



Secret Baby for The Bad Boy (Ruthless Bad Boys #5)

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Category: Urban

Description: Imagine a ridiculously hot, dangerously seductive man sitting next to you on a long flight—only to catch you shamelessly devouring him with your eyes.

And few years later, you're his new boss and he never misses a chance to intimidate you with that same smoldering gaze.

LARA

Why does everything keep coming full circle?

People meet on flights, but why did I run into him again?

One-night stands are supposed to be just that—one night. So why did I find myself back in his bed the next day?

We met on vacation, yet here he is, walking into my office.

He's looking for a job at my company, and now I'm his boss after two unforgettable nights together.

And guess what? Instead of rejecting him, I hired him on the spot, telling him the past stays where it belongs—we're colleagues now, nothing more.

But I'm kidding myself if I think we can keep our hands off each other.

I've invited trouble back into my life, once again.

He tries to intimidate me, and that intense gaze strips me bare, right in the middle of the office.

It's a look that melts me from the inside, and it's dangerous, especially here at work.

How am I supposed to face him every day when our chemistry still sizzles, hotter than ever?

And the worst part is—I want him now more than before.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

I've never been a fan of flying, a fear I attribute to losing a favorite uncle to a freak flight accident. Of course, the plane had been on the ground then, and so had he, but that connection still lives on in the back of my mind.

I grip my armrest as the engines hum, wishing I could sleep. After all, sleep is typically a magical time machine to breakfast, so maybe it'll do the same, except as the start of this vacation I so desperately need. Even though I love my brother, sometimes.... I need a break.

I scan the dimly lit cabin as I try to relax the part of my brain that's hyper-aware of every little sound and sensation. The hairs on my arms stand on end, and I feel like a Halloween cat with hair on end and fright causing a very visceral reaction.

A powerful forearm brushes mine, as if my neighbor wants to use the armrest, but changed course when he realized I'm using the space. "Excuse me," I say, pulling my arm back. I'm uncomfortable enough, I don't also need the person sitting beside me to be angry.

"Sure thing," a deep voice rumbles.

I peek at him out of the corner of my eyes. I'd already noticed him, and the fact that not only is he handsome, he's not wearing a ring. Not that I'm interested in marriage – I'm not – but he's goodlooking enough I want to fantasize about what could be but will never come to pass.

His muscular arms are crossed over his chest, his head tipped back on the headrest and displaying his powerful neck and wide shoulders. The guy is built like a professional football player, and it's making my mouth water. The plane shudders slightly, as if also responding to the sheer strength contained in his limbs.

As I stare at him, he opens his eyes and his gaze slides to me, as if he's telling me he can feel my stare. I look away, my cheeks stinging. I'm not used to being out of my element.

"Sorry," I whisper, even though I'm not. Not really.

"Nothing to apologize for." His words are low, meant just for me as he closes his eyes again.

The overhead light flickers, causing shadows to dance over the rough terrain of his knuckles—scars, callouses, the light dusting of dark hairs on his ropy forearms—then recedes. They're hands that look like they were made for work... or for holding things together while everything else falls apart.

His muscular arms, though, they're impossible to ignore as he places one on the recently-vacated armrest between us, the movement making the muscles slide as veins subtly rise beneath his skin.

The roughness of his demeanor seems at odds with his softly-spoken words. Sure, his voice is rough, but there's an almost gentle edge to his words as if there's more to the man than meets the eye. He looks more like someone who'd be riding a Harley than a business-class seat at thirty thousand feet.

Aware I'm staring again, I tear my gaze away, pressing my back into my own seat, feeling the soft leather yield to my form. My gaze drifts to the window and the scene outside—to the stars that dot the night sky through the oval glass. I try to focus on

them, but the image of my seat-mate's arms lingers behind my eyelids every time I blink.

He shifts, and the leather seat protests beneath him. He's all hard edges and raw power, and it's hard to stop thinking about him. I never get this messed up over a guy, much less a stranger, but that only makes me more curious.

"It's a long flight," he says, sounding more amused than upset.

"Yep," I say with a nod, my fingertips digging into the strap of my seatbelt to readjust the material of my clothing underneath. "Very long flight."

With every dip and shudder of the plane, my pulse quickens. The dull cabin light somehow makes my seat-mate's presence more imposing, more... magnetic. Our eyes meet and I notice the intensity in his impossibly green eyes, and my heart slams against my ribs. His gaze holds mine, unwavering, intense, as if he's uncovering all my secrets.

