memory. The flashback wasn't welcome now, but being under his direct focus, I couldn't help but recall how exciting and thrilling—yet terrifying—it was to have him admiring my moves and getting sucked into watching me like I was the rarest treasure in the world. I felt more alive when I danced. I was looser, freer, and able to just let go of stress when I moved to music.

Unlike now, when I stood here so stiff and tense that he could mention seeing me last night.

“I love our arcade night.”

“Maybe tonight will be the night I finally beat you at skee ball.”

I scoffed. “Keep dreaming.”

He leaned closer, narrowing his eyes playfully. “You still don’t think I can top your record score?”

I was trapped by desire, lured to slant toward him too. Whether it was bickering or mildly arguing, we both gave as good as we got. “It took you a year to beat it last time.”

“Then I’d say I’m due to top your score again. Any day now.”

I lapsed, looking at his lips, but I caught myself from staring at them. With us standing so close like this, almost flush, anyone could walk by and get the wrong impression. That I was flirting. That he was coming on to me. That we were?—

“There you are!” Eddie’s loud, booming voice cut through the magical moment of feeling like it was just me and Henry, alone in the world with each other.

Henry sucked in a quick breath and stepped back. I did the same, immediately smiling at the older man who’d given me a break and given me a job after I was released from serving time. I’d never forgive myself for even having a record. Short though it was, itwastime served, and the reminder of it would always ruin my mood.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Hey, Mr. Dunn.”

“Morning, Mia, and for the last time. Just call me Eddie.” My former boss winked at me before facing his son.

When I didn’t leave, too stuck on wishing Henry and I could talk more, Eddie frowned. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Oh! No. Nothing, um...” I put my hand on the back of my neck. “I was?—”

“No, but I do need to talk to Mia,” Henry said as he gestured for both of us to follow him to the CEO suite.

Crap! This seemed ominous, but then again, he wasn’t acting like anything was different between us.

I was going to drive myself insane wondering and worrying if my secret was out.

“Those forms you dropped off yesterday. I think you gave me the wrong ones,” Henry added, glancing at me over his shoulder as I walked to his left.

“Oh!” I exhaled a huge breath of relief. “Yes. The ones that HR emailed and said—” I shook my head, smiling that it was a simple little thing. Waving at him, I dismissed the concern. “I know what you’re talking about.”

“I’ve got them organized in the right piles on my desk.” Now he twisted to look at his dad on his right. “But what brings you by, Dad? You were just here yesterday, after all.”

“Getting sick of me hanging around?” Eddie joked.

“No. Never. But Mia and I need to go over those other documents that the records sent over and such.”



“Right. I know.” Eddie nodded. “You two are always so busy. But I’ve got something exciting to tell you.”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

Henry pushed open the door to his office and smiled at his father. “Yeah? What’s that?”

Eddie stood straighter and proudly announced, “I found you a woman.”

I froze, not daring to breathe. Henry had a similar reaction, stiffening and pausing mid-step in reaching his desk to set his briefcase on it.

“Do you remember the Vances?” Eddie asked.

Henry glanced at me, as if I would know. I shook my head and shrugged.

“Should I?” Henry replied.

It would make sense if it was a work connection, but it seemed Eddie was thinking of someone else.

A woman? An even worse feeling twisted my gut. Jealousy was never a lovely trait, but imagining Henry with someone had me fighting a grimace.

“Mia?” Henry frowned, holding up a hand for his dad to wait before speaking again.

“Are you all right?”

Dammit. He could read me so well to know the precise moment I was unhappy.

“Yep. Sure. I’m great. Hey, you know what, if you guys need to chat”—I hooked my thumb over my shoulder and backed up a step toward the door—“I can come back.”

“No, no. Wait.” Henry took my hand and held it, keeping me there.

The sensation of his fingers on mine soothed me at the same time it excited me. Resisting the urge to curl my hand all the way around his was a challenge.

Eddie was losing patience, especially with Owen stepping in. The man smiled at us all, but I noticed his double-take of Henry holding my hand.

Is he even aware that he’s still holding it?

I released my hand, getting the point that I had to stay. I’d rather not. I’d prefer to spare myself the torture of hearing Eddie set up Henry with another woman. It’d put a heck of a damper on my crush.

“The Vances? I used to do business with John Vance?” When Henry shook his head and indicated that the name didn’t ring a bell, Eddie sighed. “Well, his niece, Ann, is moving to the city. I’m going to introduce you to her, and you can show her around.”

“I don’t even know her.”

Eddie grinned. “But you can!”

Henry furrowed his brow. “I can look at my calendar and see if I can squeeze in a favor for a family friend of yours, but...”

“No. Tonight.”

I lowered my gaze to the floor.

“It’s arcade night with Jason,” Henry argued.

“Well, he can skip a week, can’t he?” Eddie said, sounding more annoyed.

This wasn’t the first time Eddie had brought an ‘eligible, lovely lady’ for Henry to meet since he never wanted to go on dates of his own.

“You never go out on a date or?—”

Henry huffed. “I don’t need to date.”

Eddie crossed his arms, looking nonplussed. “What about when you need a plus-one to an event, then?”

Slapping his arm around my shoulders, Henry tugged me toward him. “I’ve got Mia. She can always be my plus-one.”

When he smiled at me, I had to reply in kind, wishing that was true. He said it playfully, but a girl could dream.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

Eddie shook his head. “No, no. Mia’s just an employee. She’s not... uh, a partner to grow old with.”

Ouch. I steadied my breath through the pain of his words. Owwww, does that hurt. I never asked to be put in my place, but he’d done it anyway.

Henry released me and didn’t reply to his father. All he did was round his desk and sit, seeming ready to focus on work. Since he didn’t argue against what Eddie claimed, I felt obligated to assume that he ultimately thought that too. I wasn’t a plus-one. Or even a friend. Just an employee. That was how I was supposed to consider myself around here.

Oh, come on. Snap out of it. Of course, I was just an employee. I certainly wasn’t an eligible, lovely lady like the wealthy, prestigious women Eddie would bring by. Yet, it warmed a tiny morsel of my heart when Henry seemed so reluctant about the idea.

“Fine.” He frowned, not making eye contact with his father as he agreed. Shuffling papers and letting out an aggrieved sigh, he gave in. “I guess I’ll show her around, then.”

I expected nothing else. Henry always wanted to please his father. He previously confided in me that it was often easier to do as he said to get him off his back. According to Henry, it was far more convenient to play along with what Eddie wanted because they never lasted long. The ideas or the women. Every single “eligible, lovely lady” Eddie presented stayed for exactly one date.

But one day, I worried, some lucky ‘proper lady’ will stick.

I eyed him sitting there, listening to Eddie yammer on about the details of picking up Ann.

He was handsome, so sexy and charming with that classic nice-guy appeal. His serious nature only made him hotter, and his workaholic tendencies endeared him to me even more. He was a catch, gorgeous, ripped, wealthy, confident, and so damn successful. Any woman would be lucky to get him, but it was with a heavy heart that I knew it would never be me.

The secretary with the big, bad secret about what she did at night.

5

HENRY

Just an employee?

I couldn't stop thinking back to how my father declared Mia to be nothing more than a member of the staff. First of all, I didn't understand how he saw her like that. She was always included at family things. She was often my assistant when I traveled for work. I'd driven her to the ER when she got food poisoning and she'd picked me up when I was in a fender bender. If we were each other's person to depend on in times of minor crises, in things unrelated to work, how could she only be an employee?

Seated across from Ann Vance, the tall, overly peppy blonde my father insisted on my showing around, I thought about how Mia had reacted when Dad called her just an employee. She'd stiffened, freezing her polite smile in place, but I saw the hurt in her eyes.

Or did I?

I considered myself an expert at reading Mia. We knew each other that well. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if I was merely wishing that she'd want to be something more than just an employee.

She did look upset when he said that, right?

I couldn't be certain, but if what he said had bothered her, then that would imply that she saw herself as more than just an employee. And if she considered herself more than another member of the staff, perhaps as wanting something much more with me, wouldn't she give me a hint?

"You know what I mean?" Ann flipped her pin-straight hair back, dismissing the waiter with a curt flick of her hand as she beamed at me.

"Yeah. Yep." I nodded. I have no fucking clue what you're talking about.

I checked out of this conversation as soon as we sat down. Knowing I was supposed to be having pizza with Jason while we waited for Mia to meet us at the arcade, I figured anything on the menu at this posh, upscale restaurant would taste bland. Then once Ann ordered with the most rigid, uptight tone about her many requests, I realized I would never enjoy a second moment spent with her. I still wasn't sure how we'd turned "showing her around" to eating dinner together, but the longer we stayed here, the smaller my hopes became about leaving and salvaging our arcade night.

Reminiscing about Mia was a far better expenditure of my attention. As long as I nodded and inserted hums or sounds like I was listening, Ann would blab away all night. Pretending to listen gave me a much-needed moment to collect myself and get my head on straight about Mia.

It wasn't my imagination that she'd seemed off all day at work. Ever since my father made that comment about her "just" being someone Dunn Enterprises hired, she'd

seemed aloof. More tired than usual, and dare I say it, down.

Does she think that she's just an employee? I didn't want to think that was possible. She had to know how much she meant to me. While I wasn't brave enough to spill my guts and tell her the whole truth, that I'd been harboring thoughts about her that delved further from what friends or coworkers might feel, she had to be aware of how much I cared about her.

Worries about her reaction ate away at me, and I again debated that I could be misinterpreting so much just because I wanted her to reciprocate my feelings for her.

If she had stronger feelings for me, wouldn't she say so?

I glanced up, feeling caught. Ann raised her brows higher, watching me closely.

Fuck. She'd asked me something.

"Um. What was that?" I asked.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“Don’t you think the weather is just terrible with this heat?”

You’re crazy. It’d been in the low eighties and manageably warm.

“Uh-huh.”

Wouldn’t Mia say something if she thought she was more than an employee?

I fell back into my thoughts, debating whether she would. Dunn Enterprises had hefty ethics rules. There was a solid expectation about no fraternization for a reason—me. Jason’s mother had been a coworker, and when she became pregnant with Jason then ultimately ran off and abandoned us, it seemed like a wake-up call for better policies at the office.

Maybe she won’t say a word or act on anything because of those policies. Those ethics rules were there for a reason, but I didn’t want them to apply to me and Mia. I didn’t want anything as an obstacle.

“Are you tired?” Ann asked, cringing a bit. “You seem distracted.”

“It’s been a long day.”

“We can take this somewhere cozier if you’d like.”

I would not like. I would like to go get my son and meet Mia at the arcade.

“I am distracted,” I admitted instead. “Just a lot going on.”

She nodded, then launched into all that was going on in her life, her woes of not finding the right house staff for her next home and her concerns about the “nasty” homeless in the city.

Zoning out, but attempting to look involved in the conversation, I wondered why I was so hung up on Mia in the first place. I had been for years. Since the day I met her, I’d been aware of her and how close she was. I was drawn to her.

“You got a little...” Ann leaned over the table to dab at my lips.

On instinct, I reared back out of her reach. She didn’t get to be familiar with me like that. And I doubted anything was on my face. She just wanted a reason to touch me.

I could slip up and hold Mia’s hand for a moment too long, but I would recoil at this woman trying to clear an imaginary smear off my lips.

What a difference. Ann was nothing like Mia. Not funny, not challenging, nor even mildly entertaining. She couldn’t compare to Mia, and I wondered if I would go through the rest of my life comparing every single woman to the secretary I couldn’t have.

Even that dancer at that seedy club, Danger. The mysterious dancer behind the mask. She’d captured my attention immediately, but I bet if I could meet her, she would pale in comparison to the one and only Mia Ferris.

God, I’ve got it so bad. I had to give it up. Mia would simply have to be the one woman who’d get away. If she wasn’t interested, it’d be a one-way attraction. And the ethics policies would always be a hurdle between us, anyway. I had no right wanting her, but it felt so wrong to agree with my dad that she was just an employee.

“Don’t you think that’s so weird?” Ann asked.

Dammit. I did it again. I wasn't listening and she'd asked me something.

Fortunately, my phone rang at that precise moment.

Thank God.

"Excuse me." I scooted my chair back, moving to stand as I pulled my phone out of my pocket. "I just need to get this." I hadn't looked at the screen to know who it was, but whoever was calling, I'd talk to them.

"Oh, no need to get up." Ann put her hand on mine, and I felt awkward to rush away. Nor did I want her intruding on my privacy and listening to my call.

Seeing that it was Mia, though, I didn't want to wait. If I argued with Ann protesting my leaving the table, I could miss the call.

"Okay." I answered the call and looked at my plate. "Hey, what's up?"

"Hey, you." She sighed. "I know you're out on your date and all, but?—"

"No. It's not a date." I furrowed my brow.

"Okay. Well. Maybe whatever it is can be cut short. Laura had a PT appointment for her shoulder. It was rescheduled for this evening so she could get the PT person she likes the most. Since this not-a-date that you're doing popped up unexpectedly, it seems like you and Laura didn't have times lined up."

“Crap. I forgot.”

She laughed lightly. “Figured. Anyway, she brought Jason to the office, assuming you’d be here like usual. I told her that Jason could hang out with me since I was wrapping up paperwork.”

“Hi, Daddy!” Jason chimed in from the background.

I smiled, feeling the weight melt off me at just the sound of his little voice. Nothing could cheer me up like that boy. He was the light of my life, and I could relax in knowing he was safe with Mia.

“Could you bring Jason to the arcade, then?” I asked.

Fuck this dinner. Or not date. I hadn’t shown Ann around mostly because she wanted to redirect this into a romantic dinner. Ann wasn’t any fun, anyway. However, I immediately perked up at the chance to see Jason and Mia like usual. Like we did every week.

“Arcade?” Ann leaned forward and turned her head to the side, as though she strained to listen. “We’re going to anarcadenow?”

Who said you’re coming?

“Are you sure?” Mia asked. “I can just take him home and watch him until you get there.”

Because she had a key. Because I trusted her. Because I knew she belonged in my life as more than just an employee.

“I’m sure.”

Screw wasting my whole night with Ann. When it came to Mia, I would always be sure about spending as much time with her as possible.

My father didn’t know what the hell he was talking about.

Miawasa partner I’d want to grow old with.

And if that wasn’t an option, I’d sign up for a routine game night with her and my son over a boring dinner date every time.

When it came to Mia, I was addicted to all she’d give me.

6

MIA

“Idon’t know, kiddo.” I winced at the restaurant up ahead. I’d never been here, but I knew what kind of place it was. In short, expensive. It was also a sought-after place for romantic dates.

Henry claimed it wasn’t a date, but I wondered if this Ann woman thought otherwise.

“Come on,” Jason urged, tugging on my hand. He skipped, grinning from ear to ear as I swung him with our joined hands. “Daddy said we should meet him and then go play at the arcade.”

That's what I get for agreeing to put that call on speakerphone. I regretted letting Jason listen in to my call to his dad. In hindsight, it might have been smarter to have an adult conversation first.

"I know, but..."

But what if he is enjoying his night out? What if Ann is a woman he wants as a partner to grow old with?

All day, I let Eddie's comment get to me. I knew he hadn't said it to disparage me. He thought highly of me—as a Dunn secretary. Still, hearing such a cast off like that stung.

"We're almost there," Jason said, his voice louder with excitement. "I see him. I see him! Daddy!" He waved his freehand, using his whole body to emphasize his enthusiasm. When he tugged on my hand, I held on tighter, always afraid of him getting this close to the curb. He'd grown up in New York City, unlike me, a transplant from upstate. Jason inherently had more street smarts than I did, in a way, but I couldn't switch off this maternal-like fear of him darting out or getting hurt.

Henry stood from a seat in the outdoor dining area. Waving back—without putting his whole sexy body into the motion in a childish manner like Jason did—he smiled and watched us come closer.

I've got a bad feeling about this. No one came here to eat and not call it a date. I never dated, lacking the time to do so while holding down two jobs. I also never wanted to date, secretly clinging to the fantasy that Henry was the only man I'd ever want. But even I knew this place was simply where couples dined out for a romantic evening.

Sure enough, when we came to their table, I saw evidence in the flesh. Ann had to be the blonde sitting across from Henry. In a chic white summer dress, her hair perfect,

makeup on point, she glowered at me like a porcelain doll. An angry one. She flicked her haughty gaze from me, to Jason, then back to me. One look from her clarified that she disapproved. She couldn't be pleased about us interrupting, but more than that, her scalding sneer made me feel less-than and frumpy. I debated my short khaki skirt and the bright blue and green blouse. The bangles on my wrist seemed cheap now, not fun. And the dangling beads that got snared in my hair probably looked ridiculous among all these fine and elegant diners.

“Excuse me, the hostess stand is?—”

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“Oh, no.” Ann lost her pissy look and smiled demurely as she held a up hand to the waiter. “They’re not getting a table. They’re not staying.”

“It’s our game night,” Henry said as Jason jumped up into his arms.

My heart melted at the sight of their tight hug.

Ann huffed. “Butwe?—”

“Hey, it’s cool,” I interrupted, smiling quickly at the waiter too. “We’re not staying. She’s right.”

Henry nodded, smiling at Jason. “Ready for skee ball?”

“You’ll never beat Mia,” Jason argued playfully, and loudly. More than a few diners glanced at his outburst, and I caught the sight of Ann glowering at me again.

This was no place for a rambunctious kid. And it was no place for a third wheel like me, either. “Listen, I’ll take Jason home,” I offered, smiling at Henry and wanting to melt all over again at the soft expression he gave me. “Then we can order pizza and hang out until you’re done with this date.”

“Aw, man,” Jason pouted, squirming to be put down.

Henry lowered him, still looking at me. “It’s not a date.”

I did my best to ignore Ann shooting daggers at me with her spiteful eyes. As long as



Henry had his back to her, she'd carry on giving me the clear message that she thought this was a date.

"I wanna go play skee ball, Daddy."

"Then we will." I scooped him into a hug and a quick spin, risking the distraction with so many tables close together. My trick worked. He laughed and squealed.

"I'll take you to skee ball, okay? Then next week, he won't have any hope to beat either of us."

"Yeah!" Jason held his hand out for a fist bump.

"We can set up another time to get to know each other," Ann told Henry, her tone sugary and sweet.

"No." Henry sighed, glancing at me and Jason, then back at her. "You're not here to get to know me."

Henry, don't be so dumb. Wake up and open your eyes. She thinks she is.

"You're here to get to know the city." He signaled for the check. "I told my father I'd show you around, so I may as well get to that now. I can show you the area where you said you're interested in buying a place."

"Oh. Well, there's no rush to leave and?—"

"No, I said I'd show you around, so I will."

I pulled my lips in and fought the urge to grin. I knew that tone. I recognized that non-sense manner of Henry trying his best not to say this is how it's going to be. He

was a take-charge man. He had to be as the CEO of a huge business. And he wasn't shy to have control in his personal life as well.

He was acting like he did when he wanted to get an annoying task over with.

"I'll take him home, then," I said again, hugging Jason to me as we backed up to leave.

"Thank you, Mia." He signed the check but glanced up to smile at us. "I'll see you at home, Jace."

I sighed, leaving before the waiter or hostess would come back and harass me to get lost again. Disappointment filled me, swarming in with the ache that Henry had chosen to stay with Ann instead of going to the arcade with me and Jason. We did it every week. It wasn't like the opportunity wouldn't come back. Still, it was our thing, and I hated to be a secondary person in his life.

He's your boss. You're not supposed to be a person in his life. Just a staff member at his office.

Jason groaned as I carried him. "Why's he gotta stay with that cranky lady?"

I smiled, turning so he could crawl behind me and I could carry him piggyback style. "Don't call her cranky."

"Do you know her?"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“No. But it’s not nice to label people.”

He sighed, sounding so much older than his seven years. “I know. But she looked cranky!”

She looked pissed off. Threatened. I rolled my eyes at the irony.

Pull your claws back in, cranky Ann. No threat from the woman who’s just an employee, standing in as a babysitter.

“Well, we’re not cranky. Let’s go have some fun.” I hopped in my step, then did a silly sidestep around a garbage can. Hearing Jason laughing and feeling him hold on tight chased away the irritation of Ann’s attitude toward me. This little boy could always make me feel lighter. He had the power to turn all my frowns upside down, and that was just what we did at the arcade.

Over pizza and ice cream, we goofed off and played our favorite games. He beat me at skee ball, only because I wanted him to win half of the games we played. Jason was good company, and by the end, as we checked our ticket count on our cards, I realized how different it felt without Henry here. He always teased us about having a faulty count, even though a computer did the tallying. Jason must have felt his absence too and missed his silly joke because he looked at me with a frown. “Mia? How come you never go on dates? Like Daddy is with Cranky Ann?”

I laughed, trying not to. “We can’t call her that,” I reminded him.

“You started it.”

“I think you did.”

“We both did.” Setting his hands on his hips, he shrugged. “We gotta face the facts. She looked cranky.”

I mussed up his hair. “Okay, but that’s not nice to say.”

“All right. All right. But why don’tcha?”

“Go on dates?” I asked as the arcade worker, Penni, handed back our cards.

“Not bad, little man.” Penni winked at Jason. “Better luck next week, Mia.”

I shrugged. I hadn’t played my best, too distracted with the same thing that was on Jason’s mind—Henry being out with Ann.

“What about Henry?” she asked.

“He’s on a date,” Jason piped up.

Penni arched a brow, looking at me. “Oh. I thought...” She shook her head, familiar with us coming every week but clearly reading the situation incorrectly if she assumed Henry was “with” me.

Jason and I left, but on the walk to his home, he asked again. “How come you don’t go on dates? Grandpa worries that you’ll never find someone to ‘settle down’ with.” He frowned. “What does it mean to settle down? Like a cat curling up in a circle to lie down in a bed?”

I smiled. “Sort of. It’s complicated.”

“I can’t wait for you to get a cat! Daddy’s never going to let me have a dog.”

The current hope we had was that as soon as I moved into a different building that allowed pets, I’d finally get a cat like I’ve always wanted. Jason already put first dibs on visiting rights.

“Is you not going on dates complicated?” he asked, switching from animals to dates. He was prone to jumping around in conversations, like most kids were, I imagined.

Shrugging, I counted on another distraction to avoid answering. I lifted him into my arms and he crawled around to get another piggyback. “What isn’t complicated?” I didn’t want to answer a child’s question with a question, but I wasn’t sure how to tell this boy that I didn’t date because I wished I could date his daddy, my boss.

“But Grandpa worries you’ll be alone forever.”

Talk about a vote of confidence—not. Still, I was amused. Eddie was like the dad I never had, but I laughed off his concern.

“Forever is a long time,” I reminded Jason.

“I don’t want you to be alone.”

I laughed, looking up at him. “I’m not. How can I be when I’ve got you?” Then I skipped and hurried, letting his laughter and squeals of excitement erase the depressing thoughts that I might end up alone after all.

Because if I had my heart set on my boss, on Henry, I was in for a long duration of not getting what I wanted.

7

HENRY

My father would always have a special place in my heart. I loved my old man, but if he showed up at the office, again, for the third day in a row, I wouldn't be able to hide my frustration.

I rode up the elevator the night after that date that I never wanted to have in the first place. Showing a family friend of my father's around wasn't a "date" or a romantic evening. I agreed on the principle of it, that I would be polite and appease my father in his desire to welcome Ann to New York. Winding up at that restaurant and her sneaking a date on me wasn't what I'd been counting on.

It was one thing to miss my arcade night with Mia and Jason—and they had fun, which I envied. But it was a whole other grievance to be foisted into a situation I didn't want.

My phone pinged as soon as I reached my floor, and with a sigh, I glanced at it.

"Gee, how could I have guessed?" I mused wryly as Ann's number scrolled over the screen. I wouldn't be forgiving my father for giving her my number anytime soon.

Ann Vance:Are you sure you don't want to come back and have a nightcap?

She'd texted that after I dropped her off at her hotel and I declined coming inside. What, did she think I was stupid, oblivious to what she wanted from me?

Ann Vance: Since you have a babysitter at home, why not enjoy the night?

I rolled my eyes again at that one. Mia wasn't a babysitter. She simply enjoyed being with Jason and was always eager to help out. One day, she'd make a great mother.

Ann Vance: Good night, handsome.

She just had to go over the top and add that unnecessary endearment.

And this just now.

Ann Vance: Good morning!! A couple of smiling emojis followed.

As I walked to my office, I put her on mute. The next step was blocking her damn number, but it was early days yet. I didn't need my father to get it in his head that I blew her off completely. He'd meddled enough for the week. For the month. The year! If he suspected that I was ignoring Ann, he'd only find another woman to parade in front of me next time. He wouldn't give up until I had someone.

But I already do. I had him, Jason, and Laura, who was more like a family member than a sitter or a nanny.

And Mia. I knew I could always count on having her in my life, even if we had to stand on opposite sides of the line that marked us as boss and employee.

Knowing Mia wouldn't be in until later, I headed to my desk and slumped into my chair. Annoyance swept over me all over again, muddying my concentration. I was irritated, and it was far too early to be this peeved.

I wasted the entire night with Ann, resisting her not-so-subtle advances. I told her I'd show her around, and that was all she'd get from me. Instead of putting up with her, I

could've been with my son and my...

My...

I groaned, irked as I glanced at the photo of Mia and me at the previous company picnic. Someone had snapped the picture just before she smashed the first cream pie in my face. I was smiling at Jason, unaware of the fate waiting for me as Mia snuck up behind me to cover my face. A moment after this photo was taken, she hung around my back and laughed and laughed, pleased that she'd gotten me with that cream pie. I paid her back, and that was one of the first times that I worried Owen was catching on to my feelings for her. He'd never asked, but my best friend knew me that well. He was at least suspicious, but so far, he hadn't mentioned his hunch. That picnic was the first time I'd noticed him watching me with a bemused expression, perhaps wondering how much Mia mattered in my life.

Diving into my tasks, I unlocked my computer and rolled my chair closer. On the strip of an agenda that I had pinned to my desktop as a widget, I spotted the first thing I could smile about. Lunch with Mia. I bet she put in on my shared calendar last week. That was how often we grabbed lunches together. The prospect of seeing her one-on-one would almost make up for the loss of the arcade night.

Before I got too far, though, a notification popped up of an incoming email.

"Ann Vance?" I read aloud, groaning. Texting wasn't enough? She had to email me too?

I opened it and deadpanned at her blatant approach.

I know you said you're not available to date right now, but when you are, I'll be here, ready for you.



“Who says I’d want you, though?” I clicked on the delete button, satisfied to wash my hands of her for now. “No one. That’s who. No one is saying I’d want you.”

I told her as honestly, politely, yet firmly as I could that I wasn’t available. Not when I was expanding the business and opening a new night club. I wouldn’t be available for Ann. Ever.

With the opening of Fifty on my mind, I wanted to double down and try to find that dancer. “Let’s see about that woman,” I muttered to myself, going to a browser and focusing on that. It served as a productive use of my time as a work task, and it also kept me mostly preoccupied until the lunch hour neared.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

I didn't have a chance to grumble about Ann. I lacked the opportunity to overthink everything with Mia. I threw myself into searching for that dancer I still couldn't get out of my mind. I started with looking through the club, Danger, and then I followed a long thread of posts about that one woman who'd entertained many. Numerous people who'd stopped at Danger went home to praise her and how well she'd danced.

"How can she have a mask on in every picture?" I wondered aloud when my stomach growled hours later. I'd spent all morning looking, and I found no trace of the dancer. Searching for Gina Martinez didn't get me too far, either, but I wasn't sure how looking into Danger's stage manager would get me answers about the dancers themselves.

Maybe they all use stage names. For security and privacy purposes.

"Knock, knock." Mia tapped her knuckles on my door as she pushed it open

On a sigh, I closed out all my windows and looked up at her. Then I resisted the instinct to let out another long breath at the fresh sight of her. She'd still been in her work clothes when I came home to Jason last night, but now, she looked... elegant? Beautiful as always, but overly dressy.

"Wow." I raised my brows at her unusual outfit.

"Wow, what?" She furrowed her brow, smoothing her hand down her white skirt. It was simple and basic, hugging her sexy curves and clinging to her lean legs. But it, along with the beige top, lacked color.

“You’re so...” I stood, curious as to why she was wearing such boring clothes. She chose her outfits artistically, and I loved how she kept me wondering and guessing what she’d come to the office in next.

“So...?” She stepped back as I met her at the door.

“So boring.”

“That’s not nice.” She shoved at my shoulder, and I chuckled at her deadpanned reaction.

“And seeing you all white and drab isn’t nice, either. You feeling okay?”

She pursed her lips, looking prim, and that didn’t sit well with me. Since when was she prissy and proper?

“I’m feeling hungry,” she answered.

“Why all the drab white and neutral stuff?” I asked as we reached the elevator.

“It’s not drab.”

“It is. No color, unlike the usual.”

She shrugged. “Just trying to fit in with the office crowd.”

I stabbed the button for the ground floor, where we both liked to have lunch at the café. “Fit in?”

Her responding groan was cute. “Fine. It’s laundry day, all right?”

I laughed, appreciating her honesty. Because the idea of Mia struggling to fit in with any crowd was laughable. She drew everyone in with her smiles and wit.

As soon as we found a table downstairs, teasing each other the whole way there about the pros and cons of drab clothes, I spotted Owen striding toward us.

“Hey, mind if I join?” he asked, pulling out a chair for himself.

I dropped into my chair. I minded, but I couldn’t say that.

“No, of course not. The more, the merrier,” Mia replied.

Do you mean that? I fell right back into the habit of analyzing every word she said. Did she not enjoy spending time with just me? I worried again about my dad’s comment, that she saw herself as just a worker in the building.

I let them catch up with small talk, but before long, Owen looked at me. “Any luck finding that dancer?”

Mia coughed, damn near choking on the sip of water she’d just taken.

Owen frowned, watching her with concern as I patted her back. “Wrong pipe?”

She nodded, her eyes watery. “Something like that.”

“You okay?” I asked.

More nods, but she wouldn’t look up at me.

“You remember the dancer, right?” Owen asked once Mia was finished clearing her throat.

“How could I not?” I joked. “I’ve thought about her every day.”

Mia blinked quickly, uneasy and struggling to look at me. “What dancer?”

Is it just me or does she look pale? Maybe it was the boring white and beige leaching color from her face, too.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked her again, rubbing her upper back.

“Yep. Yeah.” Now she lifted those emerald eyes to face me. “What dancer are you talking about?”

“Henry and I went to this really seedy dive. Some night club one of the valet drivers suggested.”

“Hmm.” Mia lowered her gaze again. She fiddled with her utensils, too, unable to stay still like usual. Mia was cool and collected in any situation.

“And we saw this one dancer who was just...” Owen shrugged.

“Gorgeous. Amazing,” I clarified. “I’ve never seen a woman move like that.”

Her brows shot up. “Wow. That good, huh?”

I mimed making a chef’s kiss. “She was clearly the star of the whole place.”

“Real talent,” Owen agreed.

“Unbelievable talent,” I added.

Mia shrugged. “Eh, all dancers have to be the same, right? One dancer can’t be that much better than any others.”

“Not true,” I protested. “I bet some have the privilege of many years of practice to perfect their stamina. Or some are just naturally born with it. This woman was probably born with it.”

Owen and I talked a little more about the mysterious woman, describing her to Mia. We added in details about Danger and talked a bit about the program they’d put on. The more we talked, the more distant she seemed. When I got the impression, again, that she was uncomfortable or awkward about us talking about this dancer, I grew curious. We’d talked about the nightclubs often. She was aware that we owned a few.

But maybe she was offended now because I wasn’t giving her attention here and now.

No, that can’t be it.

Mia wasn’t the jealous sort. We often talked about business over lunch, but we were friends too.

No matter what my dad said, she was not merely an employee. Every day, it felt like

our connection and closeness was one step away from something more. Something forbidden. Something... more.

I was sure that my father would be annoyed if I tried to choose someone so unlike the women he introduced to me. But I didn't care. I was at the point that I wished those damn ethics policies hadn't been put in place so I could be upfront and pursue Mia. If she was interested.

All I could do with her now, though, was talk about business. Keeping it all professional.

On that note...

"How about you come with me and scope out some dancers there?"

She pointed at herself. "Me? Why me?"

"You're one of the very few women I can trust in my life."

She almost smiled, and I loved the idea of her glowing under my praise. "But..."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

No, no arguments. Please. “Come with me. I trust your judgment. You can give me a woman’s point of view about the dancers.”

“Maybe sometime...” She shrugged.

“Tonight. After work,” I insisted.

“Tonight?” She opened her eyes wide. “Gosh, that’s a short notice.”

“Oh. Do you already have plans?” I asked, praying she wouldn’t. Already, the idea of spending time with Mia outside of the office—but still sort of participating in a work side mission—made me happy. I didn’t want to consider that she could have other commitments. Of course, she had a life outside the office here, but I didn’t want to think about who mattered in it.

Fuck, I’ve got to watch this possessiveness.

“No. Um, no plans.” She shook her head.

“Then will you come with me?” I asked, looking her straight in the eye.

“Okay. I’ll cave.” She nodded. “I can come give you a woman’s opinion on these wonderful dancers you saw.”

“No. Not plural. I’m sure the dancers were all quality performers, but they fell to the background when she was dancing closer.”



MIA

Hearing Henry's praise hit me in the heart. When he said he trusted my judgment, I felt important and wise, valuable and worthy in a manner that went beyond meeting the expectations of my job.

His compliments about my dancing, though...

I bit the inside of my cheek and hid a grin.

He had noticed me at Danger and fell under a spell of watching me dance. Yet, he didn't know it was me.

This is going to get so messy.

That evening, after work, I got into his car and rode along to Danger. I intended to do as he asked. I'd offer advice about the dancers if he wanted an honest critique, but I sure as hell wouldn't be helping him to find, well, me. On the way there, as we listened to a video call with Laura and Jason, I wondered how far Henry might go to look for me. Gina told me that he and Owen wanted to get backstage. They'd given her a card. But what would happen when he didn't find me there? Would he give up?

It was weird to show up as a guest, not a dancer, and I couldn't help but want to hide from all the staff. The waitstaff didn't really know me, but I bet the dancers could figure out I was out here in the audience. They knew what I looked like without the mask I always had to wear for the program.

Henry didn't let me dwell on any weird feelings, though. Like we always did when we were together, we talked and laughed. We joked and teased. He made it fun, and I

expected nothing less.

We got a table, and as we settled in with a drink, I forgot that this was supposed to be about work, that he was here to look for a dancer for the purpose of opening a new club. Instead, I provided my critical observations about the dancers on the stage. I pointed out how Margaret was too fast, sometimes hurrying through beats. He laughed at my remarks about Tyler being too nervous and not natural in their steps.

“You want to look for a balance. A dancer who shows an ease with being on the stage while also being genuinely excited to perform.”

He nodded. “You sure seem to know a lot about this.”

Crap. I didn’t want my knowledge to show. I finished my nonalcoholic drink to stall. “Well, it’s common sense, isn’t it?” I shrugged. “Besides, why are you looking for a dancer to hire? Don’t you have reps and scouts and managers who do this?”

“I do. But sometimes, I like to handle parts of the business myself.”

I tensed under his stare. While I looked ahead, at the stage, at my colleagues, I wondered why he wanted to focus on me. If he was here to find a woman he wouldn’t find on the stage...

“What?” I faced him, on edge. His smile was gentle yet curious. I felt proud to earn his intrigue, but depending on what he wanted from me, I had a reason to be wary.

“You seem to be really into this.” He gestured at the stage. “Very observant.”

I smiled. “I pay attention.”

He huffed a light laugh. “You always have.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

“Do you really intend to ask a dancer here to come work at your new club?” I asked, wanting to keep the conversation about his goals here.

“I do. Fifty is opening in a new location, far from here. Miami is a big step in a new direction, but I feel good about branching out to a different area.”

“Miami.” I sighed, envisioning the Floridan heat. “That is far away. But you know what? That sounds like a good thing. A new start in a totally new place. I’ve wondered about doing that myself.”

“Opening a nightclub in Miami?”

I elbowed him gently, but he snagged me closer by draping his arm around my shoulders and keeping me close. “No. Starting over somewhere new.”

Without releasing me, he peered down at me and frowned. “You’d want to leave New York?”

I did and didn’t. I couldn’t, anyway. I had no prospects elsewhere. And I would never be able to leave Henry. Or Jason. Even Eddie. Not the family-like setting at the office, either. I’d miss them all too much. At the same time, I knew it was stupid to want to stay stuck in place because of a crush on my boss that wouldn’t ever go anywhere.

I lowered my gaze, but he turned toward me, forcing me to glance up.

“Why would you want to leave New York?” he asked, taking my hesitation to reply

as an answer that I would want to go far from here.

I sighed, searching for words. I couldn't tell him the truth. Not like this. Maybe not ever. I had no business wanting him, and even if I was stupid enough to admit that I yearned for a relationship with him, strict policies at the office stood in the way.

"Mia..." He furrowed his brow and shook his head. "I don't know what I'd do without you in my life."

Damn, does that hurt. His blunt words cut at me. I felt friend-zoned, horribly so, and a raw ache burned in my chest.

He couldn't see a life without me because I was a good worker. Because I was dependable in the office. Because I helped with Jason.

Under his close gaze, I was stuck under the obligation to say something. I swallowed hard, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Want another drink?" he asked, noticing my throat flexing. "Thirsty?"

I nodded, wondering how he could be so damn sweet and attentive to me but also stubborn to keep me at arm's length. It wasn't a hot-and-cold treatment. It was simply the sad signs of an unrequited love. One day, I'd just have to accept that he didn't want me like I did him.

"Um, yeah. A drink would be nice. Just a water."

He lifted his head, looking around. "I'll head to the bar instead of waiting for someone to come to our table."

"Okay. Sure. I'll be right here."

The smile he flashed at me felt too good, like he enjoyed my promise to stay put for him. I relished the idea that I could make him so happy. Pleasing him as a good employee was one matter, but wanting to make him content as a friend felt better.

I watched him walk off, nervous since it was a break in the program. Any minute now, someone could come up and talk to me, and that would be one more step closer to my “secret” being revealed.

But I was safe. For the several minutes while Henry went to the bar, I sat there in peace, free to be and wait with the rest of the crowd for the show to commence. No Danger employee approached me. The shadows shrouding our table must have done the trick of hiding me from my coworkers on the stage, but too soon, another man stalked up to me from the next area of seating.

“You’re too lovely to be sitting here looking so lonely,” he said with a smarmy, sleazy smile.

“Oh, I’m not lonely,” I replied, not turning toward him fully. The less I engaged with him, the quicker he might leave. Still, his wording hit me. I’d just talked about being lonely with Jason when he’d asked. Truly, I was lonely. So desperate to fit in with Henry.

“Looks like you’re all alone right here and now...” He reached for my hand, grasping two of my fingers in a swift clutch.

“Get your hand off her.”

Henry was back, two waters in hand. His eyes were slitted, and nothing about his tense expression suggested that he was in a patient mood. I’d heard his no-nonsense tone of authority many times, but never like this.

And not over me.

“Whoa. Hey, now.” The man stepped back, holding his hands up in a truce-like manner. “I was just?—”

“You were just leaving,” Henry finished for him coldly as he shouldered his way toward me. He didn’t take his stern gaze off me for a moment, locking his eyes on mine. In those dark blue eyes, I caught the hint of jealousy. The tightness in his jaw proved it.

He was... jealous? Of another man trying to talk to me?

I couldn't help a little laugh as he gave me my water. "Henry. He was..." I shook my head, too confused to make sense of this. He couldn't be acting jealous when he had placed me so firmly in the category of "just an employee" or only a friend.

"He was flirting with you." He put his glass on the table and leaned closer, standing in my space as he faced me.

"I think he was," I agreed with a shrug. "But so what?"

I wasn't interested.

"It's not a big deal."

He furrowed his brow.

"I mean..." I blinked, struggling to figure him out, to navigate why he'd be so upset.

"It's not like we're here on a date."

He stepped closer. One foot toward me. The nearness robbed me of my breath, but not as much as the heated look in his eyes.

"Why can't we be?" he asked slowly as he lowered his mouth to mine.

HENRY

Don't.

Don't.

Don't do it.

I held my breath, slanting closer to Mia's lips, and I couldn't talk myself out of it. I caved. Giving in had never felt as good as it did this moment. With the first contact of her mouth, so soft and warm against mine, I felt a charge of desire barrel through me. Liquid lust ran in my veins, and I tempered myself from holding her closer and devouring her.

She made a noise of surprise as I kissed her, but she didn't back away. She didn't retreat. Closing her eyes, she tipped her face up to me and accepted that I was making a move. I wished I could stake a claim, mark her as mine, and erase any idea of her being available to even think about another man.

Mine.

Fuck, I'd wanted her for so long, so badly. For months—no, for years—I'd wondered what it would be like to have and hold Mia. To taste the sweetness on her lips. To savor her essence.

Now that I'd crossed a clear line, kissing her, I refused to think about going back to the way things were. Because this was too perfect. She felt too damn good.

Tilting her head to the side, she gave me a better angle of access, seeking more of this heated, forbidden caress, her lips against mine, her breath mingling with my exhales. The press of her fingers registered on my chest, but not in a shove away. She curled



her fingers, twisting the fabric slightly as she leaned against me, kissing me back as slowly, yet hungrily, as I did her.

Mine. You're mine, Mia. I showed her my thoughts, naughty and taboo, as I raised my hand and gripped the back of her neck. Keeping her close, I kissed her harder, determined to slide my tongue in and really get a sample of her sweetness.

Pure desire coursed through me. Rabid need took over. Just one kiss, and I was lost in wanting all of her, in needing everything she could ever give me.

A soft moan escaped her as she shifted on her feet. Again, toward me. She wasn't running. She wasn't backing up in retreat. Kissing me back and lifting her face, she waited for me to smother her with my lips.

Before we could get carried away, though, someone called out.

"Henry?"

Fuck. Hearing Owen calling my name was the last thing I wanted to happen right now. I didn't want any distractions with Mia reaching up to kiss me back. I wanted zero interruptions, now that I'd surprised her and received her matching interest.

"Henry." He didn't ask it then, stating my name louder with how much closer he'd come.

Mia heard him that time, too. She gasped in shock and leaned back, out of my reach. With how quickly she moved, she almost stumbled back, but I kept her upright. I lowered my hand from the back of her neck, but I caught her with both of my hands on her back. Hugging her loosely, I prevented her from tripping or getting too far back.

Her lips parted, wet from mine. Each of her hot breaths whipped at my chin. They were a testament to how ragged she was, how worked up and out of breath I'd rendered her. One look down tempted me to ignore my friend coming up behind me, but she stepped back. Her brows raised as she lowered her gaze, noticing Owen reaching us.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

I hadn't asked him to come, but he was there when I asked her to come here with me tonight.

Shame filled her eyes. Shock and horror swiftly followed. All too soon, she was letting the consequences weigh down on her.

We'd kissed.

We'd crossed a boundary that we shouldn't have.

Of course, she was freaking out about it, but I wouldn't. I would not take back a second of kissing her. I was only peeved that Owen had to show up here when he had.

"Henry," Owen repeated, clapping a hand on my back.

I tore my stare from Mia, hating that she was backing up after the blissful surprise of my kiss. The perfect moment of surrendering to the chemistry between us. I'd kissed her on impulse, and so had she in return. And I wanted to do it again.

Owen's hand on my back prompted me to turn and face him. I did, finding a worse surprise with him.

Owen hadn't come here alone. He'd brought along Ann.

She narrowed her eyes at Mia, then blinked curiously at me. "Hey, Henry!" Without missing a beat, she morphed from an expression of confusion and irritation for Mia to

an overly bright smile for me. She launched herself at me, arms out in an implied request that I catch her and hug her. I did, but not tightly. Jumping at me so awkwardly, she nearly pushed me backward.

“Hey,” I said to my friend who watched me with a curious smirk. “I didn’t know you were coming out here.”

Owen shrugged, glancing at Mia as she turned toward the table and sipped her drink. She didn’t make eye contact with Owen or me, seeming to use the cup of water as a prop to distract herself with. I bet she wished she could hide behind the damn glass with how she was shrinking away.

“I can see that.” Owen cleared his throat, shooting me a silly smile that suggested he was having way too much fun with this, finding me kissing my secretary.

I hated that he worded it like I was hoping no one would interrupt my evening with Mia. Like she was something I had to hide. She was—on the principle that I shouldn’t be kissing someone who worked for me. But I didn’t like the thought that Mia was inferior or shameful, something to avoid or hide.

Now that I knew how sweet her lips were, I wanted to kiss her until they were swollen. I wanted to feel her mouth on me everywhere. I wanted... her.

Again, I glanced at her, wishing she’d face me. Standing off to the side, she paid attention to the stage.

“I was looking for you,” Ann said, grabbing my arm and tugging so I’d turn from Mia. “At the office.”

I know. You’ve been looking for me with texts, emails, and calls as well. I supposed I shouldn’t have missed the thought that she would seek me out in person too.

“She came to the office,” Owen said, “looking for you, and I told her that I knew where you were.”

Asshole. Then again, I hadn’t had a chance to tell my friend that I didn’t want Ann butting into my life. Had he known, he’d back me up and help to keep this gold digger away.

“Since I knew you would be here, I told her we could meet up. But I, uh...” He winced, scratching below his ear. “I thought we’d find you here scoping out the talent on the stage. Not... doing something else.”

I willed him to shut up.

“Yes. The dancers,” Mia said, using an overly loud and sudden tone. “Wewerewatching the dancers. But hey. Um.” She shook her head, flustered as she grabbed her purse. Rushing to snatch it, she knocked over her glass of water on the table. Liquid splashed out on the table, flooding the surface while more flew out toward Ann, who shrieked.

“It’s just water,” I said, hurrying with Mia to mop up the spill with napkins.

“But—” Ann growled, wiping at her dress that was hardly wet from the spray to begin with.

“Um. I’m just—I’ll...” Mia held her hands out, as if warding the soggy napkins to stay put on the table. Without looking up at me, giving me a slight view of her blushing cheeks, she eased to the side. She moved with a clear intention of keeping the distance between us, an exaggerated buffer as she slipped through the nook our table and chairs were in. “I’ll just go.”

Dammit! “No.” I reached out for her, ignoring Ann’s curious frown. “Mia, you don’t

have to go.”

“But, I, yeah.” She nodded, tossing me a quick smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Yeah. I shouldn’t stay out any later than this.”

But you often stay up late. I’d know because we texted constantly, daily and nightly, about anything and everything. Sometimes, it was about work things, but mostly, it was everyday sort of messages. She was always the last one to reply with a goodnight text, late into the night.

“Please stay,” I said, hating that she’d react to my kiss like this. That she’d react to her eager response to my kiss like that. I didn’t want her to feel like she had to leave. I wanted us to go right back to where we were, kissing when we had no right to.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

I didn't want her to go at all, but especially not because Ann and Owen were here.

"You don't need me here." She said it kindly, but I caught the underlying hurt in her tone. Now that Ann was here, a woman I was supposed to spend time with, she was ousted.

"But I—" I clamped my lips shut, catching myself from correcting her.

I didn't need Mia here with me. But I wanted her. I valued her companionship. I wished to hear more of her critique about the dancers and her tips for what I should look for.

All I could do was watch her walk away, though, feeling as though I'd had a sample of a forbidden delicacy I'd never taste again.

As she left, I stood there rooted in indecision. I was tempted to run after her, to continue spending time with her, but then I was tempted to linger and see if that dancer—the one I wanted Mia's opinion on—would show on the stage.

"Dammit," I muttered as I grabbed my glass of water. I drank some, wishing Ann weren't here. She'd instantly driven Mia away. And Owen. I shot him a stern look over the rim of my cup too. He just had to drag Ann here. Like I'd want her company.

I had to explain it all to him, how little I was interested. Next time he saw Ann popping in at the office, he'd tell her to leave, not encourage her and enable her to stalk me more.

“You all right, man?” Owen asked when a server stood at our area, taking Ann’s nit-picky order for a frou-frou drink.

I sighed, missing Mia and wishing I could rewind time to be with her—just her—again. Mia’s company soothed me at the same time that it excited me. I felt alive with her, and everything else paled in comparison.

“Yeah,” I lied to him. It wasn’t his fault. He didn’t know how uninterested I was in Ann. But with the careful way he studied me now after Mia’s departure, I had a hunch he was getting the gist of how interested I was in Mia.

Broody and musing on my growing feelings for Mia, I barely paid attention when the show resumed. The dancer I wanted to see wasn’t up there, and without Mia here to offer helpful tips and pointers about the show and the dance crew, I felt listless and out of it.