His gaze ticks past me, then back. "Beautiful," he says, almost inaudibly, and I watch his full lips move while wondering what they'd feel like on mine.

"Thanks," I say, breathless, though I'm not even sure he's complimenting me. It doesn't matter. My skin tingles where his gaze lingers, desire swirling in my stomach like a riptide, pulling me out to sea.

He nods to the window, and I suddenly realize he was saying the view is beautiful. My face burns and I look away from him.

Why did I agree to this getaway again? To spend a little time away from the pressures of my home life and all the heavy responsibilities that I shoulder every day. But all I can think about is the man beside me—the one who seems to see straight through to

my very soul.

I glance sideways and see my best friend, Shana. She's engrossed in her book, oblivious to my super embarrassing moment with a stranger. I lean closer, bridging the gap between our seats. With a wave of my hand, I catch her attention and mouth two words, He's hot.

Shana's eyebrows shoot up; she gives me a knowing smirk, then follows my gaze back to the man beside me. He's looking right at me—no, through me—with an intensity that could melt steel. Heat creeps up my neck and my stomach twists into a pretzel.

I can hear Shana giggle and wish I could throw something at her.

I'm caught.

He is watching me, a knowing look in his eyes. I swallow hard, my heart skipping erratically. I'd swear a slight smile tugs back one corner of those kissable lips, but the movement is so slight and fast, I can't be sure.

"Damn it," I whisper under my breath.

"Smooth, Lara," Shana says, but I can only sit here, mortified and oddly thrilled by the attention of the man who suddenly makes this flight feel endless.

He arches an eyebrow, as if expecting an explanation, but I'm trying to figure out why he's still staring at me. He's not being very polite. Not that I was being polite—no, I'm thinking about his behavior, not mine.

"Uh, it's not what—" I say, not sure where I'm going with this. Am I about to say it's not what it looks like? What else could I have meant?

“Relax,” he says in that soft, gravelly tone. This time I can tell it’s a real smile as the corners of his eyes crinkle in a way that softens his rugged features.

I nod, swallowing hard.

My heart still dances wildly in my chest as I turn away, pretending to adjust my seatbelt again, but I can feel his gaze on me. That look is so warm but also unsettling, thanks to the familiarity in them, as if we’ve known each other forever rather than the strangers we actually are.

I shift in my seat, stealing another glance at him. His eyes meet mine, and I have the oddest feeling that there’s some kind of connection between us. Connection aside, I want him. My body tingles to life and craves his touch. It’s too much, too intense, too soon.

“Get ahold of yourself,” I whisper internally. I’m here on vacation. An escape, sandy beaches and sun, not green-eyed strangers with intense gazes that tell stories I can’t read.

“You okay?” Shana whispers.

I nod, glancing at my best friend. This whole thing was her idea. And while it seemed like a good idea at the time, this vacation is kicking off to be one that I’ll remember for all the wrong reasons. But I’m not going to let this happen.

I want to tell him to stop staring at me, to look at something – anything – else, but I don’t really want to draw any more attention to the fact that I’m so aware of him. I’m here to have fun, to get away from it all. I’m not going to be embarrassed or feel weird in front of a stranger I’ll never see again. Especially not one who’s so... so... intense.

Shana glances at me again, her book lowered as her attention shifts from me to the man beside me.

“My name is Lark,” he says, as if it’s time to make introductions because we’ve made things awkward. I can feel his gaze like a touch, and a shiver tickles down my spine.

“Nice to meet you,” I say through gritted teeth without offering my name in response. I don’t want him to think this means anything more than it is – he’s the stranger sitting beside me on a long flight.

“The seatbelt sign is on,” the captain says over the intercom. The sound, the ding of the seatbelt light, it’s all a reminder of the reality of the situation. I’d never unbuckled my belt, but I check it all the same as I hear his click into place. Somehow, the belt isn’t keeping me safe from embarrassing myself.

Only when the light clicks off and we’re cleared to remove our belts do I dare breathe again.

“Drink?” The flight attendant’s voice meets my ears, and I look up into her smiling face.

“Water, please,” I say.

“Whiskey,” Lark's deep voice rumbles across my skin like a breeze.

“Of course,” I mumble to myself. Whiskey matches the roughness of the man.

“Here you go,” the flight attendant says, handing me a water and him a little bottle of amber-colored alcohol.

“Thanks,” we both say at the same time.