“I swear...” Ann scrunched her face, perfecting an expression of disgust as she shook her head at the stage. “These people, these women, have to be so desperate. Look at them.” She raised her hand to gesture at the stage and sneered. “They’re just like lowlife strippers. Dirty, without any shame or modesty.” She huffed. “Like hookers!”

I rolled my eyes, not in the mood to listen to her cattiness.

“I beg to argue,” Owen said, noticing my dark cringe. “They’re entertainers. We employ many excellent individuals at our clubs. Would you say the same thing about a Dunn employee?”

“Well. No.” She beamed a quick smile at me. “Everything a Dunn does is high-quality.”

“Then it’s no different. These dancers are entertainers. Not strippers or hookers,” he



said.

I sighed, missing Mia even more. She was so critical of a judge, commenting on form and appeal, their fitness and skill sets. She was observant and wise, not quick to generalize and be bitchy with prejudices like Ann.

It didn't matter how I was thinking about Mia. I always held her in high esteem. Sure, she had her flaws, but she was... perfect. For me.

I rubbed my face, aggravated with how badly I wanted her. I wasn't sure if it was a consequence of finally daring to kiss her after years of dreaming about it. So many fantasies had formed in my mind's eye of how she'd accept me as a lover, as her man, not her boss.

The reality of it was that my feelings would only continue to grow. I would pine for her. I would yearn for her far past this one first kiss tonight. And I had to wonder when enough would be enough.

I should've been on top of the world, so thrilled that she'd been eager to kiss me back. But I had to make my intentions clear. I wanted her to understand, full stop and without room for error, that I desired her. That she was never and would never be "just an employee" for me.

Sure, the rules at the office held me back. Those strict no-fraternization policies had been put in place because Jason's mother—Mackenzie—had been a Dunn employee too. We'd started a workplace romance that ended with her getting pregnant. When she realized that she didn't want a family with me, a forever with me, she took off. It made for many awkward moments until she left. When she ran off three days after Jason's birth—to sleep with the CFO of a rival company overseas—she'd not only abandoned me and Jason, but she'd also shown the need for rules in our office.

That situation ended poorly, but the attraction and closeness Mia and I had cultivated over years wouldn't result in a similar implosion.

Right?

She couldn't feel so right, so perfect for me, and be wrong for me.

Life couldn't be that cruel. Mia couldn't be the one woman I wanted to call mine and not be a good fit.

"Doesn't look like 'your' dancer is here," Owen commented as Ann happily slurped at her frou-frou cocktail.

The show was nearing its closing number, but I hadn't really paid attention. Bereft with Mia's absence, I'd spent the rest of the night thinking about her.

But my friend's wording bothered me. That dancer wasn't mine. The only person I wanted to be possessive about was Mia.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:47 am*

I cringed, hating this weird feeling that I could be a two-timing asshole, sitting here to see a specific dancer while lusting for my secretary. It wasn't as though I desired that dancer. I wanted to see that dancer and talk to her so I could offer her a job dancing at my club. That was it.

She'd attracted me, in the sense of making me watch her, but Mia was the only one I really wanted. And I had for far too long to be patient about it anymore.

Especially not after I'd lost all common sense and kissed her.

10

MIA

I wasn't prepared for Henry to kiss me. And I wasn't ready for it to be over. Being interrupted by Owen and Ann sucked, too. I'd spent far too long imagining the moment to want anyone butting in.

I was thrown off by seeing people from the office right when Henry charged ahead on challenging why we couldn't be together. As it was, I was wholly unprepared for how to react in front of them, let alone Henry. Had it just been me and him, I would've acted on a lot more desire in the privacy of our moment.

Turning tail and running out of Danger might not have been my finest exit, but it worked. I was too blown away by the fact that Henry kissed me to do anything wiser.

As I walked down the hallway of the office on the following Wednesday, I bit on the

inside of my cheek and resisted all those huge emotions from sweeping through me. The mere memory of Henry's lips on mine reignited them all.

Excitement. Joy. Desire. Euphoria. Glee. Satisfaction.

And so much more lust. One kiss was not enough, but we hadn't had a chance to be together again, not even here at the office.

He was in meetings. Or I was swamped with calls from other departments. If he wasn't in his executive suite, he was out for reports from supervisors and managers. And if I wasn't in my cubby-hole of an office, I was busy catching up on sleep from the nights of dancing.

Not having to face Henry was a blessing. I missed seeing him, of course. I wished I could talk to him, but with this funkiness, this confusing post-kiss aftermath, I was grateful not to have to address it.

Maybe we can just pretend it never happened and move on?

My thoughts stalled me in place. I paused near his office, obligated to interact long enough to drop off some forms.

Ignoring the lapse we mutually shared wouldn't be fair. Not to me. I didn't want to pretend it never happened. I didn't want to move on and act like it was nothing.

It was something, a very big something, according to me. Yet, I wasn't sure how to approach him and figure out why he'd kissed me and if it was a fluke one-time thing or something representative of much more.

After drawing in a deep sigh, I resumed walking toward his door. I didn't see him through the glass window, and as I let myself in, I wasn't sure if I should be relieved

or disappointed to have missed him. I set the documents on his desk and made sure the Sign Heretabs were all affixed in the proper places.

I didn't linger, not wanting to trespass. As I walked out and closed his door behind me, I heard someone striding down the hall.

Not again. Seriously. Not freaking again.

Ann was here, invading the peace of the office setting. She'd made a habit of popping in whenever she pleased, and she pleased often. Every day—multiple times—she'd stop in to chat with Henry. Oftentimes, she attempted to pull him off a call or interrupt a conversation. At this rate, Jen would never stop grumbling about her constant visits and distracting manner. Each time Ann showed up, she expected to be treated like royalty visiting without any concern of getting in anyone's way.

And here she was. Soliciting for Henry's attention. Probably his wealth, too. I didn't like to form quick opinions without much basis, but nothing suggested she was interested in him for anything but his money.

"Oh. It's you." She turned her nose up at me. "Again."

"Likewise," I muttered.

She narrowed her eyes. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

Behind her, Laura and Jason entered the hall. As soon as Jason spotted me, he charged full-speed ahead to launch at me. Weaving and darting around others in the hall, he grinned and sprinted to reach me.

I couldn't help but smile back, waiting for his hug. Feeling his little arms wrapped around me always improved my mood.

On his way, he bumped into Ann's side a bit, sending her purse swinging.

"Oh!" She scowled as Jason passed in a blur, determined to get to me.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I lowered, holding my arms open to catch him. We both giggled and laughed. Because he lifted my spirits, I spun him an extra round.

“What’s up, kiddo?” I asked him.

“I’ve got to run out and pick up something really quick,” Laura said as she glanced around the office. She was clearly seeking Henry, because when she didn’t spot him, she winced. “I thought he’d be here. I was bringing Jason for his lunch hour.” Peeking at her watch, she winced deeper. “Shoot. I can’t wait long.”

“I’ll help Mia while I wait for Daddy,” Jason said, taking my hand as I lowered him to stand. He swung our arms back and forth, too close to a plant on a stand, and I hurried to catch it before it fell.

“Yeah, that’s fine.” I nodded at Laura. “Go on and get your script. Is it helping yet?”

She groaned. “No. Not yet. I hope this different med helps. I am so impatient to get back into the classes I like at the gym.”

I held up my crossed fingers. “Hopefully soon.”

Jason darted off, running to look at the fish in the long tank set against the wall, and I just caught a glimpse of him dashing off to get a peppermint from the dish near the copier room I used the most. Each time he ran around, Laura shook her head and I smiled.

“Oh, to have that kind of energy,” she teased. “You sure he’ll be okay with you?”

I huffed a little laugh. “Of course.” I’d kept Jason with me at the office many times, but still, Laura would always check. Even though Henry was a busy businessman, he would never want Jason to feel like he wasn’t welcome here. Laura, his gym-rat of a neighbor cursed with arthritis, was simply conscious of how energized and wild Jason could be. Like he was today.

“Okay.” She frowned at his doing a hopscotch sort of jump pattern on the tile squares of the floor.

I waved her off. “It’s fine. He can hang out with me until Henry’s out of his meetings.”

As soon as she left, I held out my hand for Jason to take it. He’d behave in my small office. “Come on, kiddo.”

He ran toward me, bumping into Ann again.

“MyGod!” she snapped, scowling again as she righted her purse. “What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” he replied. “You’re just standing in the middle of the way.”

I pressed my lips together tightly, fighting a laugh. Even he could notice how she didn’t belong here.

“Well, you’re just running around like a terrible child.” She sneered as he skidded to a stop in front of me, messing up the rug and almost falling. “A nuisance.” Setting a hand on her hip, she tipped her nose up even more, as if she wasn’t haughty enough. “You belong in a boarding school. And just go away from here.” A nasty huff ended her tirade.



My jaw dropped. Jason's small hand found mine and clutched tightly.

Ann hadn't shown any kindness to Jason. They hadn't crossed paths much, but she'd seen him in and out of here while summer break kept him out of school during the day. Each time she saw him, she went out of her way to dismiss him or view him as a distraction. Not a person.

Anger burned hot within me. I narrowed my eyes, seething and loathing this awful woman's presence in our lives at all.

"How dare you!"

Jason sniffled, turning to burrow his face against me as he began to cry. "I don't want to go to a boarding school!"

"You're not," I told him, hugging him close as I stared down Ann. "And you are far out of line to ever suggest that."

"No, I'm not."

"You are!" I glowered at her, ready to retaliate harder if she argued that point.

"You have no right to tell me what to do." She pointed at me then herself for emphasis. "You just work here."

"That does not matter. You have absolutely no right to speak to him like that. To suggest he get shipped off to a boarding school, of all places!"

"He should be." She smirked as Jason cried louder.

Jen raised her brows as she stepped into the open part of the office. She'd overheard

the commotion, as did a few others who watched the drama.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Ann wasn't done. "He should just get out of the way and stay far?—"

Jason clung to me tighter. "I don't want to go anywhere, Mia!"

I smoothed down his hair. "You're not." Jabbing my finger at Ann, I hardened my stance and readied to tear into her. "Don't speak like that to him, ever,everagain!"

This poor boy. Already struggling with a workaholic father, an absent mother. He just wanted love, to be loved and give it to those he deemed worthy. And here she was, acting like he was an unwanted pest to send away.

"I will talk however I see fit. He's in the way?—"

"He's not in anyone's way." I stepped closer, wishing I could jab my finger at her hard enough to knock her over. "And if you think he's in your way, when you don't belong here at all, good riddance."

"I don't belong here?" She exaggerated a stupid bark of laughter and rolled her eyes. "Uh, yeah, I do. With Henry."

"The hell you do."

"Are you implying that I need your permission?"

"No. But I will be damned if you'll come here uninvited and say such a horrible thing like telling him he needs to be shoved aside at a boarding school."

“Who’s going to a boarding school?”

Ann froze at the sound of Henry’s voice behind her. She blocked my view of him as he’d entered. I was so focused on consoling Jason and standing up for him that all the other details about the room faded to nothing.

“Um.” Ann dropped her scowl as she turned to face Henry.

He stood behind her, furrowing his brow at Jason crying and hanging on to me. Ignoring Ann’s suddenly sweet smile, he strode toward me.

My heart broke when Jason held me tighter and cried. He turned a bit to see Henry as he crouched down to be at his eye level.

“She said I should just go away. And be at a boarding school,” Jason sobbed, pointing at Ann.

“No. No. He misunderstood,” Ann argued in a sugary tone. “Oh, goodness. I’d never say anything like that.” With Henry’s back to her as he picked up Jason, she glared daggers at me.

I felt defensive of Henry on the principle of her being just another gold digger going after him, but now, I felt rabid to fight her away to keep Jason safe.

“There was no misunderstanding.” I crossed my arms, and Henry held Jason and stood. “I was right here. I heard every word.”

“Nonsense,” Ann said.

“Jace, no. You’re not going anywhere.” Henry smoothed his hair down while I rubbed the boy’s back. “Never. You hear me? You’re never going to a boarding

school. You'll always be with me."

"And Mia?" he asked, lifting his face from Henry's shoulder.

The sight of his tear-streaked face shattered my heart. This poor boy. He had been afraid of the concept of boarding schools ever since he watched a movie about a pair of brothers being sent to one and getting trapped there.

"I'm here," I told him, continuing to rub his back.

He moved, twisting out of Henry's arms to reach for me. As soon as I held him, he sniffled. "I wish you were my mommy."

Oh, God. I didn't reply. I couldn't. I'd had that dream many times, wondering how sweet it'd be for us to be a family, a real one. Focusing on consoling him, I started to walk away with him.

"I don't have time for you, Ann. I've made myself clear," Henry said.

"Oh, I know how busy you are. But I made reservations for lunch for us?—"

"No." Henry stated that one word clearly. "I'm..." He gestured at Jason. "I'm concerned about my son. I had plans to have lunch with him, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. Mia? Will you come?"

I nodded, resting my head on top of Jason's.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“What?” Ann’s sweetness soured as she clearly felt put out. “I make reservations for us and you turn around and ask her out?”

“I have other priorities.”

“I came here just for lunch. With you. That’s why I’m here.”

“No one asked you to be here,” I sassed.

She narrowed her eyes until Henry faced her again. “I made plans for us to get lunch.”

“You made plans for lunch. I did as well. And they don’t include you.” Henry sighed at Jason clinging to me. “My family is more important right now.”

She snorted. “Well, your family is. But she’s not.” She flicked her hand at me, dismissing me. “She’s just an employee.”

Oh, fuck you. I hated that term. Ever since Eddie said it, reminding me that I was just an employee, I worried that the label could be true.

“Hey, you know what?” I let Jason stand so he could go back to Henry, who watched him with worry. “I actually can’t do lunch today.” I willed myself to stay strong through the lie. I was ready to go. If Jason—and Henry—wanted me to go to lunch with them, I would. But being stuck in the middle like this didn’t feel good. Her words hurt. Jason saying he wished I was his mommy made my heart ache. And I couldn’t face Henry without his seeing how badly I wanted him to push Ann further

out of his life and consider me a woman worthy of really being with him.

As more than just an employee.

“I’ve got to meet with a friend, but I’ll bring back that ice cream we like, okay?” I said to Jason.

He nodded, still sniffing. The barest hint of a smile touched his lips, and I exhaled in relief.

“But—”

I turned, ignoring Henry calling out to me. Ann could win this round. She was supposed to win him. Competing for Henry against a woman like that wouldn’t end well for me, so I resorted to what was becoming my latest tactic of getting out of awkward situations.

I ran.

I extracted myself and sought to hide from it all—my feelings for Henry, the disappointment that he couldn’t be mine, and the horrible woman who made it no secret that she wanted him.

I hurried to grab my purse and leave. Gina would be at Danger. She doubled as my boss and my friend, and I knew I could count on her to hear me out while the club was cleaned, closed during the day.

That was where I found her, snacking at one of the tables while the maintenance crew cleaned and mopped on the stage. She raised her brows, pausing mid-bite of a sandwich to stare at me. “You ran all the way from the big office uptown to come here?”

“Just a subway stop... or five... away.” I huffed out a deep breath as I plopped in a chair.

With aplomb, she took me in, noticing my office wear of a plaid skirt and white blouse, minimal makeup, and sensible shoes. I’d hurried, even with the subway ride, and I was sure I looked a mess. I felt like one, thinking about all that happened at the office with Ann and Jason.

“You look so...” She gestured at me.

“Stressed?”

“Well, yeah. You always are. But so different.”

I shrugged. She was used to seeing me in my stage wear. But she could also recognize me as myself. That night Henry kissed me, she’d spotted me. It was half the reason I ran. If she noticed me, others could too. Gina knew about my job, my addiction to being near Henry. All of it. I confided in her often, seeing her as a friend when I lacked time to look for any and make them naturally outside of the workplace. Or workplaces, for me.

Gina knew not to approach me with Henry, but I couldn’t assume the same for everyone else. Hence, my rush to get out of there, to keep my lives and identities separate.

“Like the other night, when you were here with the boss man.” She rolled her eyes. “I forgot to mention how that blondie was talking shit about the dancers. The waiters overheard her when she ordered her ridiculous drinks from the bar—and then demanded them to remake them when they weren’t ‘right’.”

“Ann? She was talking about the dancers?”



“Yep. Said they had to be lowlife losers who couldn’t get normal jobs. Then she bitched about the whole club. Clearly, I don’t deliver to her expectations.” Once more, she rolled her eyes.

“I’m not surprised.” I shook my head and rambled about why I’d rushed here to talk to her. I needed to get it all off my chest, and as she ate a sandwich—offering me some as well, which I accepted—I spilled the details. How Ann was clearly digging her claws into Henry. How she said that horrible crap to Jason about a boarding school. All of it.

“Well.” Finished with her sandwich, she wiped her mouth and tossed the napkin to the table. She crossed her arms and leaned back. “When are you going to just makeyourdamn move on him? Huh?” She raised her brows, all too aware of how I’d had a crush on him forever. “When are you going to tell him how you feel about him, for real?”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I dropped my face in my hands and whined. “I don’t know. I can’t.” I shot back up to face her. “Technically, he’d already made a move. He kissed me, right? That’s a move. But then she showed up, and that was that.”

“That was that? He didn’t say anything about it? He’s acting like it never happened?”

I cringed. “We’ve both been too busy. I haven’t had a chance to speak with him alone.”

Until today. He asked me to lunch, and I ran here instead.

“This friendship thing between you two has gone on long enough, though, hasn’t it?”

“I’m just worried he will never want me as anything more than his secretary. Than his friend.”

She shot me a dubious look. “He kissed you.”

“But that could’ve been a heat-of-the-moment thing. Jealousy because another man was hitting on?—”

“Aha!” She pointed at me. “Jealous of another man near you... because he wants you.”

I shook my head. “Aside from that, I am his employee. And that will always stand between us.” Talking with her felt a lot like listening to a devil’s advocate. She was all for my telling Henry how badly I desired him. Hearing myself talk out loud aided in getting it all out of my mind and off my chest, though.

“I need to work harder on keeping things separate in my life. Henry is my boss, and that’s a job I need?—”

“But you’re halfway in love with both of them. Father and son.” She frowned, concerned for me.

“—to pay off the last time I lowered my guard and thought I was in love with someone.” The last time I let love in, I was hurt so badly.

“Not every man will be like Dennis,” she said gently.

I sighed, hating to hear my ex’s name. Because of him, I was conned into participating in an armed burglary. Because of him, I’d been stuck with all the blame and captured, forced to serve a sentence for a crime I had no knowledge about until it had happened. I’d done minor time for a crime I hadn’t committed. I had a record to expunge because I’d been duped to think a man loved me and wouldn’t use me.

Henry wouldn’t. I knew he wouldn’t do anything to be in the same category as Dennis.

The residual pain from being burned in love lasted to this day, and it served to warn me back from wanting more with Henry anytime soon. It was simply too complicated.

Or is it?

“I say you should just tell him how you feel about him,” Gina advised. “Or... tell him that you’re the dancer he’s trying to contact and bribe to work for him.”

I shook my head faster. “Heck no,” I replied of the latter.

It had to be safer to keep my worlds separate—for as long as I could.

11

HENRY

Mia didn't want to have lunch with me and Jason, and it didn't sit well with me. She came to our arcade night, but she seemed to only focus on my son, being merely cordial to me. That was how sensitive she was to him, perceiving when he might need more reassurances. If Ann made a flippant comment about Jason going to a boarding school—which I couldn't see why or how she'd assume she'd have any say in that matter—then Jason's upset mood made sense.

I didn't ask Mia about it. I wanted her to explain what happened. But she was a distraction. She was that good at making my son smile that I couldn't bear to bring up the topic. At least not around him. Instead, I went along with the evening and had fun, too, watching Jason for any sign of his being sad or anxious.

I was sure that many children did well at boarding schools. Or I hoped they would. Jason had asked many questions about those kinds of institutions after he watched a movie about it, and I hated that it instilled a fear in his mind.

No, he'd never go to a boarding school. He belonged at home, with his family, even if it was small. I was the holdup for keeping our family unit so small. If I could marry and have more kids, then he wouldn't be so lonely. I lacked the time to go hunting for a wife. And it seemed that Jason had already made up his mind about that, anyway.

"I wish you were my mommy."

I'd never forget my son's teary face as he said that to the woman I couldn't get out of my mind.

I groaned, closing my eyes and dropping my head back to rest it on my chair. Rubbing my face didn't soothe me. It didn't perk me up. I was frustrated and tired, and adding my desire for Mia into the mix worsened my patience.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I'd been too busy to get a moment alone with her. I was working. She was working. Jason needed more attention from me. My dad did, too, with some paperwork getting snagged.

I wanted a chance to talk with Mia like we usually did. We were past due to discuss the kiss at Danger. And I was eager to hear what she had to say about Ann and Ann's comments. I wasn't blind. I knew Ann was a gold digger, too eager and pushy for my time. Though she might think she was hiding her expressions when my back was turned to her, I noticed the tail end of her sneers, scowls, and rolling eyes. Besides, she was too damn sugary with me for it not to be fake and forced.

Mia wasn't available, though, also unusually busy. She always came in late, apparently because she had a habit of staying up late reading. Jen constantly praised her bookworm routine, but I wondered if that was true. If she read that much, wouldn't she talk about books, too? She never did, not with me when I asked her about what she was currently reading. I'd given up on asking, getting a hunch that she actually did something else at night.

But if she's not at home reading into the morning, what is she doing? I debated every day whether Mia was actually the homebody she appeared to be outside her working hours here at the office.

I hated the thought of her being busier than usual because of that kiss. I had yet to explain why I'd had to kiss her. It wasn't only because I wanted that guy and everyone else at the club to see that she was with me. I also felt prompted to act on my question, when I put her on the spot and challenged her about why we couldn't be out on a date at the club.

I'd asked her to come with me to scope out talent. For work. But it felt like so much more. Every second spent in her company felt supercharged and more exciting.

"But it couldn't have been a date," I mumbled aloud as I sat up and opened my eyes at my computer screen.

Mia and I couldn't do anything so long as we both worked for Dunn Enterprises. While I couldn't stop thinking about the sensation of her lips against mine and how badly I wanted to kiss her again, I couldn't risk breaking the company's policies to start something with her.

I sighed, looking at the photo on my desk. Picking it up made me feel closer to her, closer to that fun moment I'd had with her.

My dad wouldn't understand it. He simply would not be able to believe me or accept it if I approached him and told him that I wanted to date Mia. That I dreamed about kissing her. That I fantasized about making love to her and learning if she was a quiet lover or a loud?—

"Goddammit." I shook my head and looked up at the ceiling, annoyed with my train of thoughts. She so easily derailed me, just like this. All these what-ifs between us.

After the way Mackenzie duped me and abandoned me and Jason, leaving to go work for a rival company, my dad wouldn't be able to understand that I'd want to risk it all again. Mackenzie and that other guy weren't together any longer, either. She hadn't leaked secrets or anything like that. She'd simply wanted to fuck someone else and not be a mom.

Still, the breakup phase was tense. I had been stressed with Jason, who got ill a couple of weeks after birth. My father had still been in charge as CEO then, and he'd faced a fair share of backlash from the media.

I got it. I understood that my mistakes in love and trust had caused difficulties. When it all fell apart, he'd scolded me about why I couldn't have "just kept it in my pants".

He'd think that again about Mia, regardless of his high opinions of her. If I was stubborn, I bet he'd tell me to fire her, then see if she wanted me. And I couldn't do that. I refused to make her lose her job.

Once more, I lowered my head. I rubbed my brow, scanning through texts with Jen on my phone about a little fire she'd had to put out. All of the employees here were the best of the best, all treated fairly and welcomed for their skills. Mia, included.

"There's just no way around it," I mused out loud.

"No way around what?"

I looked up, catching Owen walking in. "Nothing."

"No, no, no." He sat, stretching his legs. "We're too good of friends to play that crap. There's no way around what?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him I was fretting about there being no way around the no-fraternization rules barricading me from pursuing Mia like I wished I could. He'd caught us kissing. I knew he was more than curious. But so far, he hadn't said a single word.

Perhaps it'd be wiser to not bring it up. "No way around that manager, Gina, to find that dancer," I said instead.

While it was true, and I had been working on finding that dancer, it was far from what was really on my mind—Mia.



Owen chuckled. “She’s a tough one.”

“She’s protecting her employees’ privacy.”

He nodded. “Sure. And I applaud that. But hell, man. We stopped in there yesterday and told her to let that dancer know that we’d offer her five times what she was making at that club.”

“And still nothing.” I sighed, feeling defeated. “I can’t explain it, either. I know there are many other dancers, and the scouts are showing me résumés of others, but something about her just... drew me in.”

“I can tell. You’ve never chased after someone you wanted to hire like this before.”

The only other time that someone’s simple gaze captivated me like that was the first day I met Mia, when she was a secretary’s assistant here. One instance of eye contact, and I was magnetized to her.

We were stopped from discussing that mystery dancer any further. My dad walked in, all smiles. “Hey. Both of my favorite boys in one place.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Owen had always been like a brother to me, best friends and now colleagues. Since he was an orphan and never had a dad, he didn't seem to mind having a father figure here. "What's up, Eddie?"

"Just coming by to ask if you're bringing anyone to the company's family picnic." He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. "I wanted to stop by after lunch with a few retirees who mentioned that it'd be coming up." He grinned at me. "You'll bring Ann, right?"

"Yeah, how about Ann?" Owen asked.

Since that night at the club, he received a lengthy explanation from me about how little I was interested in the blonde. His teasing me like this now was cruel.

"No." I shook my head and folded my hands on my desk. "I'm not bringing anyone. I don't have time to bring a date. Mia and I volunteered to handle the bar booth."

I'll have a chance to talk to her there.

"Besides," I added, "Jason and Laura will be there as usual. I want to make sure they have fun too."

My dad shrugged. "I'll be there too. I can keep an eye on Jason. And then we can ask around and have Jen swap some volunteers. You could do the bar booth with Ann!" His hopeful smile was so bright but so wrong.

Did he not get a clue? Couldn't he sense my lack of enthusiasm where Ann was

concerned?

I rolled my eyes. “Ann doesn’t seem like the kind of person who would want to stand in the heat and pour drinks without pay.”

He frowned. “I’m sure she can volunteer?—”

“Why would she?” I wasn’t backing down. I loved him, but I wasn’t about to be a complete pushover to make him happy. He asked me to show her around and I tried to do that. Being polite was one thing, but I’d told that woman I wasn’t available.

“She’s not a Dunn employee. Not affiliated to the company. And she’s not family.” I grunted a faint laugh. “Why does Ann need to be there at all?”

Annoyance kicked in. I saw it clear as day in his scowl and how quickly he propped his fists to his sides. “Dammit, Henry. You push every woman away!”

“I’m not looking for a woman, Dad.”

“Why?” He set his hands on the edge of my desk. “I know you want more of a family. Jason does too. And me. Why are you so damn hesitant and reluctant to make that more of a possibility?”

Owen cleared his throat. “You know what, if Ann really wants to go to this picnic, I can show her around for a bit.”

Dad exhaled long and hard, aggrieved, once again.

But I couldn’t tell him the truth. The real truth.

I didn’t want any woman he shoved at me because they weren’t Mia.

She was the only one I'd want, and I had no way to get her.

"Thanks, Owen," Dad muttered, still shooting me a disappointed look. "I already told her about it and all."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be there, and I didn't sign up for a booth to volunteer at."

Dad left a moment later, needing to take a call from his broker, and as he walked out, Owen looked at me oddly. Like he suspected something was up. The second the door closed, he faced me. "All right. What's going on? I saw you kissing Mia at Danger. You're acting cagey?—"

"I'm not acting cagey."

"—and you can't stand the idea of being near Ann."

"Can you?" I huffed. "I appreciate your taking a hit for the team and all, but really, you don't need to sacrifice yourself to go to that picnic with her."

"If I didn't step in like that, your dad would've kept pushing. Now I think I know the reason you push all those women away. I think I've got a good guess why none of the dates he brings to meet you last."

I kept my lips shut as he stared me down.

"What's going on, Henry?" He leaned closer, setting his elbow on my desk. "Is it Mia? I know I saw you kiss her. I think Ann saw, too."

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I nodded, feeling so much lighter just to finally admit it. “I can’t stop thinking about her. About wanting something more with her.”

He furrowed his brow. “For how long?”

I scoffed. “Forever.”

“No. I meant how long have you been wondering about hooking up with her?”

“I don’t want a hookup with her. I want...”

He groaned, raking his hand through his hair. “Shit. Henry. Come on. You went through this with Mackenzie. You can’t seriously be telling me that you wanna repeat history and sleep with someone in the office again.”

“Mackenzie came on to me. She pursued me. And it’s not the same at all. Mackenzie was a hookup. Mia wouldn’t be.”

He frowned hard, looking at me like I was the world’s biggest idiot. “You’re playing with fire.”

I was, but there was no way to climb out of the flames now.

Mia was imprinted on my soul, and I wouldn’t feel complete until I knew for a fact that we couldn’t be together.

## MIA

Even though my nervousness about having to talk to Henry lingered, I woke up excited for the Dunn company's annual family picnic. It fell on the following arcade night, but I doubted Jason would care about missing it this week. He loved the picnic, as did many others. Employees brought their families. Many even brought their dogs. It was truly a family reunion, and they didn't skimp. Renting out a huge park space, they had food booths with catered food, a beer garden area, so many games and rides and activities for kids. Bands would take turns at the dance floor laid out, and the other funnier games for adults, like the pie throwing that Henry and I had fun at previously, would be a draw.

Sometimes, it saddened me, seeing my "family" at the office showing up with real families. I didn't have one. No parents or grandparents. No siblings or cousins. Not even an aunt or uncle. It was just me, and witnessing others with loved ones sparked an ember of heartache to flare hotter.

This year, I wouldn't have the time to be sad or mope. The beer booth that Henry and I had partnered up to volunteer at was busy. I wasn't surprised. This picnic rivaled the Christmas party spirit-wise. Around jokes and laughter, we fell into the fast-paced demands of serving drinks. I didn't even have the time to ask him about that kiss. I suspected he wanted to follow up about that lunch hour when Ann made Jason cry, too. So far, we hadn't found a moment to simply talk, and we wouldn't here, either.

"You're spilling. Spilling. Spill alert!" I told him, the warnings with increasing volume.

He cursed under his breath, rushing to flip up the tap on a beer after getting another sleeve of plastic cups from the side of the counter.

I laughed, too amused when he tipped over another drink in his haste to get that cup

out of the way.

“You’re getting sloppy back there, Boss,” someone teased as they waited for a drink.

“It’s hot in here,” Henry joked back good-naturedly.

“More like steaming,” I added as I pushed my sweaty hair back behind my ear again.

“Then I guess it can’t be so bad if you’re both wearing more beer than you’re serving!” someone else taunted.

I moved the handle on a tap too quickly, splashing foam to fly up. “Whoops!”

Henry laughed, coming closer to swipe his finger along my chin. “Got a little there.”

With all the drinks served and no one at the other side of the counter, we finally had a moment to breathe. To catch up. To just be. And we did so with him locking me in an intense, smoldering gaze as he dragged his finger along my skin, then licked the foam off his fingertip.

Oh. Help. Me. God. I swore my knees turned to rubber. I felt shaky and unsteady, so primed and revved up from his heated stare.

“Thanks,” I replied, wondering if I sounded as breathy and helpless to this desire as it seemed like I did.

“I’m glad you’re here.” He stepped closer, seeming to search my face. “With me.”

“Nothing beats volunteering to supervise the pie throwing booth, though.”

He took one more step toward me. If he neared me any further, he’d be in my space.

Within reach to kiss. I licked my lips, glancing at his, and an unbidden flare of desire stunned me.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I'd fantasized about this man. I'd dreamed about him. But in this moment. So close and seemingly alone for a fluke instance in this shaded tent... I felt raw and rabid with lust to the point that I'd start drooling or panting.

"I'm having fun," he confessed. "With you."

"Me too."

"You're having fun with you too?" He reached out, his finger moving through the air to connect with mine, but he seemed to have second thoughts as he lowered it before making contact.

"I'm having fun with you," I clarified, pushing at his chest slightly.

He was quick, snapping his hand up to keep mine pressed there. Beneath the T-shirt that strained over his muscles, his heart raced. I pressed harder, just barely, with the tips of my fingers to feel the steady, fast thump.

I wasn't alone in this. He was experiencing the same tension, the same excitement and thrill that I was at being alone and close.

"Your heart's so fast," I said. "I thought all that running was supposed to make you super fit and lean. Heart healthy and all."

He swallowed, claiming that last foot that stood between us. Almost flush to him, my hand kept captive under his on his chest, it seemed like an intimate alternative to a hug. Our arms pressed together, the only buffer between us, but with the molten burn

of his blue eyes on me, I felt strapped and bound to him, to this desire sparking and crackling between us like a live wire.

“Of course, it’s racing. I’m near?—”

“Hey, hey, hey!”

I flinched at the sound of a hand slapped on the wooden counter. Henry sighed, closing his eyes for a moment and mouthing a short line of profanity. I jumped back, whipping around to face Owen.

“Hey!”

“Thirsty?” Henry asked wryly, as though he wished he could punch his best friend for interrupting.

“Yeah. I think I am. Whatever you’ve got on tap.” Owen smiled at me. “How’s it going so far?”

“Busy. But fun.” Even if you prevented me from getting another kiss from the man of my dreams. “Having a good time out there?—”

“I need a mojito. Like, now.” Ann stepped closer to the bar from behind Owen. She paused in frowning at the loud, rowdy picnickers surrounding us, partying it up like we liked to. Peering at me from over the top of her sunglasses, she sniffed, like I was an incompetent hired help. Not a person.

“A mojito?” Owen chuckled, ever the easygoing one to defuse any situation. “Nah. You need a picnic drink.”

“A beer?” Ann sneered. “I don’t think so. A mojito. Now.”

“Noplease?” I snapped back, racking my brain for how to even make a mojito. I recalled Gina once saying they took too long to make, so she seldom ever ordered them.

“I doubt we have all the ingredients to create a mojito,” Henry said, giving Owen his beer. “Think simpler.” Then he snapped his fingers and pointed at his friend. “As a matter of fact, maybe you two could step in for us for a minute.” He tugged at his T-shirt collar. “We could use a break for a while. That way, you can see what’s back here to make whatever drink you want.”

“Sure. I can do that. I mean, you don’t mind, right?” Owen faced Ann.

“What?” She grimaced. “You expect me to work?”

“Volunteering. Remember how you were saying volunteering is as important to you as philanthropy is?” Henry took my hand and guided me to the exit flap in the tent.

Owen met us there, and Henry patted his back. “I owe you one,” he said softly.

Ann was still whining, following Owen as he told Henry, “Yeah, you fucking do. Now get lost and have some fun.”

“Thanks,” I whispered to Owen as Henry tugged me further from the tent. He didn’t let me go, and I wasn’t in a rush to correct him. Freedom tasted sweet, and with his touch, his fingers wrapped around mine, I felt positively giddy out here.

“We were due a break sooner or later,” Henry reasoned.

“Hey, you don’t have to justify it to me. I feel bad for him, though.” I pointed at the food booths. “Want to get dinner?”

“You asking me out?” he teased before releasing my fingers.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I wish. I really, truly wished I had the bravery to make such a move on him and go for what I wanted, work policies be damned.

“BBQ, or just burgers?” he asked.

“You pick.”

He steered me toward the burgers, and we both said hi to people as we walked by. Once we were in line, he turned to face me, not forward. “What was that all about last week, anyway?”

I lowered my eyes. He had to be a lot more specific than that.

“With Ann, and Jason crying about boarding school. When I asked the next day, when he’d calmed down, he said she told him that she wanted him gone and away.”

“Yeah. Laura had to pick up her meds, and I offered to watch him at work until you came back to take him out to lunch. He was running around a bit.” I shrugged. “Nothing crazy, just all that energy little kids have, and she seemed annoyed. He accidentally bumped into her a couple of times and she threw out that ridiculous crap about his belonging at a boarding school.”

He shook his head. His lips were pressed tightly in a firm line of disapproval at my testimony. While I knew he’d be angry about what she said, I didn’t want him to be mad. I wanted the happy Henry back. It was so seldom that we could have fun in a setting like this that I wanted to be selfish and enjoy every second.

“I put her in her place and told her off. But dammit, the second he started crying, my heart broke to pieces. He doesn’t deserve hearing someone say he’s not wanted or doesn’t belong there, that he should be sent away for just being a rambunctious kid.”

“Thank you.” He looked me in the eye, letting me see the full sincerity and honesty of his words. “I can always count on you to stand up for him.”

I tipped my chin up, indicating that he should move up in line. He did, backpedaling so he could still face me.

“I’m hoping my father will give up on her hanging around. I’ve made myself clear. I’ve given her no indication that I’m interested,” he said.

“I can tell.”

He studied me, slowly smiling with a wicked look in his eyes. “Yeah? How so?”

“You don’t encourage her. You tell her that she’s not a priority.” I laughed lightly. “For any other woman who’s not a gold digger hellbent on snagging a man, those are pretty strong hints.”

“You don’t think her seeing me kissing you wouldn’t give her a clue?”

I looked around, checking who was in line. My cheeks warmed up as a blush stole over my face.

“I haven’t forgotten about that,” he said, cupping my elbow as I stepped forward in line. His touch kept us close, moving as one.

“I haven’t either.” I drew in a deep breath for courage to ask, “Why did you? Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I couldn’t think of a good reason not to.” He grinned, amused. “Why’d you kiss me back?”

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly so dry. “Same. My brain blanked on why not.”

His chuckle was low and naughty, but he didn’t push me here. We got our food and ate near the music. Talking about missing arcade night prompted us to launch into another kindly debate about who’d beat whose record. Before long, we were finished with our food. I crumpled up the wrappers and glanced at the people on the dance floor.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m not in a rush to go back to that bar booth.”

I shook my head and lost the fight with a smile. “Me neither.”

“Want to go by the pie booth and see how it’s going there?”

I stood, tossing our trash in the garbage can nearby. “No.” I tilted my head toward the music. “I want to dance.”

He stood, following me there, and we found a corner where we could dance to the live band. It wasn’t anything like the kind of music I worked to, the melodies and songs I had to learn to dance to at Danger. But it was music. I felt the beat, and it tempted me to let loose and just be. To enjoy and embrace the rhythm flowing toward me. Henry was no slouch. He wasn’t a great dancer by any means, but he didn’t shrink away from dancing with me. The only breaks in his focus came when someone approached to say hi.

Eventually, the songs changed. A more upbeat and newer song played, and while it wasn’t accurate to how the original artist wrote it or performed it, the band didn’t butcher it, either.

“Damn.” Henry smiled, watching me and moving less. We stayed together, but I gave in to the lure to really move, to welcome my body to follow the beat and keep up with the tempo. More of the moves that I had to use at Danger came into play, but I was just freestyling, letting the music control me like it used to when I was younger.

When I was a kid, I took dance classes. As I grew older, I stuck with it, on dance teams in high school and cheerleading as well. I’d always enjoyed dancing. It wasn’t just a job to me, and like those moments when I was on stage, I rejoiced in the thrill of moving to the music and letting go of all my thoughts and worries.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I lost track of time as I danced, but when I noticed Henry looking at me oddly, I instantly realized my mistake. He watched me closely, wearing a strange, confused expression on his face like he was trying to puzzle something out.

Me. I realized with panicky clarity that he had to be thinking back to when I'd danced on stage at Danger. I was moving similarly enough. If he was so hooked on finding me as Gina said he was, constantly offering more money for the "mystery" dancer to come work at his new club opening in Miami, he'd recall exactly how I danced.

Shit. Shit. Shit. I didn't want him to get too curious. I didn't want him to ask. I had to keep everything separate.

"Daddy!"

Jason was there, running toward us, and I let loose a deep, long exhale of relief.

Thanks, kiddo. I had been saved by the boy. He'd shown up and darted toward us just in the nick of time.

"Hey!" Henry caught him and twirled him a bit. "Having fun?"

Laura eased up closer, sipping a drink and dancing toward us. "Heck yeah, we are." She winked at me as she waved. "How about you, Mia? Having a blast?"

"Yes!" I took Jason's hand, spinning him in a circle and bringing him closer to me. For the next hour or so, we danced, joked, and laughed as a group.

Despite a long yawn as his energy rapidly faded, Jason begged for another round of games.

Laura shook her head. “Look how late it is. We need to get you home and in the bath to get some of that cotton candy out of your hair before bed.”

“Can you come?” Jason asked me.

I tensed, just slightly, at his question. He’d been asking me to come over more and more lately, and I wasn’t sure if I could keep up these smiles and pretend all was well. Each time I came to Jason and Henry’s home, mostly for the sake of watching Jason in a pinch, I fell deeper into the fantasy of wishing I could stay there. That it could be our home, together, where I could pick out onions in the prepackaged sandwiches or meals for Henry as he preferred. Where I could trail after Jason and collect his shoes that he always lost. And where they could let me settle into that plush chair by the fireplace when I wanted to read on rainy days. It was all too easy to envision us being together like that, and knowing it was nothing more than a dream cut my heart in half.

“Mia and I need to stay and help clean up,” Henry told him.

“Yeah. We need to finish with the picnic things,” I told him.

We had a crew coming in to do that, actually. They’d hired a company to take over the teardown and cleanup, but I imagined we’d need to at least check with the bar booth we’d sicked on Owen and Ann. Since we left them there, other scheduled volunteers showed up. Oddly enough, I didn’t see Owen or Ann anywhere else for the rest of the night.

Maybe I was having too much fun to notice them. Or maybe Owen really was that good at keeping the determined woman away.

After we told Jason and Laura goodbye, we walked through the picnic grounds to check on everything. Crew members from the rental place were already in command, taking down tents and moving tables and chairs aside.

It seemed like we were in the way as we went through to pitch in with the cleanup wherever we could. In the end, we gave up and walked back toward the parking lot. I'd taken a subway and then walked here, but Henry drove and his car was waiting here.

"I had a lot of fun tonight," he said as we walked.

The crowd had thinned out as the picnic ended. While we helped tear down and clean up, most had left. It was just me and him out here, alone. And it saddened me when he didn't try to take my hand.

He shouldn't. He's your boss.

"You know..." He glanced at me, smiling. "Laura took Jason home already."

"Uh-huh..."

"I'm not sure that I'm ready to call it a night." He paused by his car, facing me with a slightly nervous expression. Like he was waiting with bated breath for what I'd say.

"Me neither." I'd already told Gina in advance that I wouldn't be working at Danger tonight. It was early yet, compared to my standards of dancing late several times a week.

He unlocked his car but didn't get in. In the distance, another band played. It was likely set up at a bar near the park, but the music drifted to us.

“Then let’s keep the fun going.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me close, then let me out in a little spin.

“Sounds like a plan.” We danced once more, just the two of us, mostly alone in this parking lot with music playing live in the background. Despite the sunset and the darkness filling the sky, we had plenty of light to see each other and where to step on this gravel.

We drew closer and closer together, pulled toward the other in this inexplicable bond. Before I could stop long enough to wonder when it had happened, I was in his arms. He hugged me close, and I draped my arms over his shoulders to cling to him too.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“Now this isn’t so bad,” he said, riling me up with that husky, low growl. “You and me. Just us.”

I nodded, loving the idea of that. Just us. No interruptions or rules to keep us apart.

Staring into his eyes, I was suckered into such a potent draw of desire that I convinced myself that I should test out a what-if theory.

If I kiss him this time...

I sighed as I reached up, going with the idea and acting on it before I’d lose my nerve. He grunted lightly as we collided, my mouth flush to his. Letting in the tingling thrill of pressing my lips to his, I kissed him with all the pent-up frustration and need I’d been bottling in for too long.

... how will he react?

13

HENRY

I closed my eyes, savoring the touch of Mia’s mouth against mine. She surprised me, taking the initiative to kiss me, to make a move and seek out my lips.

All too soon, just as the heat seeped through me, this burning, raging desire that I couldn’t stop, she dropped back down onto the balls of her feet and looked up at me.

I saw the indecision. The worry. But also the intense need and barely-contained excitement.

I let a slow smile spread over my lips, and she mirrored me. Bewitched, I watched as she grinned right back up at me. Then she slid her hand up the back of my neck until her fingers slipped through my hair. The moment of hesitation seemed more like a check, a verification that this was really happening. That she'd done the bold thing of kissing me. After the gradually building tension between us, she'd caved. The slow increase of awareness had sparkled between us as we danced, just the two of us out here all alone.

And I intended to surrender to it as well.

She pulled my head down to hers. I tightened my arms around her to hug her closer. Together, we met in the middle with a slower, lazier kiss. It stunned me. It seared me. The feeling of having her in my embrace and her lips on mine felt too good.

Fuck, yes.

I couldn't get enough of her neediness from me.

Over and over again, she brushed her mouth against mine, demanding another kiss and another. Every one of them made me harder. Each time she gave a little mewl or faint growl of desire, I clutched her closer.

She held my head, keeping me leaning down so we wouldn't miss a moment of kissing. I gripped her against me so she wouldn't retreat for good.

It was surreal, making out with this woman I'd feared I'd never have a chance with. As we kissed and held one another, she leaned into my guidance as I walked her back to my car. Once I had her caged against the side, grinding against her, she panted

against my mouth and fisted the front of my T-shirt.

We kissed. And kissed.

I never wanted to stop. This charging energy of desire invigorated me. Lust pummeled through me as she parted her lips wider to give me access to really taste her. Her tongue came into play, seeking out mine and exploring. I devoured her, punishing her lips with such a tight seal that I couldn't imagine stepping back.

I'd kissed women, many women, but none of them had ever connected with me like this. None had ever driven me insane with carnal need like Mia did.

All over each other and unable to break apart, we remained in lip lock. No one would see. Everyone was gone. I had her all to myself, and I had no plans to back up a single inch. Her breasts pushed against my chest, taunting me with the wish that I could see them. Hell, I'd settle for feeling them, but I didn't want to do so out here, in the middle of a park where anyone could spot us from the street. As I pushed my hips against hers, she widened her stance and kept her legs parted. It gave me the perfect angle to pin her to the metal, locking her in place so we could make out and recoup all the wasted time of our past.

This wasn't a mistake. This wasn't a fluke moment. We were both all in. I swallowed her groans, and she framed my face to keep it sweet.

Things were undeniably changing between us, and I was all for it.

When she gasped and let her head fall back on the car, I realized she might not be.

"Wait."

Damn. It. Please don't stop. I nodded. I would wait for her, though. I felt like I already

had, exceeding my patience, but there wasn't a single thing this woman could ask for that I wouldn't make happen.

I frowned, almost pouting as the tip of her tongue peeked out. She traced it along her lips, wetting them as she caught her breath, and I wondered if she was doing it to tease me.

"I just..." She smiled, gorgeous and honest. "I just needed a moment to catch my breath."



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Thank God. We had been depriving each other of oxygen like that.

“We—” She swallowed and tried to regain her composure without parting from me. Her hand remained on the back of my neck, keeping me close. “I— Yeah. I need a moment.”

I leaned in to press a kiss to her brow. “A breather makes sense.” Backing up from her was torture, but I endured it. “How about I drive you home?”

She nodded, taking the hand I held out to her. “Yeah. Thanks. That’s... yeah.”

I laughed lightly to myself, amused that merely making out like that could fry a bit of her brain and mental power. She was bewildered to the point of not speaking well. So was I, but I refused to retreat.

We got in my car, and once we were buckled in and I was ready to drive, I glanced at her. I found her staring at me, quizzically and amusedly.

“What are we doing, Henry?” She touched a finger to her lips, almost as though she struggled to understand that we’d actually made out like that, desperate and needy.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I’ve always wanted to kiss you like that.” I tore my gaze from the road to glance at her again. To kiss you like that and much more.

“But lines are getting blurred between us.”

I nodded. “I don’t care. I can’t care. Not when it comes to you.” I was glad to show

her how I felt about her, but telling her that I'd wanted her for years would be coming on too strong, too soon.

"What about the rules at work? All those ethics policies and no-dating and such."

"We're not on the clock now, are we?" I smiled at her as she blushed again.

"No, we're not," she agreed.

Internally, I had to cringe. We were off the clock now, but that hardly mattered. Obviously, the no-fraternization policies were in place so people weren't getting involved at the office and having quickies all over, but it was a general clause for employees not to hook up at all.

Hell, I was the reason that policy was enacted in the first place. Had Mackenzie taken the breakup better and not caused so much drama and strife, I bet none of those rules would've been put in place at all.