Looking out the window once more, I sip the cool water as if that'll calm my stomach and stop bile from backing up my throat. Beside me, the glass he'd poured his drink into tilts back, the sharp-stinging alcohol disappearing past Lark's lips. His Adam's apple bobs slightly—a small movement, yet I can't help but watch.

I need to get ahold of myself.

But those arms—the veins weaving up muscular forearms, visible even in the dim cabin light—hold my attention in a way they have no business doing. I've never cared about how a guy's arms look, so why am I obsessing over his? Maybe I should have gotten a drink, too.

His seat somehow looks too delicate for him and when he shifts, my whole body lights up as his arm touches mine. His soft apology leaves me breathless, and I know I need to figure something out, because this is all too damn much.

I'm going to try the magical time machine of sleep, because I don't know what the heck else to do. Maybe my dreams will be less chaotic and more lighthearted beach-vacation worthy. And I better not dream of him.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

I push through the throng of sun-kissed bodies, listening to the sound of laughter and the smell of sweat, heat, and ocean air filling my lungs. A delicate hint of coconut sunscreen lingers in the little beachfront bar as I sit down on one of the stools.

Scanning the open room, I take in the bar that's alive with the clatter of glasses, animated conversations, and the rhythmic thumping of a nearby volleyball game. A server weaves through the crowd, her tray held high like a sail catching the breeze.

"Another round!" someone shouts, and a cheer erupts from a table decked out with nearly empty colorful cocktail glasses.

I lean against the weathered wood of the bar, feeling lucky because the place is almost standing room only. My gaze meets one set of incredible blue eyes and freezes right there.

It's her, the woman from the plane, perched elegantly on the edge of a barstool, one long bare leg crossed over the other as her cute polka-dot sundress rides up her legs. Her laughter mingles with the rest, but all her attention is on her friend, until her gaze meets mine.

"Can I get you something?" The bartender nods at me, pulling me back into the moment.

"Whiskey, neat," I say, turning back to her as he moves off to pour my drink. Her gaze meets mine, and that smile widens just a fraction, beckoning and cautious all at

once. I knew there was something between us on the plane, but I can also sense her fighting against it. There's something elegant and almost prickly about her. Like an adorable but damaged cactus.

I take my drink and thread through the crowd, making my way to her, because I'm not about to let her slip through my fingers without at least trying. She sips her drink through a straw, her gaze meeting mine as I close the distance between us.

"Mind if I join you?" I ask, gesturing to the seat beside her.

She shrugs lightly, the corners of her mouth twitching. "It's a free bar."

Her friend glances at her, then at me, then speaks. "Lara, I'm going to go get another drink. Want one?"

Now I know her name, and I can't help but feel that her friend is in my corner.

Lara nods as I take the seat next to her, assuming her words were an invitation – or at least permission.

I settle in, elbows propped on the table. I'm close enough to catch her scent—vanilla and sea breeze.

"Are you enjoying the view?" I nod toward the sun sinking low on the horizon.

"It's beautiful," she says, without looking away from me. "Like a painting, but no one else seems to notice. I guess it's just common for them."

"First time?" I ask.

A slight smile crosses her beautifully-curved lips. "Is it that obvious?"

“Only to a fellow traveler.” I raise my glass slightly, a silent toast to shared secrets.

“Ah.” She stirs her straw through her nearly-empty drink. “What brings you to the land of sun and surf, then?”

“Escape,” I say. It’s a half-truth that hides more than it reveals.

“Escape from...?” Her eyebrow arches a cautious and somehow inviting gesture.

“Life.” I can’t help but smirk with the word. “You?”

“Same. Escape from life.” There’s a note to her voice that I want to examine, but the guarded look in her eyes tells me that’s not going to happen. She’s intriguing, the way she clutches her glass, the slight tilt of her head, the way she uncrosses and recrosses those incredible legs.

“Found any adventures yet?” I ask, feeling playful. I like talking to her.

“Maybe.” That guarded smile is back on her lips, and I want to learn all her secrets.

“I think your friend got hung up,” I say, nodding at the woman who’s now talking with two men near the bar. She looks cornered but happy to be there, and I doubt she even made it over to order drinks. “I can get you a drink if you like.”

She’s watching her friend, humor shining in her eyes as if she’s not one bit surprised.

“She marches to the beat of her own drum,” she says. “I’d love another drink.”

“What would you like?” I ask, finishing my whiskey.

She lifts a shoulder. “Surprise me.”

That sounds good to me. I make my way to the bar, thinking about her every step of the way. I know this is my vacation and I shouldn't be looking for trouble, but she's the kind of trouble I need. Something to get my mind off the events of this last week.