We remained quiet on the drive to Mia's apartment, but it wasn't an awkward silence. She kept peeking glimpses at me, almost coy and shy, and I struggled to focus on the road. I parked soon enough, and I walked her to her door.

She stalled there, taking her time to unlock it. Each time she glanced at me, I felt tugged closer. I grew needier. Her desire was clear in her eyes, in the short, panted breaths. She couldn't stop looking at me with that raw hunger, and I knew I wouldn't be walking away.

We were unsteadily balanced on the edge between right and wrong. It was a fine line, and I so badly wanted to fall with her. Whichever way it ended up being. It felt right to be with her, like we fit, but then I was well aware that it would be frowned upon.

She was my secretary. A friend. But neither of those made sense with the yearning that pulled me toward her.

“Do you want to come in?” She set her teeth on her lower lip as she asked, gazing at me with trusting eyes so bright with lust.

“There’s not a chance in hell I can walk away, Mia.” I stepped in to kiss her, feeling the smile on her lips as I met them with mine. She unlocked the door as she kissed me back, and together, we entered.

I walked her back, leading her inside. With our lips locked, our hands all over each other as we fought to erase any gap between us, we moved as one. I had the foresight to pause long enough to close the door behind me, and she arched up toward me, pushing my back to the wooden panel I'd locked.

“This is insanity,” she whispered against my lips as I scooped her into my arms.

I nodded, kissing her back. “It is. But I can’t get enough of it.”

She grinned as I carried her toward her bedroom. I hadn’t been over here that often, just stopping by or dropping her off. Once, we caught up on paperwork in her teeny kitchen late into the night. It was such a small place that I couldn’t err in which way to go.

“I can’t get enough of you,” she replied as I lowered us to her bed.

Like her apartment, it was small. Yet, it held us. We dropped together, and as we resumed kissing until air was irrelevant, I eased her onto her back as I lay on my side.

She cupped my face as I slanted over her, keeping me where she wanted me. No distance remained between us, but still, it wasn’t enough.

I wanted to relish the heat of her body next to mine. On mine. Around me. Now that we were here, alone and able to finally act on this desire burning so hot for too long, I was desperate to taste every inch of her smooth skin.

“Tell me to stop,” I warned her as I moved my hand from her hip toward the zipper of her short shorts.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

She answered by dragging my fingers there faster, shoving them under her waistband. “Don’t you dare,” she said on a ragged exhale.

“Mia...” I lowered over her more, using my leg to encourage her to part hers wider. The more open angle gave me access to unzip her shorts and slide my fingers lower. Damp and sticky. She was wet already, aroused and dripping for me to the degree that her panties clung to her messily.

The moment I stroked my fingers over her slit, she gasped and sucked on my tongue. We hadn’t stopped kissing yet. At this point, I wasn’t sure if I ever could. It’d be hell to refrain from wanting her lips on mine, her tongue dueling with mine.

As I explored further, though, she lost her determination to kiss me back as hard, to be as demanding. I pumped my fingers into her tight, wet heat. She sucked me in, greedy, and I didn’t delay in giving her what she needed.

She lay back, eyes closed and looking like a sex goddess, all mine for the taking, gorgeous and vulnerable, giving herself to me.

I growled as I lowered my mouth to her breast, sucking on her nipple through the thin layers of her shirt and bra.

“Oh, fuck. Henry...” She moaned, keeping her eyes closed as she yanked on her clothes to tug them up. Her shirt and bra remained on, bunched at her neck, but I didn’t waste a second of closing my lips over her nipple and sucking that hard bud.

Between my finger pistoning into her pussy, my thumb rubbing over her clit, and my

mouth on her breast, she didn't last long. She held my head to her chest as she arched her back, thrusting her tits to me. Her legs trembled and shook with the force of coming. But it was her long, low moan of pleasure that really did it for me.

She came, so raw and uninhibited, swearing and saying my name. Breathing hard, she tried to keep up with the onslaught of pleasure that I gave her. Me. Her boss. Her friend. Her... Fuck, now wasn't the time to even think about how wrong this was, how forbidden any orgasm would be between us.

My dick strained beneath my shorts and boxers, painfully hard. Pre-cum had leaked, sticking to my clothes. While I leaned up, kissing up her jaw as she rode the remaining waves of her climax, I stroked softer caresses over her sensitive pussy, teasing her entrance a little more.

Watching her blissed-out smile would forever be etched in my mind's eye. Seeing her like this, so happy and contented because of me, would always be one of my prized memories to revisit.

"I—"

My phone rang, cutting her off. She opened her eyes as I winced, looking down at her.

"That's Laura," she said, aware of the specific ringtone I had for my neighbor.

"Yeah." I sighed, wishing we wouldn't be interrupted. "Stay right here. Just like this." I kissed her soundly, smacking our lips as I pulled my hand from her shorts that I hadn't even slowed down to unzip.

She smiled at me as I shifted on my side to get my phone out of my pocket. "I'm not going anywhere." Lifting her leg, she rubbed her thigh along my erection.

I groaned before answering on speaker. Just because she looked too damn hot, too tempting, I lowered to kiss her as the call rang.

“Henry?” Laura answered. “Oh, thank goodness you picked up.”

Her worried tone immediately set me on edge. Mia heard it too, pushing me up and furrowing her brow.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Jason—” The sound of puking came from the background. “I think he’s got a little bug or something. He was a little sluggish earlier and didn’t eat much at the picnic. He’s got a little temp and is throwing up. The poor kid.”

I sighed, hating that my son was ill. My second thought was a selfish one, wishing this could’ve happened on any other night than this one, where Mia and I were finally going for what we wanted with each other.

“There you go, honey,” Laura cooed to Jason on the other end. “He asked for you. And Mia. That boy sure adores her. I’m comforting him the best I can, but I think he wants his daddy.”

“I want Mia.” Jason’s quiet voice came from the background.

She pushed at me gently, urging me to get up so she could rise too. “Let’s go,” she mouthed, ready to help.

I stood, adjusting my erection beneath my pants so it wouldn’t be too painful, and watched as Mia fixed her clothes too.

“We’ll be right there.” It killed me to have this night interrupted, but I didn’t even

have to ask. She'd never fail to give my son her attention and help. Mia loved Jason, and realized that instead of feeling short-changed or deprived of sleeping with her, I could appreciate how much of a blessing she was in my life. She had feelings for me, and she also cared about my son, too.

I ended the call with Laura and looked at Mia.

"Ready?" she asked.

I nodded, but I mentally groaned at how greedy I felt to want her attention on me.



14

MIA

Jason would always be my Achilles' tendon. That sweet boy had mattered to me from the moment I met him. I couldn't explain it. Maybe he was a projection of the kind of child I wished I could have of my own. He invoked maternal instincts in me, and I would never give up a chance to make him feel safe and happy.

Riding in Henry's car again, for the second time within the hour, I felt each bump and dip in the road. Those vibrations somehow funneled to me, emphasizing the delicious soreness and tenderness I felt from coming.

He'd only fingered me. It was just foreplay, really, but he'd known precisely how to make me shatter and come so quickly.

"I..." I furrowed my brow, unsure how to sum up and convey what was on my mind.

I wanted to apologize that we'd been cut short. To express my disappointment that our fun was interrupted. To tell him that I didn't know what we were doing either, but I was enjoying it while it lasted.

"Hmm?" He glanced at me, concern etched in the lines on his rugged face.

"I, um, hope he's okay." It felt like a lie. I was worried about Jason, but I wondered if I was using this as a deflection point, a diversion for speaking about the much bigger elephant riding along with us. This elephant of us both acting on our attraction when

we shouldn't have.

"I think it's a bug. He was playing at James's house, and I heard that he had something similar. A twenty-four hour thing, I bet."

He wasn't dismissing it. He was too logical to be in denial. Henry was always so practical and pragmatic.

Except when it comes to me.

We arrived quickly, and as soon as he parked in the garage to his building, we hustled inside. We didn't have another chance to talk—about anything. And I was deprived from analyzing and second-guessing and fretting about how much things had changed between me and my boss tonight.

Laura opened the door to let us into his penthouse apartment. She looked stressed, but not overly so. "I think he's just falling asleep now."

"Poor thing," I said as I set my purse on the table.

"Thanks for calling," Henry told her. "I'm going to go check on him."

As soon as he was gone, Laura yawned. "Picnic days always feel so long. Even without a puking boy at night."

"I bet."

"Pfft." She rolled her eyes. "You're used to these late nights." Then she frowned. "Wait. Aren't you supposed to be at the club dancing tonight?" She looked over her shoulder and lowered her voice, careful that Henry wouldn't overhear. He was already down the hall in Jason's room, though, so it was just the two of us.

“No. I asked for the night off.” It felt strange to do that, what with the need to make money. “Last year, I didn’t, and I was so damn tired doing a double. The picnic, then dancing.”

“I don’t know how you can do it.” She gathered her knitting bag and water bottle to walk over to her place down the hall. “I pray you don’t have to keep holding down two jobs like this forever.”

Me too. She wasn’t loaded, but after her divorce, she was set with the apartment in this building and a hefty alimony. Before that, though, she worked fulltime to simply be away from her ex-husband she fell out of love with.

“I’m going to head home,” she said.

“Have a good night’s sleep,” I told her. We hugged, and I sighed once she left.

Henry returned to me in the kitchen, where I tidied up a bit. I didn’t have to, but I wanted something to do.

“He’s asleep.”

I smiled. “Good. Rest will help him.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess we were a little rash in hurrying you over here. He asked for you, but he’s out now.”

I shrugged. “No worries.” If that boy ever thought he wanted me to comfort him, I wouldn’t hesitate to be present for him.

“I feel bad, though. All that urgency to check on him and he’s sleeping soundly now.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I heard the regret in his tone. That maybe if we hadn't rushed to come here, we could've continued with what we had been doing at my place.

"He could wake up yet and ask for me," I said.

"Yeah. But don't feel like you have to stay all night for him. I bet he'll sleep well."

I set the kitchen towel down on the counter and walked up to him. His stare stayed locked on me with every step I took. I had his full attention, and after his making me come earlier, I felt charged and wired to revisit that sensation. With him this time.

"Do you want me to stay for you?" I asked. The second the words left my mouth, I felt slightly anxious. I was being as direct as possible, putting it all on the line.

He put his hands on my hips and pulled me closer until my chest was flush against his. "Yes." He looked me dead in the eye as he stated that one word clearly. Then he followed it up with a heady kiss. "I want you to stay. For me."

Oh, my God. I would melt. He was incinerating me, making all my dreams come true like this.

All I'd wished for was to stay with him, to truly, deeply feel like I was far more than "just an employee" for him.

As he led me toward his room, I held my breath and tried to bottle in all the excitement brimming over.

“I appreciate your even wanting to come over the way you did,” he said as he turned to close the door to his masculine room. It was huge, bigger than my teeny apartment, but it somehow felt smaller when I faced him.

Henry had always been larger than life, but in the private security of his room, he seemed to loom even bigger, more of a force to contend with.

“I know I’ve said it before,” he said softly as he walked up to me and backed me up to the bed, “but I’m very grateful for how you let Jason into your heart.”

“How could I not? He’s a great kid.”

“He is.” He set his hands on my sides and lifted me to toss me on the bed. As I bounced a bit on the mattress, smiling up at him, he joined me. Leaning on one hand, I watched as he crawled closer to relax with me. “And you’re a great woman to be so inclusive and welcoming of him.” He dropped closer, kissing me tenderly. “It wasn’t easy to give up what we were doing at your place to rush here.”

“I would always rush to help him,” I said, meaning every word.

“I know.” He smiled, gazing at me with so much adoration in his eyes. “It’s meant a lot to me. Being a single parent isn’t easy.”

“You’re doing the best you can, though.”

He sighed, lowering his gaze. “I try,” he admitted.

For the next hour or so, we talked. And talked. He explained all the ways he worried he wasn’t doing a good job of being Jason’s parent, and that segued into talking about his dad pushing him to find a woman to settle with. That opened up a line into a conversation about Ann, and even his ex, Jason’s mother. Late into the night, we

simply lay there, content with each other's company, and talked. About everything and anything, but not us.

"I'm not sure about opening Fifty now." He lay back and rubbed his face.

"The club in Miami?" I asked, leaning over him more to see his face. I rested on my right elbow to watch his expressions.

"Yeah. If opening it now will prevent me from giving Jason what he needs, maybe it should wait."

Henry did travel, but overseeing a new location opening in Florida would require more trips.

"Ever since Ann made that fucking comment about a boarding school, he's been more anxious."

"I bet Jason could come on some trips. And when you're gone, Laura and I could keep him company."

He nodded but didn't smile. "I know. But..." He shook his head. "I can't even find the dancer I want to hire. The dancer I saw who could star there."

Mentally, I cringed. He was saying he couldn't find me. This should've been a moment where I could open up and tell him the truth. That it was me he wanted to hire for Fifty. But I didn't want to throw in the complication of having to own up to lying to him for so long.

"You can find other dancers."

"No." He frowned, looking up at me. "I want her."

Oh, boy. Pride filled me, but the funk of lying to him soured it.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“What’s so special about her?”

“I can’t put my finger on it,” he admitted. “She was good. Really good. And something about her just impressed me. Drew me in.”

Because it’s me. Because you want me.

I laughed, though, because if this were happening in any other circumstances, the irony of it would be hilarious. “Oh, come on. Anyone can dance.”

His responding smile was slow and sexy. “I like the way you dance.” He sat up, leaning with one hand behind him as he cupped my cheek and kissed me hard.

Then I’ll dance. For you.

Inching away from him, I kept my gaze locked on his blazing blue stare. I crawled back, getting off the bed. “Is that so?”

He nodded. Liquid heat swirled in his eyes as he reclined back on the bed, both hands on the mattress behind him.

I moved to an imagined tune in my mind, being careful not to use too many of the parts of my routines at Danger. As I began, he reached for his phone and used the app to lower the lights and turn on low music. It helped, since I’d never, ever done something like this for a man before. When I was on the stage, I numbed myself to simply feeling the beat and letting my body vent out my creative energy.



For Henry, here in the privacy of his room, I danced for his pleasure. I taunted and teased, stripping my clothes off as I went. Dragging my garments off felt like a slow agony, the caress of fabric tickling my skin. Then the burn of his stare on me heated me up faster in kind.

He remained still, breathing faster with his nostrils flaring as he watched it all. That big bulge grew beneath his shorts. His erection was more prominent as I stripped and danced. Already dark with desire, his gaze became tenser.

Need crackled between us, and it aroused me to the point I worried I wouldn't last. I'd started this. I initiated this little game, but I wasn't so sure I wouldn't survive the torture of teasing us both.

Down to my panties and bra, I felt exposed and too covered at the same time. I wanted to feel him, skin to skin, and relish in the hard heat of his body sliding against mine. I wanted to experience the perfect union of his kisses with his mouth so hungry for a taste of me.

I crawled onto the bed, still dancing slowly. Before he could stop me completely with his hands, I turned over his lap. Straddling him, I ground back against him and moaned at the promise of pleasure his hard dick would give me. He was thick and solid, jutting up from beneath his clothes.

"Mia..." He kissed my shoulder as I slowed down in my gyrations on his lap. "Please."

Hearing him beg for me was my undoing. With his arms wrapped around my waist, one of his hands coming up to cup my breast, I turned my face until I could kiss him. As he pressed up at me, thrusting his hips up so I could feel his need, I dropped my hand to unzip his shorts.

“Please what?” I teased between slow, drugging kisses.

He hissed as I reached for his thick cock and pulled it out.

“Please put me out of my misery.” He bared my breast, tugging the cup down so he could capture my nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

“Only if you put me out of mine, too,” I negotiated before kissing him again.

15

HENRY

“You’re miserable?” I growled against her ear as she ground down on me.

I moved my hand over to tug down on her other bra cup. Her tit popped out, spilling into my hand, and I didn’t wait to hold and caress the generous mound. Not giving her a chance to answer, I quickly kissed her harder until she leaned back. Encouraging her to shift to her side gave me the opening I needed to twist.

As she leaned down, falling onto the bed, I maneuvered so I hovered over her. Kissing her as she lowered, I braced my weight over her with one hand on either side of her mostly bare body.

“Miserable in wanting you,” she replied breathily. She framed my face, kissing me back, until she lowered her hands to tug at my shirt.

“I’ve wanted you for so fucking long, Mia.” I reared back to pull my shirt off. Letting her get a long look at me, appreciation evident in her lusty stare on my chest, I crawled backward. I shoved my shorts and boxers down, stripping without the sexy grace she’d shown me in her little private dance. Before she could reach out for my

dick, though, I inched backward until I gripped her panties.

She wasn't idle. Arching her back up, she hurried to unclasp her bra. As soon as she did, she cupped her tits and played with her nipples, rubbing them with her thumbs. "I bet I've wanted you longer."

I chuckled, a gritty, deep sound as I continued lower. Once I was on my knees, I dipped down to bring my face toward her pussy. Her legs were splayed open. She was bare for me, glistening with cream and all for my taking, but I pushed on her thighs to get her to widen more. I rubbed my thumb over an oval birthmark high on her leg, near her hip, looking forward to when I could kiss every bare inch of her slender, athletic body. The plans I had for this woman. The fantasies I looked forward to fulfilling. Forever wouldn't be enough with her.

"Are we going to argue about who's wanted the other longer?" I pressed a deep kiss to her entrance. "Or would you rather me do something else with my mouth?"

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“Oh, fuck yes.” She moaned, keeping it quiet, as she pushed up at my face. Writhing and shaking, she met my lips and sighed. Each time I lapped at her, she dropped her legs wider apart. Then when I dove my tongue into her slick heat, she arched her hips up for more of my touch.

I ate at her without pause, reveling in the sexy sounds she likely kept quiet in case Jason could wake up and hear us. I cherished the way she wasn’t afraid or shy to show me what she wanted. She’d dragged one hand from her breasts to push on the back of my head. Keeping me where she needed me, she gripped my hair and tugged on the strands.

If she didn’t come soon, I’d lose my load. Reaching down low, I fisted my cock to stem the pending rush to come. She was too much. Tasted too sweet. Sounded too sexy. And she moved like a siren, taunting me to surrender to the need for release.

“Henry!” she cried out, then clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound.

The scent of sex hung in the air, and as she came, tensing and dripping with juices, I licked her up until the flutters and trembles began to fade.

Yes. Finally. I crawled up, wiping the back of my hand over my mouth to clean up a bit as I grinned down at her.

She was exquisite, her hair wild and splayed all over the bed, her eyes hooded with satisfaction, her breasts rising and falling quickly as she strained to catch her breath.

“I’ve dreamed about having you.” I made room for myself between her legs and

pushed the head of my cock at her entrance. “Like this.”

She nodded, moaning. “Me too.”

“I’ve got no right.” I growled as her pussy sucked me in. Just the head was in, stretching her tightness, and I knew I had to go slow to savor the sensation of her gloving me so well. “No business wanting you like this.”

She shook her head, staring at me with need. “We don’t. But it’s just this one time.”

What the fuck? No. I wanted to protest. How could she possibly limit this pull between us, this feral magnetism that drew us close?

“One time,” she suggested. “To get this out of our system.”

The hell with that. I was only an inch or two into her, and already, I was looking forward to doing this many, many times with her. “Yeah,” I lied, wondering if she was rambling this nonsense as a way to justify it to herself that we should surrender.

I couldn’t explain why I was so drawn to her. I doubted she could, either. All that mattered was that we were mutually ready to act on this chemistry.

And we did.

“Plea—”

I didn’t let her finish begging. I pushed in, wedging my cock deep within her. One long, steady shove inside stretched her to accept me. She gasped, smiling as soon as she adjusted to the fullness of me deep in her.

“Don’t stop,” she requested.

I didn't. Back and forth, I rammed into her. Her breasts swayed, jiggling with the force of my thrusts. In and out, I stuffed my dick deep inside her sweet tightness. She reached for me, pulling me down until I could kiss her. With my tongue stroking along hers, we rocked and found a perfect rhythm together. She'd danced for me, but now, we danced as one on the bed.

It didn't take her long to come, clenching around me as she let out a sexy-as-hell moan. Again, she had to be muffled, too loud to not wake Jason across the apartment. I covered her mouth this time, kissing her so hard, so soundly, so hungrily, that the press of her lips to mine pushed me to follow her in an orgasm.

I shot my load, flooding her with my hot cum. Tingles built at the base of my spine, and with a tension in my chest that snapped from the rush of coming, I pounded into her once, then twice. Finding my release with her felt too damn good. I was floating, lazy and sated, so spent and exhausted from finally reaching this point of euphoria with her. Years of waiting. Months of yearning. Days and nights of dreaming and wishing. They all came to an end now, with both of us caving to our desire to make love.

Because there wasn't a chance in hell that wasn't what this was. Love. I wasn't so gullible to lose my head over a woman just from a hot, satisfying fuck. This was Mia, the only one I wanted as a partner to grow old with.

But first, before I could think of how to express that sentiment to her with something other than slow, tender kisses like I gave her now, I had to figure out how to explain to her, once and for all, that she was so much more than "just an employee".

As I woke up the next morning, I held in a quiet moan at the aches in my muscles. Keeping my eyes closed, I wondered why I'd worked so hard at Danger. New dance routines challenged me, and it gave my legs and arms variations of a workout, but Gina hadn't changed the routines lately.

Wait.

My eyes popped open as I realized that this wasn't my bed, wasn't my lumpy mattress and thin blankets. I wasn't in my room with the AC on the spritz, hotter and muggier than hell with the end of this New York summer.

Because I was in Henry's bed. I lay next to him, naked, in his room.

## Page 43

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

All at once, it came back to me. I'd taken the risk to kiss him, and even though we were worried about Jason being ill, we'd ended up here where I'd danced and stripped, then...

Oh, my God.

I stared at Henry sleeping away, his handsome, rugged face so peaceful with half of it smushed into his pillow.

I fucked my boss!

I cringed, squeezing my eyes shut.

No. I didn't fuck my boss. I slept with the man of my dreams. Literally. I'd lost count of how many dreams he'd starred in over the years. And the reality of feeling him sliding into me was far, far better than I ever could have imagined.

That was what I felt. The slight soreness I registered wasn't from dancing. It was from making love with the one guy I tried to tell myself I couldn't have.

Wincing, I hurried to slip out of the bed without waking him. I had no business having sex with him at all, let alone caving again and again. He'd woken me twice to take me again, and each time felt better than the one before. I had a hunch Henry would never disappoint between the sheets, but I was wrong to assume I could test that theory.

I never should've caved to my desire for him at all.



I tugged on my clothes, trying to be quiet as I checked the time.

Shit! It was so late. I wasn't due at the office for a few hours, but I'd wanted to get up much earlier than this. First of all, I had to hustle and slip out of here before he woke up. I had no clue how to face him now that we'd crossed so many lines that there was no way to know which way was up. Second of all, I had to make sure I could do this walk—or run—of shame out of here before Jason got up too. I wouldn't know how to explain to him that I'd stayed the night with his daddy.

Because shame was exactly what I felt. I drowned it in, almost rooted in disbelief that we'd done it. We'd both fallen prey to a desire so potent we couldn't resist. We couldn't. We shouldn't have. There were strict rules at Dunn Enterprises.

I didn't regret it, but we had to figure out how to cover it up and keep it on the down-low.

As soon as I stepped out of Henry's room and heard Jason's voice near the kitchen, I realized I was already stuck.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

I scrambled to think of a way out of his seeing me, but it was a futile brainstorm. As I walked down the hall, he noticed me in the reflection of the oven's glass surface.

"Mia!" He smiled but didn't get up from his seat on the counter. "I didn't know you'd be here."

I steadied my breaths, hoping I'd look calm and cool. "I came with your dad last night when we heard you were sick." Spotting the bowl of plain cereal he'd poured for himself, I hoped he was feeling better.

“And spent the night in the guest room?” He furrowed his brow as I reached him in the kitchen.

“Yep!”

“Yay!” He grinned.

“Feeling better?”

“Oh, yeah! I think I ate too much cotton candy last night. And then my tummy felt funny. Throwing up made me feel better.”

I smiled, brushing his hair back on his head. “Good. I’m glad to hear it. You look like you’re feeling better.”

“Uh-huh.” His smile stayed put as he lowered his gaze to the tablet where he played a game. He was self-sufficient for a young boy, able to pour cereal and preoccupy himself in the morning. He had always been like this, and Henry had praised his morning routine more than once.

I hope that means he didn’t come looking for Henry this morning. Then again, the bedroom door had been locked.

“I’ll see you later, okay? Now that I know you’re better, I should get going?—”

“No, stay. Grandpa will be here for brunch soon.”

“Oh, I don’t want to invite myself. I should?—”

“Stay. Please?” He turned those sad puppy dog eyes on me, and I laughed lightly.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“I should go. I have to work today.”

“So does Daddy, but he’ll have brunch.” He grinned, looking past me.

I turned to find Henry striding toward us. In low-hanging sweatpants that should’ve been illegal, bare-chested, and with his hair mussed from sleep, he was mouth-wateringly, devastatingly sexy.

“Yeah, stay for brunch, Mia.” He grinned, cocky and damn well knowing I had to feel put on the spot.

“Maybe for a while,” I relented.

“Yay!” Jason scooted out a stool for me, and I took it, charmed by the boy who always wanted to include me in his life. I was turned on all over again at the sight of Henry cooking at the stove, too. Once again, I had to fight back the emotions of heartfelt longing.

This domestic scene was just what I wished to have one day.

When Eddie arrived, though, his surprise at seeing me there threw me off. He noticed my clothes, and I prayed that I wasn’t blushing so fiercely that he’d see it. I was wearing the same things I had on last night, and the implications would be clear that I’d stayed overnight. Still, he refused to hear of my leaving, insistent that I stay until brunch was over.

Jason proved to be a much-needed distraction, chattering and keeping me company

while Henry tried to get me to look at him. The less I made eye contact, the better chances I had of not blushing. The mere memories of what he'd done with me last night threatened to make me turn as red as a tomato, and I didn't want to risk his son or father observing my being vulnerable and meek like that.

Unfortunately, Jason became a significant distraction when he spilled orange juice on my phone on the counter. It soaked into the soft outer part of the case, and I hurried to get it off and dry it.

"Oh, crap," I muttered, cringing at the mess.

"I'm sorry!" Jason hadn't done it on purpose. He'd moved his arm too quickly. With cracks already marring the screen, though, the acidic juice screwed up the whole device.

No matter how much Henry, Eddie, and I tried to mop it up then dry my phone, it was obvious the phone was ruined. I bet I could still make calls, but the screen was shot.

"I'm sorry, Mia," Jason repeated.

I gave him a strained smile. "I know. It was just an accident."

Anger kicked in deep down, though, because there was no way I'd be able to afford a replacement. It was my own fault that I tried to save and keep this already cracked phone for as long as I could. Had I gotten a replacement sooner, I bet the juice wouldn't have ruined it as quickly.

At the sink, Eddie stood with me to clean up while Henry and Jason wiped the stickiness off the table. "We'll get you a replacement," Eddie said.

"You will not," I argued.

He chuckled. "Obstinate as ever, I see."

I smiled, unoffended. Eddie Dunn had always tried to look out for me. It meant the world to me when he got me that job all those years ago, but from day one, I refused to accept charity from him.

He'd become a fatherly figure when I needed one the most. And I wanted to wince at the thought that I was paying him back for that generosity by sleeping with his son.

"Aside from this phone," he said, "how has everything been going?" He crossed his arms and leaned his hip against the counter.

I still worked on pressing napkins to my phone, bitter and depressed that I'd need to replace it. I was saving all I could to expunge my record. Money was tight on top of all the debts from my four years in college.

"Do you think you'll ever go back to school?" he asked before I could answer his first, more general question.

"No." I sighed, setting my phone on the counter. "I'm not sure that I will."

For so long, my drive had been to go to law school. But so much time had passed since then that I wasn't convinced I even wanted to do that anymore. Besides, even with the act of expunging my record, I'd never be able to get a job in the legal field. Not as a paralegal, attorney, anything. Even if I passed the bar, my record would forever be a stain on my name.

Honestly, all I wanted now was a family, not a career. I wanted to belong with the family I'd found here. With Jason and Henry. Even with Laura and Eddie. I loved being included in their lives, and I wished I could fit in as a permanent person to stay for good.

My father was in prison, and my mother passed away from cancer a month before I turned eighteen. I didn't have anyone, and I wished I had these wonderful people as my family.

Jason called Eddie over, and he paused before leaving me at the sink. He regarded me carefully, as though he waited to say something else but debated it.

“Just know that if you ever need help with getting the future you want, I'll do what I can to make that happen.”

## Page 45

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I almost laughed. He could help by not bringing vapid, annoying women in for Henry to date. He could stop introducing gold diggers to the man I loved.

Yeah, right. I smiled and nodded. “I appreciate all that you’ve done for me,” I told him seriously.

As he walked away, though, I was hit with the conviction that he would always see me as a charity case. Something less than and needy. The young woman with a record he took under his wing when he hired me at Dunn Enterprises.

He’d never see me as a potential daughter-in-law.

I began to excuse myself, shoving my phone in my purse as I slipped away and left them to be a real family. On the walk down to the street level, my heart hung heavy with renewed aches.

I couldn’t dismiss this thought of never getting what I really wanted in life.

Eddie would never want me and Henry to stay together.

All Henry really had for me was a one-night stand. That had to be it. Now that we’d caved to the desire we’d put off for so long, that was it.

A tear streaked down my cheek at the yearning for something so far out of my reach.

There would be no repeat with Henry. I had no business wishing I could just be his and fit in with him in his home.

Stop the pity party, dammit. I wiped my cheek as the subway moved, bringing me closer to my neighborhood far from Henry's skyscraper.

Torn with the ache to want the impossible, I tried to clear my head. I vowed to double down on doing what I was in control of. I couldn't ever change the circumstances of who I was and who he was. I couldn't erase my past. I couldn't ask him to change the ethics policies at the office.

We simply wouldn't ever work due to things I couldn't change or control.

Instead, I could work on my debt. Make money. I could focus on expunging my record and getting over the mistakes of my past.

Maybe one day, I'd be able to feel worthy of someone else.

Not Henry Dunn.

I had a taste of him, but that was all that would ever be on the menu for me.

It was past time that I let that reminder sink in and stay in my head.

17

HENRY

Mia couldn't have run out of my apartment any faster. I watched her all morning after we slept together, and every time I noticed her looking toward the door and seeming to feel uncomfortable, I wished that she'd want to stay.

Sure, things were awkward. We'd messed up big time, acting on our desire before figuring out how to make it work.



I was confident we could. We had to. Two people could fit and make sense as well as we did without there being a chance of lasting.

I was the CEO, for fuck's sake. If I wanted to enact a change to the ethics policies and scratch out the rules about not fraternizing, then I would.

But her eagerness to bolt disheartened me. My mood lingered, keeping me quiet and morose for several days.

It didn't help that Jason was needier than usual. Ever since Ann opened her damn mouth and spewed that bullshit about a boarding school, I'd been facing issues. My dad noticed too.

"What's with this sudden separation anxiety?" he asked one night when he came over to play with him.

I sighed then explained what Ann had said. His expression changed from a frown to a scowl. He shifted from frustration and worry to anger. Then he frowned again, seeming sad. "She had no right to say such a thing."

I shrugged, looking at him expectantly. He'd introduced her. I was the one who politely told her I wasn't available. Part of this fell on him for insinuating that I had to give her a chance. "She had no right to be encouraged into thinking she had a golden ticket to belong in our lives."

He hung his head. "I... I can see how she was a bad fit now."

I nodded. “Very bad fit.”

“I only want you to find?—”

I held up my hand to silence him. “Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I already have found someone? A woman I would love to grow old with? A partner in life to grow my family with me?”

He didn’t reply, looking to the side. His chagrined wince should’ve made me happy, that he was finally getting it and would butt out of my love life, or lack of one. It was on the tip of my tongue to expound even further, to come right out and tell him that I’d found Mia. That I wanted my secretary for much more than what she currently did in my life.

I couldn’t risk it now, though. Jason was clinging and asking constantly if she could come over or if he could hang out with her. She was really good with him, coming to his level and making him calmer. But she’d been busier than usual lately, going so far as to call off or tell Jen that she’d be in later.

It worried me. She seemed to be staying up late, always coming in so tired and then getting right to her tasks without making small talk with me at all. She looked half awake when she came to the office, and I kept wondering and growing more concerned with why she’d have such a robust nightlife all of a sudden.

Is she seeing someone?

Is she trying to avoid me since she’d had me?

Moving on?

I sighed at my desk, determined to stop this insanity of guessing and speculating. As soon as she came in today, I'd ask.

She was the one who said we'd have sex just that one time. Then we defied her prediction by fucking twice more that night. One night wouldn't cut it for me, but I couldn't shake off the thought that she might be done with me like that.

That does it. It'd been days now. I was asking her as soon as she got in. Thinking ahead, I ordered lunches to be delivered and texted her that I had lunch for her, waiting in my office.

She replied, which should've reassured me. It should've made me feel better that she wasn't blowing me off.

Mia: Okay.

That was it. My offer of lunch and to spend time with me earned me nothing but an okay.

"Dammit." I dragged my hands over my face, wishing I could get a better read on her. I couldn't dismiss the idea of her reacting to having sex with me like this, pushing me away. I'd never regret sleeping with her, but I was weighed down with the awful hunch that in doing so, I'd ruined our friendship.

Just before she was due to come in, I checked that the delivered lunch bags were closed up tight on my desk. I'd ordered her favorite, hoping that would get me a smile. First, though, I had to drop off a couple of things at Jen's desk.

Finished with that task, I strolled back to my office. Looking down at my phone to

follow through the many messages and emails I had to stop putting off for too long, I almost ran into someone who'd gotten off the elevator.

A distinctive, cloying, and too-strong perfume reached my nose as I sidestepped at the last minute. When I saw that it was Ann dropping by, I deadpanned.

I assumed that after talking with my dad about what she said, he'd tell her to stay away. He was fiercely protective of Jason, like I was, and there was no way that he'd let her continue to think she could be here and seek me out. Then again, maybe he hadn't had a chance to speak with her and set her straight, that no one came here and suggested that Jason be carted off to a boarding school as a nuisance.

"What do you want?"

She pushed her straight blonde hair back and tipped her chin up. "You're not giving me enough attention, Henry."

I looked down at the carpet, wishing I could find some reserve of patience and manners there. I saw no inspiration. I was depleted of tolerance for her. It was with clenched teeth and an urge to shout that I looked up at her again.

I bristled, knowing I didn't owe her any attention in the first place.

"You have to pay attention to me to earn me," she nagged, smiling haughtily like she knew she had to be right.

That remark irritated me more than her attitude did. Ann was just like Mackenzie, materialistic and wanting things and all of me, never realizing that I had to work. I doubted Ann had ever worked a day in her life. She'd balked at having to volunteer for a measly hour at the picnic, like the thought of being productive for someone else was horrid.

Mia got it. She understood all that was on my plate, and more than that, she was one of the hardest workers I knew.

“You know what? I don’t have time for this.” I gestured to the hallway, loosely indicating the direction toward my office. “Mia will be here soon, and I have to speak with her about something.” I did. I was desperate to ask if she was seeing someone on all these late nights or if she was avoiding me after sleeping with me. But Ann didn’t deserve to know any of that.

“Are you interested in her?” She jutted one hip out, crossing her arms tighter. Her stance was defensive, but her tone was offensive. The combo pissed me off. I just wanted her gone. “Are you interested in Mia?”

“That’s none of your business.” I was, but I’d be damned if I’d answer her and let her think she had control of this conversation, one I wanted to be done with now.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“I thought you were a smart man, Henry. Someone smarter than trusting a filthy criminal like her.”

I scowled, slitting my eyes and ready to lash out at her for slandering the woman I loved. I wouldn't stand for her to make up this bullshit. I got it. She was jealous and antagonistic of Mia, but this was taking it too far.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I demanded.

She huffed a laugh. “My God. You're so clueless.”

I gritted my teeth, taking offense to that remark. Mackenzie used to say I was clueless as well. She'd nag that I was too stuck in my work to be aware of how unsatisfied she was with me. That I was oblivious to how long she'd been cheating on me near the end. She claimed that I had tunnel vision to work and it was my biggest flaw.

“She's a criminal,” Ann enunciated, spelling it out like I was a moron.

I shook my head. This was bullshit. How low would she stoop? “No, she's not. Mia couldn't be a criminal.”

Ann lifted her chin, defiant. “Yes, she is. I did my homework on her.”

I shook my head faster as wrath claimed me. “Impossible. I'd never let a criminal be an employee on the executive floor. I'd never let someone with a record handle sensitive documents. And I sure as hell wouldn't trust someone like that to be near my son.”

Ann grinned, covering her mouth like she had to keep in laughter. She was looking past me, at the elevators.

With the sinking feeling of my stomach dropping, I turned and found Mia.

She'd overheard it all. She frowned, not making eye contact as her cheeks turned pink. When she blushed, it was normally sexy. Her flush made her that much more real to me, but right now, the idea of her experiencing embarrassment peeved me.

She'd only be embarrassed if this nonsense Ann was saying was true.

But it couldn't be.

"Then I'll quit," she said, not looking up at me. "I'll see myself out."

18

MIA

Keeping my face lowered, I avoided looking at Henry. I couldn't. I refused to. Seeing the anger and judgment written on his face would be too painful of a hit to take.

My heart was already cracked. Shame burned through me. It stung, so deep and hard, that he'd be that kind of a person. To talk so harshly about me, someone who'd always be in his corner and there for him however he needed or wanted me.

He'd never known about my past. I preferred to keep it that way, at least until I could afford to expunge my record.

Too late.

It seemed that Ann had gotten so jealous, so desperate to remove me from the scene, that she went digging and looked me up.

“What?” Henry demanded.

I glanced up, furious and wounded. He never used that tone with me. We argued and bickered constantly, but he had no right to snap at me like that. Like I was the villain.

A fleeting thought hit me that he wasn't trying to project his anger at me, but at Ann. I knew he was fed up with her. He'd told me the other night when I stayed over that he wanted her gone and out of his life. He had no patience for her drama, and it almost made sense that he'd be mad in general in this context.

But there was no mistaking how he directed his anger at me. No error in witnessing his scowl of disbelief at me. Not her.

Ann was merely the messenger, I supposed, but the message remained true.

“I'll quit, then.” Holding my head up high, I relied on the remaining embers of my spirit to keep me strong. “I've got integrity. If you're going to judge me because of one mistake in my past, then you can look for someone else.”

I didn't wait. I couldn't. Tears threatened too close to the surface. Turning sharply, I headed for my cozily small office. So many little colorful trinkets and décor would have to stay. I'd have to leave it all behind, these details that marked this place as my space, that identified me as this person in the office family.

Hearing Henry's footsteps hot on my heels, I knew he'd demand answers. He'd give me that judgmental bullshit as I packed up my things, and I couldn't bear it. I couldn't stomach shoving my things in a bag or box while he glowered at me.



## Page 48

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Still, I yanked my spare tote bag from the hook and stashed some things. Pens, my notebooks, the ceramic things Jason had made for my birthdays and holidays. I hurried to grab all the artwork he'd made for me too, all those images he'd proudly hung in here.

"Mia. What the hell is going on? What is she talking about?"

I ignored him, blinking quickly to fight the battle with these tears. I wouldn't answer. I owed him not a single damn thing after the way he spoke.

I paused in reaching for the framed photo of us. The funny moment from the pie smash booth. I frowned at it, wondering how I could've been so stupid and gullible to long for a man who'd only judge me so harshly, without any shadow of doubt.

I set it back on the desk, placing it face down, and left. Passing him as quickly as I could, I prided myself in not looking up once.

It wasn't until I was out on the street, hurrying on the sidewalk, that I gave in to the sting of tears. I sniffled, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

Screw these tears. Screw him. I'd lost too much of my heart and my mind to him, and I'd be damned if I did any longer.

It was time to focus on me, and that included making enough money to live on. Without the secretarial income, I'd need to dance more. So it was only logical to call Gina.

With every step I walked from the Dunn building, I felt the gnawing agony of leaving a home. A family. I'd belonged there, but not really. Not according to Henry, at least.

"Hey, babe. I was just about to call you."

I frowned, wiping at the tears that spilled over. "Why?"

"The offer to dance at this club has been doubled. Again."

The amount of money Henry and Owen were throwing at Gina to buy me out was staggering. But it'd never work. I'd never be his employee ever again.

"No. I'll pass."

She giggled. "But damn, babe. Think about all that money!"

"I am thinking about money. That's why I called you. I just quit."

"What?" She screeched it. "You quit your job for Henry?"

I nodded, even though she couldn't see it. "Yeah. Got any extra shifts I can dance?"

"For you, hell yeah. Come to the club. We'll talk. Cuz I got a feeling there's a story behind this one."

"Not really." It was nothing but a short snippet of drama and heartache. After telling her I'd be there soon, I disconnected and slowed my walk.

Rushing out the way I had was fueled by adrenaline. Now that I was out here, breathing in the open air, I let it really sink in.

Gina had told me that I needed to do something about my feelings and friendship with Henry. So I did. I caved and slept with him. Now, I was painfully aware that making love hadn't done anything to endear me to him. Not really. Because he couldn't stand criminals like me. He couldn't trust someone like me, not in the office or in his home with his son.

He wasn't even a friend with that kind of prejudice. I'd always been aware that we came from completely different worlds and backgrounds. He was rich and well off while I was poorer and with a bad rep.

But in the rare moments when I almost shared my deep secret with him, that I had a little record, I convinced myself that he wouldn't judge. That he could be understanding and forgiving. After all, Eddie was. He'd looked past my record and he gave me a job. He was cool about it. I had started to assume that Henry would be like his father in that regard, but clearly, I was wrong. Eddie hadn't been born rich and successful. He was an ordinary man before he became an influential billionaire businessman. I supposed that made a world of a difference. Perhaps Henry's upbringing in wealth made him more judgmental deep down, lurking.

It hardly mattered how or why Henry was so judgmental and harsh when his dad wasn't. He'd shown his true colors.

There was no taking back how he'd spoken.

The truth was out there.

He didn't know me if he could reject me under the stereotype of a criminal.

I hated that my past would always follow me. Until I could have my record expunged, I'd forever be a criminal. Even then, once I saved up to expunge it, I couldn't erase the years of judgment—from others like Henry and Ann or how I

viewed myself.

As a woman unworthy of love no matter where I went or worked.

No matter how hard I tried to be loved.

19

HENRY

Mia has a record?

I couldn't comprehend it.

What did she do? What charges did she face?

I watched her rush through the door to the stairs, hurrying to flee and quit so urgently that she didn't bother with the elevator.

Mia? A criminal?

I couldn't picture her ever doing anything wrong. She picked up litter when she passed it. She scolded me for even nearing the edge of the crosswalk for fear of jaywalking.

Mia was too good to have earned a record. But she had. I saw the shame in her eyes. I saw the reluctance to answer me when I followed her to her office. That omission of an answer, that silence, was proof. She didn't want to tell me, but it was true.

I stood there, rooted in shock.

This was a woman I knew. Someone I thought I knew in and out. I'd slept with her. I'd helped her to the doctor. I worked with her. I played fucking skee ball with her.

I'd fallen in love with her, too, hung up on the idea that she could be my wife and Jason's mother.

I was stunned stupid, pained to realize I couldn't have known her at all if I was ignorant about her past. Here, I thought I was familiar with every detail about her, but she'd been lying all this time, never being upfront about having a criminal background.

"See?" Ann gestured at the stairwell door as it swung shut. "She's just a lowlife criminal."

I fisted my hands, peeved that this woman was still here and had the nerve to gloat about this news. I was hurt, feeling attacked with this news, and right on the tails of that pain was the heartache of being duped by the woman I wanted.

"You should be grateful that I saved you from getting involved with her." She smiled widely as the elevator doors opened.

Laura and Jason entered the reception space, and I was glad that my son had his headphones on, his face turned down to watch his tablet.

"You should be thanking me for telling you that you were trying to get involved with a stupid criminal, Henry. I saw you watching Mia. I noticed how she conned you into falling for her. You were a prey to a criminal's seduction, and as soon as you can get over that stupid bitch?—"

"That's enough!" Laura's face was red and pinched and she shouted at Ann.

People didn't raise their voices up here on the executive floor. That wasn't how we did things. Not even Owen, who came close when he got into spirited discussions with some of the guys about fantasy football.

Ann sneered at her.

Laura leaned down to pick up one headphone. "Go on in your dad's office, Jason. Now."

He furrowed his brow, glancing at me, then Ann. He grimaced and hurried away from her, doing as Laura said. He tossed a "Hi, Dad" to me as he passed, but he didn't linger by Ann.

Laura wasn't done. She stalked up to the blonde, jabbing her finger at her face. "I'm going to say this onetime. Get lost. Now." Laura's mother-bear instincts came into full force as she backed Ann toward the elevator. "No one talks about Mia like that."

Ann scowled, looking past Laura to find me, as though I'd intervene. I didn't. I couldn't. I was still too shocked to even think.

"You can't?—"

Laura shoved at her shoulder, physically prompting Ann to get on the elevator. "I can and will tell you that you've got no damn right to talk about Mia like that. She's more of a woman than you'll ever be."

As soon as Ann was fully on the elevator, Laura retreated so the doors could close.

Once the metal panels slid shut, she turned on me.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“What’s wrong with you?” She shook her head, stomping up to me. “Thank God Jason had his headphones on. We came up after Ann, and I heard it all. I kept Jason aside and debated leaving, but I’d be damned if I’d let you act like a moron.” She swatted my shoulder, furious but reining in her temper to not strike me harder. “How dare you talk about Mia like that!”

“I—”

She swatted at my other arm. “You know Mia.”

“I thought I did!”

Her eyes narrowed. “You know who she is and what kind of a person she is. Why would one piece of old information about her past change your views of her?” She turned away, flinging her arms to the side in frustration, then circled back to glare at me. “She’s never given you a single sign not to trust her, not to confide in her and count on her. Has she?”

I opened and closed my mouth. She hadn’t. Mia had been friendly and kind, funny and warm. Since the day I met her, we clicked, and she’d never given me a clue that could warn me from trusting her.

Under Laura’s scathing scolding, I wondered if I was wrong, if I’d erred in judging her too quickly. Dunn Enterprises had countless programs to help juveniles and delinquents to get back on their feet. I never held anyone else’s past against them like I did with Mia, but so much of my reaction felt like instinct. The impulse was quick to reject what Ann said. I couldn’t have helped it to shout back so passionately.



As I replayed the scene in my mind, though, I felt increasingly worse. I felt terrible for how I'd acted, but still, I couldn't make sense of it.

"How dare you talk so harshly about Mia," Laura repeated.

"But it just sounded so ludicrous!" I exploded. "Ann was pissing me off, talking such bullshit about Mia, suggesting she could've been unlawful." I watched her, waiting for her to argue. She didn't. She merely stared me down.

She knows. She knew. Laura wasn't surprised about this. She was aware that Mia had a criminal background.

"And how should I know what secrets Mia's keeping from me?" I shook my head, angry that there were still some mysteries about the woman I wanted for the rest of my life. "She's always staying out late and acting like she's sleep deprived in the morning."

Noticing Jen and another office worker peeking around the corner, I pointed at them. "And don't tell me it's because she stays up late reading."

I scoffed at Laura. "Who knows what she's doing all night."

Laura set her hands on her hips. "I'd like to think she'd wized up to the fact that you'll never care about her as more than an employee. Maybe she's been busier than usual at night because she's found a man who can treat her nicely."

Fuck. She punched where it hurt. I'd just been worrying about Mia finding someone else. Hearing Laura say it like a taunt stung.

I thought back to how well I'd treated Mia during our one night we shared together. How sweet she looked when she came. How tender she was when she pleased me.

I loathed the idea of Mia showing another man that side of her. I hated the thought of someone else being rewarded with her smiles and orgasms. Pushing back the instant jealousy, I faced Laura, determined to find out what she knew, how she could stand up for Mia in the face of her own admission of wrong-doing, confessed via her silence.

“Mia is not up to no good at night,” Laura declared, calm and unwavering.

“How do you know? What aren’t you telling me about her?” I felt hurt all over again that my neighbor, the woman who babysat my son, would be privy to more personal details about Mia than I was.

Laura scoffed, looking away as she shook her head. “That’s not my story to tell. You’d have to ask her. Not that I expect she’ll give you the time of day now.”

I doubted she would either, and already, the absence of her felt so dark and heavy.

20

MIA

The first week after quitting my job at Dunn Enterprises felt like a month of agony. Every night, I went to sleep thinking back on how I could’ve been so wrong about Henry, to ever think that he could be a man who loved me. Each morning, I woke up crushed with the reminder that I wouldn’t get to see him.

Missing him became a rite of life. I missed Jason too. Even Eddie. Laura. Jen. All the people at the office. They’d been my acquaintances, stand-ins for the family members I never had.

Now all I had was Gina. She’d taken pity on me when I showed up crying and telling

her how I'd quit. She knew about my past, and she'd never judged. Lots of the people who worked at Danger had pasts.

Because I felt so lonely and upset at home, she suggested that I stay with her at her place. It helped a little, having someone to talk to, to hear in the background, because if I had to travel across town every night and head home to my lonely little place, I'd cry until I was dehydrated.

Dancing was my only solace. It made me more money, too, picking up nightly shifts instead of just a few to supplement my secretary wage. I still could lose myself to the music and stay with the rhythm. It helped me to go numb and stay inside a shell, guarding myself from the constant battery of emotions that plagued me.

My heart ached. My head hurt. My soul was crushed. But I put myself out there to dance and keep on carrying on.

## Page 51

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Until one night, I worried that I spotted Owen in the crowd. I swore it was him, seated further back where it was harder to see the guests clearly. It seemed like him, a tall man with a shaved head and shrewd, dark eyes.

Crap.

I had my mask on for this familiar routine, the masquerade covering that concealed half of my face. But still, I couldn't dismiss this nagging thought that he was staring directly at me, watching me.

For a few days, I wondered if Henry would show up here in his relentless search for "me". He'd been so eager to find the dancer who'd impressed him, but so far, he hadn't shown up.

Backstage, after the routine was over, I sighed and sat back on a chair.

It wasn't Owen. It couldn't have been. I was projecting my fears on strangers, tense that someone from my Dunn world could find me in this Danger world.

Hell, there's no Dunn world anymore. I quit. The only identity I had now was that of a dancer here at a seedy club.

A knock at the door heralded Gina entering. With her was the man I was trying to convince myself I hadn't seen.

"Aw, shit." I sat up, frowning at Gina, cringing as she led Owen back.

“Hey, babe. This guy wanted to talk to you...”

I smirked at her. She knew damn well that Owen was Henry’s friend. “And the bouncers let him back?” I crossed my arms, not getting up from where I sat. My mask was off but my costume remained on. I had been outed. Owen could now clearly see that I was the dancer he and Henry had noticed.

“You let him back here?” I asked, pinning her with a hard look. She didn’t take the backstage security lightly.

“I figured it might help you to talk, and well, I don’t know.” She hurriedly backed up, extracting herself from the situation.

Owen stood there after she closed the door. He didn’t step in my dressing room any further, glancing around the small space. All the costumes, wigs, masks, all of it.

“So, it’s you.”

I nodded.

“Yeah. I dance here.”

“You’re the dancer we saw that one night.”

I nodded again, lacking the energy to do more. Tension kept me trapped, and I wished I could know how to navigate this awkward moment.

“No wonder Henry was so stuck on finding you, why he was so entranced.”

I rolled my eyes. “With me?”

“You. The woman he’s been in love with since the day he came into the office and saw you.” He was dead serious. His tone wasn’t mocking. But I didn’t believe him.

I laughed bitterly, wishing that could be true. “Clearly, he’s gotten over me. The dancer ‘me’. I was half afraid I’d see him in the audience, but he doesn’t come to this club anymore.”

“Because Jason is upset. He’s needed to be consoled every night.”

I sank back in my seat, hating that my quitting impacted him. I’d gone completely no-contact with anyone from the office, and that rippled on to affect that sweet boy, too.

“Jason’s upset that he doesn’t see you anymore, Mia.”

“I didn’t intend to ever hurt him,” I replied quietly.

“I bet not. But the timing of it all wasn’t great. He had to make some sort of a report about his mom for his summer camp. He wrote it about you. When he presented it, he cried, and the other kids were assholes and punks to make fun of him. Henry’s either at work or at home trying to comfort him.”

I swallowed hard, feeling the burn of tears. I wouldn’t cry. I refused. But dammit, the thought of Jason in pain or missing me like this hurt so badly.

“Eddie’s been looking for you too.”

I raised my brows.

“He’s worried about your quitting.”

“Henry didn’t tell him why—or when—I did?”

He shrugged. “I think Laura filled him in on what happened that day.”

“Eddie was the only one who knew about my past. He overlooked it. But it seems his son couldn’t.”

“Trust me. Eddie’s had plenty of harsh words to tell Henry, but everyone is focused on Jason. He’s really upset.”

“That wasn’t my intention.”

He nodded. “I know. You’d never do anything to hurt Jason.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you implying that I hurt Henry?”

“No. He was a complete asshole to lash out like that and say what he said. Jen filled me in. I wish I hadn’t been out of town that day so I could intervene at the office.”

I didn’t reply.

“Eddie’s been worried about why you’re not at home, either. He’s half convinced you’re missing and is two seconds away from putting a missing persons notice out for

you. Laura has talked him out of it.”

I would have to make plans to thank her. “I haven’t been home. I’m staying with a friend.” I didn’t owe him that explanation. He’d deliver it to Eddie, or Henry, and I didn’t want to arm them with any more details about how I lived my life. I felt terrible about abandoning Jason. Eddie, too. But there was no way I could remain there and see them while avoiding Henry. Still, telling Owen that I was simply staying with someone else could put out the fire of them searching for me.

While I considered how all of them had to be thrown off with how I’d left, I got curious whether anyone else knew I was a dancer. “Laura has always known I worked here. She happened upon me working here when she was out at a bachelorette party, and I wasn’t dancing with a mask.” I shrugged. “Then we got to talking, and I shared a bit about my past.”

“Fair enough.”

“Does...” I licked my lips. “Did she tell everyone about me? Eddie knew about my record, but not that I danced.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It sure was news to me that you dance here.”

I was desperate to ask about Henry. How he was doing. What he was doing. Owen had already shared that he was busy comforting a distraught Jason, but I wanted to know how he was taking my departure.

I kept my mouth shut. I couldn’t stoop so low to ask. It would signal my interest, and while I missed that man with all my broken heart, I couldn’t bring myself to be in such a vulnerable situation again, beholden and hungry for clues and news.

“Aren’t you curious about Henry?” Owen shoved his hands in his pockets. “How he’s



doing and all?”

It was almost as if he could read my mind or guess what I was so quiet about. “No,” I lied instead. “I’ve been too busy working to think about him.”

“But not working for him again, not even at Fifty, right?”

I deadpanned, staring at him.

“You’ve turned down all the offers passed on through Gina,” he clarified.

“No. I’ll never work for Henry again.” I sat up. “But the idea of moving and starting over somewhere new appeals. I could make more. A fresh start away from Henry could do me well.”

“You can’t mean that.”

I huffed. “He’s shown me his true colors. He’s told me what he thinks of me.”

“He didn’t tell you anything. He was trying to get Ann out of there and couldn’t believe what she said.”

I shook my head. “I’m not listening to excuses.”

“Mia, he’s miserable.” He ducked his head, passively trying to come more to my eye level. “He’s convinced that he’s screwed up beyond hope. That he’ll never have a right to ask you to come back to the office, or to even be his friend again. Anything.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I pressed my lips together and looked down at my bare feet. Those gorgeous but painful shoes I wore for the numbers were always the first things I took off.

“He’s lost without you,” Owen added. “And he’s kicking himself for what he said.”

Hearing his words, I wondered again if I had been too rash, that if I’d stayed and simply explained myself, he’d want me to stay. I told Eddie all those years ago about my record, and he hadn’t judged me. He gave me a chance to turn my life around. He respected that I’d never accept charity, but I’d prove myself with a job.

Was I too rash to give up on Henry? I knew he was in a combative mood already, having to face off with Ann. If I took the time to tell him about my past and apologize for never coming clean, maybe there was a chance that he would understand and want to move past it. It wasn’t like we’d ever broken into the topic about whether we’d ever been arrested or in trouble with the law before. He never looked at my HR files. Eddie had when he hired me, and that was that. Henry wouldn’t have ever known about my past unless I told him about it. A smidgen of guilt filled me that I should’ve stepped up to explain.

No. He wouldn’t change his mind.

I shrugged, knowing I couldn’t risk anything more with the man I’d wanted so badly for years. I refused to put my heart on the line like that anymore. It was too broken, battered and chipped, then crushed and pulverized.

I leaned on the benefit of the doubt once before. When Dennis set me up to “help him with a favor”, I figured I could trust him, that I could believe what he said and in his

behavior. He'd duped me, framed me, and I learned how hard love could hurt when I had to serve that little bit of time while he walked away clear and free of charges, pinning it all on me.

I wished I could give Henry the benefit of the doubt now, that I could take a chance on him and my feelings for him to sit down and talk. I almost felt like I owed him that conversation.

But it was simply too damn risky. I couldn't put my heart out like that again.

It was too broken to be stitched back together again.

21

HENRY

One week. Seven days had passed since Mia quit. On me. On working at Dunn Enterprises. All of it.

She had taken off, her head held high, and sucked all the brightness and joy out of my existence.

I couldn't live with myself like this. The self-loathing and regret consumed me, accumulating each day until I felt like I would go insane missing her.

I royally fucked up with her. No one could ever screw up with the love of their life like I had with her. No one.

"Henry." My dad walked into Mia's office, and I sighed. It was late. Well after the rest of the staff had gone home. How he knew to find me here, I didn't care to figure out.

This was my only solace, looking at the decorations and knick-knacks that once defined the lively woman who worked in here.

I cradled the framed picture between my hands, wondering when I would lose the memory of her placing it face down, like a firm closure on me and her ever being together.

Never. I'll never forget how she did that.

"Is Laura with Jason?" I asked him. He'd been over watching him when I was in the office. While he was a devoted and involved grandpa, my son was super needy and clingy lately.

"Yes. She took him out for ice cream and promised him a movie night." He sighed, sitting in the other chair. Looking around the room, he seemed to search for what to say. "We arranged it so you could..." He shrugged. "Go for another run? I don't know. Whatever you need to do to get your head on straight again."

"The only thing that could get my head on straight again is having Mia back." I didn't stutter or hesitate. I looked him straight in the eye as I told him the truth.

"Well, I'm not sure how you can try to do that." He folded his hands on his lap. "I've been checking at her apartment, and it seems like she's not there."

I arched a brow. "Dad. Do you hear me? I won't be the same without her."

He nodded.

"Not because she was my secretary."

Again, he bobbed his head.

“Because I love her.”

He grunted a laugh. “You sure about that?” He crossed his arms. “If you loved her, you wouldn’t have been so quick to judge.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“I didn’t judge, Dad. I was surprised and defensive of her. Ann was irritating me, showing up and bothering me. I suspected she was making up shit and slandering Mia because even she realized that my heart belonged to her.”

“I’m extremely disappointed in her. Her and her father.” He slashed a hand through the air. “I’m never speaking with him again. Raising a spoiled girl like that?” He grimaced. “Thank God you didn’t care for Ann.”

I gave him a stern look. “Because I wasn’t looking for anyone. I had Mia right here all along.”

He furrowed his brow. “Then why the hell didn’t you ever say something?” With a look to the side, he sighed heavily. “Jason adores her. She puts up with your nonsense. And... Why, Henry? Why?”

I tilted my head to the side. “Gee, I don’t know. Because the last time I actually got involved with a woman, she burned me and left me with a newborn she wanted nothing to do with. And she threatened so many lawsuits and bullshit that we put no-fraternization policies into effect.”

He winced. “I can see how that’d be an obstacle...” He rubbed his chin. “But this is Mia we’re talking about. You could’ve just told me, said something.”

“I couldn’t when I wasn’t sure how she felt about me. If she felt anything for me. Past friendship or a working relationship. She’s always been slightly guarded to get too close.”

“I can’t blame her.”

“Dad.” I sat forward, keeping the framed photo on my lap. “What did she do? You had to have done a background check on her. You have to know, and still, you hired her.”

“Of course, I did. Regardless of any record she could’ve had, I knew from the moment I met her that she had a good heart and a sweet soul.”

“Then what?—”

It was his turn to hold up a hand and stop me from speaking. “You have to ask her. When I hired her, we agreed that it would always be up to her to share the details of her past. I won’t betray her trust in that now, even when she’s not here.”

But how can I get her back here? I needed her in my life. Every second that passed that we were apart felt like hell.

“While I respect that you were rash to defend her, you should’ve minded your temper, Son. I heard how you lashed out and reacted. You could’ve toned it down, could have given her more of a chance to explain rather than act so angry.”

How many times would I have to repeat this? “I was angry at Ann. Not Mia. I was surprised, yes, but fuck. I hate that she could even think that I’d want to hurt her.”

“Then if and when she comes by, I truly hope you can convey a sincere apology to her.” He stood, looking around the colorful room again. “Did you know that I tried to talk her out of taking this office when she started?”

I shook my head. “No.”

He smirked. “No windows. It feels so confined and small.”

“She loves this office.” I mentally groaned, catching myself on that tense slip. She didn’t work here anymore. “Shelovedthis office.”

“She told me that she liked it, having privacy and feeling secure here. Like she belonged here and nothing could trespass on her happiness here.”

I exhaled a long breath, hating myself more for taking that away from her. I hadn’t fired her, but I took blame for her quitting.

“And if you do find her...” He walked back and leaned over to place a small ring box on the desk. “Don’t waste another minute.”

I smiled at the container housing his mother’s ring, a family heirloom. My mother wore it until she passed. And now, it was back in the family to be used again.

His implication was clear, and I accepted the offering without a word. After looking at the antique piece of jewelry, I snapped the lid shut and put the box in my pocket.

If I could have a second chance with her, I wouldn’t waste a single second to make her mine forever.

“Thanks.”

He left, but I didn’t linger for long in this office. Her absence felt too acute in here. Instead, since Laura was with Jason, I took the opportunity to return to Danger.

It was where I’d first kissed Mia.

It was where she’d shown an artistic critique of dancers.



It was where I'd asked her why we couldn't consider being together.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Hell, maybe that dancer will be here tonight. I doubted I'd be enticed, not after losing Mia. Without her, it felt like a crime to enjoy anything. Like life was in grayscale and drab.

After I paid my entrance fee, I walked inside and raised my brows at the huge crowd. I was late. The show was more than halfway over, and I gave up on the notion that I'd find a seat.

It hardly mattered. I'd only come to pass time that moved so slowly in the aftermath of messing things up with Mia. Seeing that talented dancer might tempt me to stop obsessing about my loss for a moment.

Scanning the dark crowds, I sought a spot to sit or stand. The only area that wasn't packed was near the side. I settled in, waving off a waiter who walked past the tables, offering to take orders for drinks.

Then I looked up.

And I saw her.

The dancer. She was mid-step in a complicated, fast turn of footwork. But it was her. I remembered the slender length of her legs. The delicate and shiny beadwork of her costume. Even the long hair.

But it was also her.

"Mia?"

I stepped forward, mesmerized with the similarities. A half mask covered her face, but the more I stared, the more I was convinced that the mystery dancer who'd snared my attention was my Mia. They were the same.

I watched her smiling, painted lips part wider in a cocky smile, playing along with the theatrics of this dance routine. I'd kissed those lips until they were swollen. I gazed at her high cheekbones, recalling how smooth her silky skin was when I cupped her face.

Lower yet, I dragged my gaze over her breasts, punched with a hit of lust at the memory of sucking on them and teasing her hard nipples. Further down, her tight, flat dancer's stomach. No fat and all strength. She'd tensed there when I went down on her.

Her hips. They rocked to the music now, but on my bed, I'd held on to them as I pounded into her tight heat.

Those legs. She'd wrapped them around me, cinching me close as we chased our orgasms together.

I narrowed my eyes at the small oval birthmark high on her thigh.

It was her.

My mind wasn't playing tricks on me. My eyes weren't deceiving me. That birthmark proved it beyond a shadow of doubt.

The dancer I wanted to hire, the entertainment I was desperate to contact.

It was her.

Staring at her legs, I witnessed the slight stumble. She misstepped, and as I looked up, I felt the full intensity of her gaze on me.

We locked eyes, making eye contact as if it was just the two of us in here. No one else mattered. All these other dancers, musicians, waiters, and guests were insignificant.

In this critical moment of seeing her again after she ran out of my life, it was just me and her.

Surprise showed in her glittering green eyes, so wide open with alarm. Her minor mistake had to have been because of me, shocking her that I was here.

I knew she realized what this meant. She had to feel this change, this awareness between us.

She knew.

She knows that I know.

Nothing else could've caused that look of panic in her eyes, that oh, shit expression she so carefully tried to hide.

A mask wouldn't hide her from me.

A flashy costume wouldn't keep her concealed.

I'd made her. Her "cover" was blown.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

With the music dwindling down and the applause roaring louder, I knew this was my chance.

She watched me hurry to the side, desperate to reach the backstage area. Any second now, she'd go to the rear rooms, and I damn well would find her. I had to. Pushing and shoving my way toward where the two tall bouncers blocked the way, I tucked my head low and wove through the crowd as they stood and gave a standing ovation.

I didn't care that they scowled as I passed by. I disregarded the complaints about my forceful run to the side.

I had to reach her.

Looking up at the stage, I tracked how far she moved. Where she was. She was following her colleagues, but when she glanced down as she spotted me heading for the backstage access, she cringed and pushed to hurry faster.

"Mia!" I shouted up at her on the stage. She couldn't hear me. Not over the music. Not with the crowd's applause. Catcalls, shouts, claps, and whistles drowned out everything else.

"Mia!" I called out to her one last time before I turned, facing the bouncers as I neared them.

"Hey, man."

They both held up their hands. "No access."

“I have to?—”

“No.”

A drunk stumbled closer, seeming to be in the mood to pick a fight with them. “Hey, be nice, yo.”

“Get back,” one of the security guards said.

I couldn’t. I was determined to see her. “I just?—”

The drunk slurred something and took a swing at the other guard.

While they were preoccupied, I slipped past them, running to search for Mia.

“Mia!” I shouted after her, spotting her up ahead in a narrow hallway.

Behind me, other guards rushed up to capture me, all yelling that I couldn’t be back here.

“Mia!”

Strong hands wrapped around my arms, and I was dragged away just as Mia slipped through a door in the back.

22

MIA

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” I paced in the small dressing room.

Yesterday, I was surprised to see Owen back here. Gina led him here, and he said he wouldn't tell Henry that I was the mystery dancer he sought out before. I believed him, that he'd keep his word.

Seeing Henry in the crowd proved how stupid I was to have believed him, though.

I shook my head, chanting more of the same "oh, my God" between panted breaths. I'd never run off the stage so quickly in my life, and still, he'd almost reached me back here.

"Babe?" Gina knocked once before walking in. "You here?"

I nodded, wrenching off my mask as I paced. I hadn't even taken my shoes off yet. That was how desperate I was to hide.

All I ever did with Henry was hide. I hid my feelings from him. I hid my secret about my past. My second job. But not my love. I'd taken a chance to let him see how much I cared for him, and he'd ruined that too.

"Damn, is there a ruckus out there. Some drunk tried to rush back here." Gina shut the door, frowning.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“Not a drunk.” I shook my head and tried to catch my breath. Well, maybe Henry was intoxicated. I doubted it, though. When I spotted him in the audience and understood that his gaze implied he had recognized me, he seemed clear headed and with it, not buzzed.

“Huh?” She frowned. “I saw him. Charlie was dragging off some balding dude who reeked of booze.”

I shook my head. “Henry. Henry’s here.”

Her eyes almost bugged out. “What?”

“He was in the audience. He saw me. I think he saw my birthmark and recognized it and knew it was me.”

She covered her mouth. “Oh, my God.”

That’s what I said.

“I have to go. I have to get out of here.” If he was still out there, I couldn’t face him. It was bad enough for one thing to implode in my face. He’d found out my secret about having a record. But also learning that I was a dancer, too? I didn’t know how to face him at all anymore.

I couldn’t stomach his opinion of me sinking even lower with the news that I moonlighted as an exotic dancer.



“Shit. Go. Just go.”

I had one more act to handle, but I simply couldn't go back out there.

“I'll have Samantha cover for you for the closing number. Someone. Just go on. Get out of here.” She grimaced, worried about me. “And if I see him, I'll try to keep him back.” Then she bit her lip. “Unless... maybe it would help to talk to him?”

I shook my head, taking off my headpiece and kicking out of my shoes. “No. Hell no. Not like this.” One thing at a time. I couldn't imagine having to fess up that I was the dancer he'd wanted to hire for Fifty.

Lies were awful. I hated telling them. I despised keeping them. And a huge dose of guilt swamped me. I never should've let it get this complicated to begin with!

“Fuck.” Gina grabbed my hand. “You can't go back to my place.”

I furrowed my brow, unzipping and removing my dance costume. It wasn't anything she hadn't seen before. “Why not?” That was where I planned to go. Henry knew where I lived. I could avoid him and hide at Gina's. I'd wait for her to come home so we could talk and she could—hopefully—give me advice on what to do next.

“I got an email that the maintenance guys are changing locks because of that break-in two floors down.” She cringed. “They won't give you the key. I have to pick it up as the registered tenant.”

“Dammit.” I ran my hand through my hair, bunching it back. The hair spray crinkled, but I didn't care about the slimy yet stiff texture. I couldn't care about anything other than getting away.

“Run home, and I'll check on you as soon as I can.” She looked at her watch. “Gotta

go. Stage time.”

I waved at her as she left, then as soon as I stuck my feet in my sandals, I grabbed my purse to leave.

Henry wasn't at the back door when I slipped out. He wasn't lurking in the alley either.

I wouldn't put it past him to not give up, though. Not with how determined he'd been to sneak past security to get to me backstage.

I won't cave. I will stay strong.

I walked home, assuming that he'd be there waiting to intercept me. And when I saw him, I had to guard my heart. I couldn't be so dumb as to let him convince me into thinking he didn't judge me like scum.

Sure enough, he was there, standing at my door, hands in his pockets. It wasn't fair how sexy and hot he looked, simply leaning against the wall, casual and patient.

Half of me wanted to run into his arms. But the logical other half of me warned me to toughen up.

Holding my head high, I walked up without a rush, hoping to show that he couldn't get to me. He couldn't control me through this desire and friendship that I once thought was mutual.

“Are you here to judge me some more?” I asked, proud that I kept my tone steady and clear, not cracked or too snappy.

He watched me, taking in the sight of me like he was a starved man and I was the

feast he envisioned in his darkest moments.

“No.”

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I raised my brows. “I was a criminal. I’m a ‘lowlife loser’ of a dancer.”

“Ann said that. Not me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can I fall any further under your judgmental eye?”

He sighed, dipping his chin to his chest. “No, Mia.”

“I’m not one of your rich and proper women that Eddie pushes in your face. I’m not the kind of daughter-in-law he’d want in his family.”

A slight tug on his lips made me wonder if he was hiding a smile, but that would be too cruel, for him to smirk or make fun of my heartache. I was only speaking the truth, dammit.

He shook his head. “Can I come in, please?” Tipping his head toward my door, he indicated that he wanted to talk to me in there, privately and alone.

I recalled what we’d done the last time I let him past this door. He’d made me come. We’d kissed and bonded, showing each other how good it was to give in.

Not anymore.

I was determined to stay strong and protect my heart. He wouldn’t hurt me again.

I was too guarded to let him in. My heart, my thoughts, and my home.

“That’s not a good idea,” I told him.

“I—”

His phone rang, and he growled.

“Go back to your life, Henry. With your family. Your blueblood and wealthy women.”

“That’s not—” He scowled, nearly dropping his phone as he grabbed it from his pocket. “Laura? Hello?”

She replied, but since it wasn’t on speaker, I didn’t know what she said to make Henry’s face go pale.

I tensed, fearing bad news. I could guard my heart from this man, but it didn’t stop me from caring and loving him. I didn’t wish him ill.

“What?” He lowered his phone, putting it on speaker as he reached for my hand.

I didn’t flinch, too nervous about his fearful expression.

“He’s gone, Henry!” Laura said tearfully. “Jason ran away!”

23

HENRY

My heart stopped. It skipped a beat as I heard the scariest news a parent could ever be told.

“He ran off, Henry. One second, we were at your place so he could change his shoes, and then he took off while I was in the bathroom!”

“Calm down, Laura,” Mia said. She lost her aloofness, twining her fingers with mine and holding my hand tighter. I clung to this support she offered, aware that I hadn’t earned any right to have it anymore. I’d hurt her. And still, she put me and my son first.

“Mia?” Laura asked.

“Calm down and explain what happened,” Mia said, taking charge while I locked down in temporary panic. Jason was all I had. He was my son, and I loved him more than the earth itself. The thought of his being gone, in any capacity, nearly knocked me over.

“I took him to get ice cream, and then we went to the movies. He asked to go home in the middle of it, saying he wasn’t in the mood for a movie. So we came home, and I suggested going to the park even though it was late. He likes that splash pad. We got here, and he said he wanted to change from his shoes to his sandals. I went to the bathroom, and when I got out, he was gone. He left a note that said he wanted to find you, Mia, and to bring you back in his life.”

She covered her mouth, worried and moved. “When was this?” she asked.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“Did you call the police?” I asked.

“I called the building’s security. They’re searching now.”

Mia shook her head. “When did he leave the note?” she asked.

“Maybe ten minutes ago,” Laura replied.

Mia let go of my hand and hurried to unlock the door. While she looked worried, she also seemed confident.

“It’s arcade night. I bet he went there,” she explained.

I nodded. Relief washed over me. She had to be right. But still, Jason was only seven, far too young to be out on his own in the city at all.

“Let me change, and we’ll go look.”

“Okay.” I waited at the door as she ran in, leaving the door open. “Laura, we’re going to go look.”

“Oh, God. I’m so sorry. I should’ve?—”

“You couldn’t have predicted this.”

“He was acting so down. It totally slipped my mind that tonight would’ve been your arcade night.”

Last week, on the first arcade night without Mia, he'd cried all evening, so upset until he fell asleep.

Mia rushed back out, and we ran toward my car together. She wasn't panicking but was determined to find him. She wasn't hesitant, just full speed ahead to help me get my son back.

I felt sick to my stomach, clenching the steering wheel tightly as I drove to the arcade. Traffic wasn't gnarly like usual, and I sped as much as I could. It still felt like too long.

"He's got to be there," Mia said, comforting me despite the grimace lining her face.

I hope. I pray. He'll get a stern talking to about taking off like that, no matter how distressed he was, but I was grateful that Mia was here with me now, to assist and offer support.

This was the woman I knew. This was the Mia I loved. She wasn't a criminal. She wasn't a lowlife to be a dancer. She was a strong, generous, and fiercely loving woman I wanted to keep in my life forever.

"There," she said moments later, pointing out a parking spot.

I careened into it, slamming to a stop. We ran out, frantic to reach the arcade's entrance. Once we did, we spotted Penni, one of the regular workers, waving at us and smiling from behind the counter.

She pointed to the left, and I saw the back of Jason's head.

My heart slowed. I nearly fell over with relief. Mia held my hand, noticing how I immediately crashed at seeing him.



Penni came out from behind the counter. “I saw him show up and have been keeping an eye on him.” She glanced at how I held Mia’s hand.

“Thank you.” Mia leaned over to give her a side hug. She blew out a big breath, also calming down at seeing Jason unharmed.

“I was gonna look you up and call y’all if no one came in ten more minutes.”

“Thank you,” I told her, planning to tip her generously for looking out for him.

Mia let go of my hand as we walked up to Jason. The second he turned his head and saw us, he lit up. A huge smile crossed over his face at seeing Mia. Then the expression crumpled and he burst into tears as he ran toward her.

“Mia!” he cried out for her as he jumped at her, and she caught him in her arms.

I wasn’t mad. I wasn’t hurt. He’d done what he set out to do—find Mia and bring her back. I wasn’t happy that he’d done something so careless as taking off, but I realized that he’d missed her. Of course, he’d run to her. Not me.

I was his constant. He could know that I’d always be there for him, but Mia had given a different impression.

Because of me.

“Oh, Jason.” She closed her eyes as she hugged him tight. His small arms squeezed around her, and I damn near lost it, so touched and moved by their close bond.

“I’m sorry, Mia. I’m so sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry for whatever I did that made you not want to be there anymore.”

“What?” She reared back, still hugging him but peering down at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry I made you mad. I didn’t mean to spill juice on your phone.”

Mia’s brows shot up high. “What?”

“It was an accident.”

She nodded. “I know. But what does my phone have to do with?—”

“Isn’t that why you didn’t want to be around anymore?” Jason glanced up at me, confused. He’d asked me where Mia was, and I gave him such vague answers, not sure how to explain any of this. The decision not to be clear with him was kicking me now.

“No.” Mia shook her head. “No way. That phone was just a phone, a thing I can replace.”

“Then why didn’t you want to be around anymore? Isn’t it because I broke your phone?”

“No.” Mia sighed. “That’s not why.”

“Then why?” he insisted.

“I just had some... things to concentrate on.”

He sniffled. “But... but you aren’t even at the office anymore!”

She hugged him close again until his round of tears faded.

“Jason.” I crouched lower to where Mia knelt and hugged him.

He tucked his face against Mia but rolled his head to face me.

“Mia and I had... an argument. It’s my fault—only my fault—that she’s been away.”

Standing straight, he furrowed his brow and scolded me. “That’s stupid. Why would you want to make Mia go away?”

“You know what?” Mia looked around, noticing as I did that we were attracting attention. “Instead of making a scene here...” She stood, taking Jason’s hand. “Come on. Let me walk you home and we can explain.”

Jason smiled up at her like she was the mightiest person in the world. His eyes were still glossy with tears, but he gazed up at her with complete adoration and love.

“Will you tuck me in bed?” he asked in a small, quiet voice.

My heart cracked at how much he loved this woman, how much she meant to him.

“Of course,” she promised him, holding his hand.

Jason lifted his other hand to me, and I took it. He was due for a very stern scolding of his own, to hear me out about how stupid it was for him to run off like that. But it could wait. I imagined Mia would lecture him as well. That was how much she cared about him.

We walked, hand in hand, like a little family.

I glanced at Mia, who looked off to the side like she was fighting tears. And I hated all over again that I’d made her upset. Both of them.

I had a lot of fixing to do.

MIA

Henry was quiet on the walk back to his place. Laura was there, distraught, but she let me and Henry handle Jason. She gave him a quick frown and said she'd see him tomorrow.

Jason also didn't talk, perhaps knowing he was in trouble for that stunt. Or maybe he was just too damn happy that I was back here.

He changed and got in bed, and as I promised, I tucked him in.

"Jason, you can't ever run away like that again."

"I didn't run away. I just looked for you."

I tilted my head to the side and narrowed my eyes. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He lowered his head. "I'm sorry. I won't do that again."

"It's dangerous. I don't want to ever think about you being on your own and getting hurt. No matter how upset you are about something, you can't run off."

"I won't do it again." He tentatively smiled. "Will you stay, Mia? Forever? I wish you could."

Oh, be still my heart. I wished I could too. "Sometimes, things aren't that simple. I bet

you want a mommy. I can tell you do. Some days, I wish I still had my mom too.”

He nodded.

“I am sure your daddy will find a good woman to be your mommy.” It broke my heart to say this. “But it won’t be me.” Tears clogged in my throat. It was killing me to be honest with him, but he deserved the truth. Henry and I came from two different sides of life, and there wouldn’t be a way to make us work. He’d proven that with his harsh words.

“I love you, Jason, and I always will. Even if I don’t work in the office anymore, I’ll stay in touch with you. Okay?” I didn’t want to commit to seeing Henry anymore, not when it would continue to chip away at my heart, but Jason deserved stability. He’d latched on to me, as I had him. No matter how things fell apart between me and Henry, I had to keep Jason in mind.

“Will you read me a story?” he asked, pointing at a book about a wishing well.

“Sure, kiddo.” I snuggled in to sit and read to him. He fell asleep halfway through the story, and I kissed his forehead before I got up.

I wasn’t sure I could stand this heartache. I wanted to be the one to comfort him, to show him that the world could be full of love and support.

I was vulnerable and upset, genuinely worried about that sweet boy. So when I walked out of the room and ran into Henry, I tried to stay strong. He clearly had been waiting out here, listening in to it all with the door cracked open.

My heart was too raw to care about his opinions. I’d spoken the truth in there, at any rate. I hadn’t lied to Jason, so he couldn’t jump at me for more lies.

“Can we talk?”

With a heavy heart, I nodded. “Okay. But then it’s goodbye, Henry.”

He frowned, walking alongside me as he led me to his room. I wasn’t sure we needed this much privacy, especially after I said this would be it between us. This would be goodbye. Then again, he likely didn’t want Jason to hear what we’d say.

“Did you hear me?” I asked as he closed the door. “This has to be goodbye. I can’t suffer through loving you like this anymore.”

He stopped mid-step, raising his brows. I’d stunned him. “What?”

My timing was crappy, but I supposed it was better late than never to spill my heart. “I love you, Henry. I have since the first time we worked together at the office, arguing about margins and fonts of a document.” I shook my head, wishing it could be funny, but it sounded so pathetic. I’d spent years pining for him, and this was what it got me—heartbreak. “But it’ll never matter to you. It will never be enough for you.”

“You love me.” He stated it instead of asking it.

I nodded. “Sorry.”

“Sorry? For loving me?”

I hung my head for a moment. “For being the wrong person to love you.” I cleared my throat, determined to at least clear the air once and for all. “I’m sorry I didn’t come clean and tell you that I was the dancer you saw at Danger. The dancer you contacted Gina about over and over to hire for your new club. I never wanted anyone at the office to know that I was an exotic dancer. I was ashamed, afraid that people

would...” I swallowed hard, struggling to get the words out as he stood there and watched me. “Would judge me. I only got into dancing because I needed the money. My pay at the office wasn’t enough to live on, not with my debts. I was desperate to survive, so I started dancing for extra money.”

“You were the star on the stage,” he said softly as I drew in a deep breath after talking for so long, even if I didn’t ramble without pause.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

I nodded and shrugged. “I struggled with staying in my secretary position. I could make more just working at Danger. Or elsewhere. I know I’m a skilled dancer, but I never wanted to leave the office. It was the family I never had. I never wanted to give you up, because seeing you was the highlight of my life.”

“Fuck. Mia...” he whispered, stepping closer to hug me.

I retreated, warding him off. “No.” If he touched me, I’d cave. I’d want to lean on him for support and never let him go. “Let me get it all out.”

He frowned, watching me closely.

“I wanted to save up to pay off my student loan debts for my bachelor’s degree. I wanted to save up to expunge my record and have a career, but I know I won’t be able to go into law with my record now, anyway. My ex, Dennis, also ran up high credit card bills. But most of all, I wanted to save up to expunge my record. Dennis met me right after my mom passed away. I’d just turned eighteen and I had no one. My dad’s in prison. My mom was gone. It was just me, and Dennis exploited my loneliness. I worked ahead to try to finish my bachelor’s degree early, to go into law school. He conned me into helping him with a ‘favor’ he and his friends had arranged. Long story short, he was breaking in to burglarize an apartment. He had a weapon. I did not. I had no clue what was happening, thinking I was picking him up from a party or something. I wasn’t. He framed me when he almost got caught, and I was charged for a crime I didn’t commit or know about. I served a couple of months and had to do a lot of community service. That’s what Ann unearthed about me. I met Eddie at a rehab sort of event designed to give former criminals a second chance at life. I asked him not to tell anyone about my past because I didn’t want one mistake

to define me. I didn't want my debt or past to define me. I wanted my hard work to define me. It's obvious that my past does define me, though, where you're concerned."

He stepped closer and took my hand to hold between his. "Mia. No. It doesn't. I'm sorry for lashing out how I did. I wish I could take back every single word I said. I wasn't judging you. I thought I was defending you from Ann slandering you. I thought she was making it all up to attack you. I was surprised and so confused. You're a good woman, a good person, and I was stupefied that you could've ever done something to be in trouble for."

"I didn't. I just made the mistake of loving the wrong man."

He tugged me closer, tipping my chin up so I'd face him. "I wish things could be different between us, Mia. You've never been 'just an employee' to me. I've struggled with remembering that we were supposed to only be friends. It broke my heart to see you so upset, and I hated myself for ever making you want to leave."

I lowered my gaze, touched by his words but afraid to believe that he meant them. Once more, he gripped my chin and gently urged me to face him.

"And I will spend every day of the rest of my life proving to you that you're so much more than your past. You're my future, Mia. I want you to be my wife. The mother of my children. My partner to grow old with. If you'll have me, if you have enough room in your heart to forgive me, that's how I want to define you. Asmine. Because I'm lost without you."

I blinked, warring with the smile that almost broke free. I clung to a remnant of doubt, though, nervous to believe him.

But then he lowered to a knee and pulled a vintage ring box out of his pocket. He

opened it and held it up to me, showing me—without a shred of hesitation—that he was serious.

“Mia, please put me out of my misery and marry me?”

Joy filled my heart, spilling over and infusing me with excitement. I lost the fight with a wide grin, laughing as I let it cover my face. “Well, to put you out of your misery...” I held my hand out, fingers splayed.

It was happening. This was it. All my dreams. Those high hopes and out-of-reach fantasies. They were all coming true with his proposal. My heart raced, and I feared I’d pass out from sheer elation.

“Will you marry me?” he asked again, almost as though he feared he was imagining my acceptance.

I nodded. “I’ll marry you, Henry.”

He smiled, sliding the ring on my finger as he stood to kiss me. Enveloped in his arms, I surrendered to his demand to kiss him back.

It was perfect, an episode of kismet as I clung to him and held him close.

“I love you, Mia.” He rested his brow against mine. “I love loving you, and I will never stop.”

I laughed, charmed by how eager he was to say it.

“I’ll scream it from the rooftop.” He guided me back to the bed, kissing me again and again, as if he couldn’t get enough of my lips. “I’ll shout it from the mountains.”

I nodded, yanking his shirt to tug it off. Lust flooded in, lighting me up with an impatient need to celebrate this milestone.

I had a fiancé. We were engaged. And I wanted to mark it in style, with him deep inside me.

“I want to see you pregnant with my babies.” He caught on to this feverous need to get naked, pushing at my clothes between hot, desperate kisses.

“I want to hear you call me your husband.”

“Nagging it?” I asked as I helped him lower my shorts then step out of them.

“Nag. Argue. Beg. Whatever. I will listen to everything you tell me to do,” he growled. His fingers made quick work of my bra as I shoved at his pants and boxers.

“Everything?” I asked as he stepped out of his clothes, his hard, hot body bare and mine to enjoy.

“Everything,” he promised.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“Starting now?” I asked, shivering under the firm caress of his hands roving over me. He slipped his finger along my slit, reaching for my entrance, but I twisted to push him down. Once he was seated on the bed, I climbed onto his lap, straddling him.

“Tell me what you want, fiancée,” he said, his mouth a breath away from mine.

“You.” I gripped his erection, turned on that much more with how aroused he already was. As I stroked him, rising up on my knees, I kissed him softly, sweetly. “I just want you, Henry. For the rest of my life.”

He smiled, gazing up at me with a soulful expression of pure happiness. “Consider it done.”

I lined him up to me. The push of his wide cockhead stretched me, but the slight burn felt too damn good to slow down or stop.

“I want you to make love to me,” I told him between wet kisses.

He moaned, gripping my head as I sank down a little further on his rigid dick. “You won’t be able to stop me.”

I lifted up a bit to ease back down more. I was taking him slow, planning on dragging out the agony of needing him. This night was too important to rush through a single thing.

“I want you to be my family,” I said, voicing my deepest desire.

His grin turned wicked. “A family?” He lowered his hands to my ass and flexed his fingers on my muscles. It turned me on, that bite of pain from his touch, and I sank down on him until he was all the way in, every hard, thick inch of him. He was deep inside me, to the hilt, and it had never felt better.

“How many kids will you want?” he asked, straining to talk with me sucking him into my pussy.

“As many as you’ll give me. Jason needs brothers and sisters.” I lifted up and sank down, starting a slow, grinding ride on him that pushed me close to coming too damn soon.

“Consider it done,” he repeated, breathing harder as he matched my motions. Seated, he put his hands behind him and pushed up into me. Each time I lowered and smacked my ass over his thighs, he thrust up to drive that big shaft as deep as he could.

Over and over, we raced to come. Words failed me. Thoughts ceased to form. All I could do was feel. I felt him, in me, then hugging me once I shattered.

He covered his mouth over mine, kissing me hard as I came. I hurtled toward my orgasm so quickly that it stunned me. I trembled, moaning into his mouth, but before I could come down from the high of it all, he picked me up and turned us until I lay on my back. A few more hard pounds into me pushed him over the edge. He groaned, too, and I tugged his head to bring him down to muffle how loud he was.

“This is gonna be a habit,” I teased him as I milked him dry. His thrusts slowed as he collapsed over me, clutching me tight in a slick hug.

“What is?” he asked breathlessly.

“Trying to make sure neither of us is too loud.”

He grinned, kissing me softly as we caught our breath. “Or we can renovate for more sound-proof walls.”

I laughed, charmed and amused by my boss. My fiancé.

My love.

25

HENRY

I would’ve thought I’d be too tired to wake up early after the shower sex Mia and I had. Then her middle-of-the-night wakeup with her mouth on me to give me head. We thoroughly celebrated all night long, but I woke up at my usual time.

A run would have to wait. Lying here and staring at her sleeping was far too fun to pass up on.

When would this surreal feeling pass?

When will it really sink in?

I’d done it. I’d pulled it off. I got the girl. My son got the mommy he wanted. And my dad would no doubt be hearing a baby announcement any time.

If Mia and I kept up with this enthusiastic of a sex life, I’d be knocking her up without pause.

It was new, yet. We were in a newlywed phase before tying the knot. But we had

years to make up for. We had lots of time to catch up, after so long of resisting each other and tiptoeing around a chance to make this work.



*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

Eventually, I got up and grabbed my laptop. The keyboard wasn't the quietest. Jason always made a funny face when I tried to do a little work in the living room when he was watching something on TV. I was used to the clacking, but it woke up Mia too soon.

"Why are you working already?" she moaned good-naturedly.

"I'm not." I furrowed my brow and looked over at her. "Are you going to want your job back?"

"Are you suggesting that you could find someone to do it better than me?"

I smiled, loving her confidence and ability to be snarky right back with me. "Or do you enjoy dancing more?"

She smiled, stretching and teasing me with a slip of the sheet over her bare breast. "Hmm. I'm going to hold you up to that baby-making promise. How about I cut back to only dancing for you and keep my job at the office until I'm too pregnant to handle it?"

I leaned over, kissing her with a smack of our lips. "Sounds perfect. But you're moving in with me."

She smiled. "Oh?"

"Office-wise. I don't want to have to go looking for you all the time."

“Won’t that be a distraction?”

I shrugged. “I’ve gotten work done all these years, haven’t I?”

She snuggled against my side. I loved how casual she was about being here. “And moving in here, too.”

“Are you sure about that?” She blinked, still looking drowsy as she pointed at the computer screen. “Because this suggests otherwise.”

“Well.” I draped my arm around her. “We’re not going to have enough room here for all these babies. This apartment has three bedrooms, but we’ll need more space.”

She smiled up at me. “Do you realize you’re making all my dreams come true?”

I nodded. “Are you aware that you’re making mine come true?”

“I do now.”

Together, we browsed for properties. She fell back asleep, though, but I was too awake and excited about our future. We were forging ahead quickly, ready to make our lives united as soon as possible, with a baby hopefully on the way soon. The wedding too.

I moved my search on to wedding venues, wondering when she would want to get married. Any season would do except winter.

Can I talk her into a fall wedding? Or would that be too rushed?

I would give Mia the wedding of her dreams. Whatever she wanted, I’d make it happen. I meant it when I told her that, and I expected her to hold me to that promise.

I had never been more content than this moment. With my woman at my side, my future wife on board with being mine, I felt like all was right in my world.

As soon as Jason woke up and learned about this development...

I grinned, counting on him to be over the moon and thrilled.

Eventually, I had to get up and prepare for work. Mia would come back too, I bet, eager to resume her role. I'd never forget how she said she wouldn't want to leave the family in the office, and I felt proud to be able to give her that inclusion.

Too soon, I bet she'd be busy with our children, but if she wanted to stay a working woman, I wouldn't hold her back from it.

It was a win-win situation for me. I'd see her at home and work.

I got dressed, and Mia did as well. She was still yawning and wiped from the excitement of the previous night, but I bet she'd perk up when Jason saw that she was still here.

We moved into the kitchen to start breakfast, and I loved how she was used to being here already. She knew where everything was. She was familiar with the layout, and sneaking in kisses—just because we could—made this domestic scene that much more fun.

Jason was still asleep by the time my dad showed up. He stopped in setting the box of fresh pastries on the counter after letting himself in. Spotting me with Mia, arms around each other at the stove, he blinked once. Then twice.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

We'd surprised him, all right. It shouldn't have shocked him, since he gave me the family ring to give to her. But maybe he'd doubted me or that I could win her over.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "This is new."

I rolled my eyes. "The hell it is. I fell in love with her that first week, the moment she first told me that Helvetica is a 'lame' font."

She swatted my butt as I passed by to load the toaster. "Itisa lame font."

"How can a font even be lame?" I countered.

"Because it's too showy. Or it just doesn't match the vibe of the document."

"A document has a vibe now?" I teased.

"Yes! You would think it was a joke if a résumé were typed in Comic Sans."

"Not if it was a résumé for a clown."

"Do clownshaveresumes?" she shot back.

"Oh, my God." My dad smiled, tears shining in his eyes. "Listen to you two. You reallydolove each other."

I supposed bickering was our love language, after all.

He rushed to Mia, wrapping her in a big hug. “Oh, it’s true. He really does love you.”

She laughed, hugging him back. “And I think I can handle him, too.”

“Oh, congratulations.” He cupped her face and kissed the top of her head. “Daughter! I will have a daughter!”

“Hopefully, a granddaughter or two as well.”

He chuckled, wiping his eyes. “Oh, I’m so happy for you.” He pulled me in for a hug.

“So I have your approval?” Mia asked.

“I hoped. I wished. I prayed for so long that you two would finally get your heads screwed on right and realize how good of a match you were. Of course, I approve. I’ve always enjoyed your fitting in with us.”

“Then why did you always bring women for me to meet?” I asked.

“To prompt you into making a move on her! To figure it out and go for her, once and for all.”

Mia laughed, smiling as Laura let herself in. She stopped by for breakfast often, but it seemed like she was only popping in to drop off something Jason forgot with her last night. She furrowed her brow, looking at all of us one by one.

“Did I miss something?”

My dad lifted Mia’s hand, showing off the ring.

“Oh!” She squealed, doing a little happy dance in place before she ran up to Mia and

hugged her.

“I can’t believe it! You finally figured it out,” she said, echoing Dad’s sentiments. She roped me into a hug too.

We were all so loud that we woke Jason up.

He walked into the room, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. “What’s going on?” He blinked, adorable with that drowsy look on his face. As soon as he spotted Mia, he opened his eyes wide and his mouth hung open. “Mia? You’re still here!”

He ran to her, and she scooped him up into a big hug. She held him at her side, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “What if I stay forever?”

He gasped, looking at her, then me, then back and her. He volleyed his gaze back and forth, shocked.

*Source Creation Date: July 2, 2025, 7:48 am*

“Forever?”

“As your mommy?” she asked, showing him the ring I put on her finger last night.

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. He blinked back happy tears and strapped his arms around her so tightly she coughed.

“Yes!” he cried out. After they hugged, he wiggled to be put down so he could run to me.

I caught him, closing my eyes as he wrapped me in a tight hug too. He squeezed me, sighing happily. “Thank you, Daddy.”

I didn’t lower him as he pulled back to face me. I smiled back at him, loving that toothy grin of his. “I wished and wished for this to come true. All my birthday candles. All the pennies I threw in the fountain downstairs. All the times you found an eyelash and blew it away.” He twisted until we both looked at Mia, smiling back at us.

“And my wish is coming true!”

“I know what you mean,” I confided in him. As I stared into the emerald gaze of the woman I loved, I thought back to how long I’d wanted to call her mine. I’d wanted her from the beginning, and finally, she was mine to keep for good.

No. Not just mine.Ours. She had accepted both of us. I was a package deal. She wasn’t acquiring only a husband. She was getting Jason as a son, too.

I glanced at my dad, seeing how happy he was, and I realized she was getting a father-in-law eager for more grandkids to spoil, too.

I couldn't wait to see how our family would grow.