I head back with our two drinks, and we both glance at her friend as I sit. She's still talking to the same guys, her laughter as she throws her head back making them glance at one another.

"She's still having fun," I say, taking a slow sip of my drink, the warmth of the liquor spreading through my body. We talk about nothing and everything—the weather, the music, the taste of freedom that comes with a vacation.

"Vacation's a good time to have fun," I say, my words hanging between us, an unspoken invitation.

"Is that so?" Lara's glance flickers to mine, curious, her lips forming a perfect circle around her straw in a way that has my body responding.

"Absolutely. There's no one here that'll remember or judge, and we'll never see these people again." I leave the possibility open, letting it linger in the humid air between us.

Her laughter is soft, almost private, as if she's sharing a joke with herself only. It's a sound that stirs something within me, a heat I have no business feeling.

"Well, I like having fun," she says, turning her glass in her hand.

"Doesn't everyone?" My gaze holds hers, steady and unwavering as our deeply personal conversation's double meaning leaves me wanting more of her.

"Sure." Her dismissive response tells me she's not making any promises, but I want

her to know I'm serious.

We continue our small talk, offering details about ourselves that skirt who we are. Nothing serious. Nothing too personal. But even with our surface-deep talk, I'm enjoying her responses and thoughts.

Her friend comes back by, the two guys flanking her, and she says she's going to go for a while. Lara nods, reminding her friend to be safe and gets up to give her a hug. When she's gone, I see Lara staring off after her, a look on her face that has me wondering if her friend is the risk-taker and Lara is the responsible and safe one.

My fingers, cool from holding my drink, find the edge of the spare room key in my pocket. Pulling it out, I slide it across the space between Lara and me.

Her brows furrow as she looks at the key.

"I'm in room 102," I say, my voice low and full of promises of how much she'll enjoy herself if she agrees to join me.

Her hand pauses, hovering just a breath away from the key, her eyes locking on mine. There's a question in them, maybe even a challenge. She's guarded, but the way she tilts her head seems almost like she's challenging herself. Slowly, deliberately, her fingers slide the key toward her body.

"Room 102," she says almost thoughtfully as the key disappears into the clutch she's holding.

I nod, trying to read her, but she's a mystery wrapped in polka-dots with a beautiful smile.

I'd considered a villa instead, but the beautiful hotel room had running water, which

won my vote. The villas are beautiful, but I'm not interested in roughing it.

I walk out onto the balcony, staring out over the expanse of the ocean as the world below me ebbs and flows. People laugh, talk, dance. Entertainers dance with fire, and the beat of drums awakes some primal beast within me.

When I turn around, she's there, in my room, a dream made real by my tired mind.

"Hello," she says in a soft voice that tells me this is no dream.

"Hello," I respond, my heart thumping as every inch of my body comes alive. She'd accepted my invitation. She's here, in my room.

I walk toward her, no other words passing between us; none are needed.

Lara's arms wind around my neck as our lips crush together. It's fierce, a raging inferno of pent-up desire that rips through the careful distance we'd managed to maintain. Our kiss deepens, hungry, raw. Her tongue meets mine as I plunder her mouth, wanting to taste her sweetness as her body presses to mine like she was built for me.

My hands wrap around her, pulling her close as I press both palms to the sexy curve of her backside.

Her hands find the hem of my shirt, pulling it up before her hands glide from the crook of my elbows to my wrists. Her hands guide me to her sundress, and I unbutton her like she's the best gift on Christmas Day. The look in her eyes is impatient, needy, and there's an edge of fear there, too, as if this isn't like her.

As we shed clothing, dropping them to the floor, we stand skin to skin. Our bodies are ready, I can smell her dampness, she can feel my hardness between us. Her soft

skin nestles my aching cock perfectly, and I want to take her now.

Wordlessly, I pick her up and push her to the wall, sliding inside her like we've done this a million times. She gasps, her fingertips digging into my shoulders.

"Did I hurt you?" I ask, hoping I can control myself and stop if she says yes.

She shakes her head. "Don't stop." Her whimper is an order I wouldn't dream of not following. She's slick and hot, welcoming the length of me into her body as I grab her ass and lift, then lower her. Her head presses back to the wall, her perfect breasts bouncing against my chest as her body takes me again, again, again.

My lips meet her neck, the soft spot below her ear, then trail down. Taking a pebbled nipple between my lips, I suckle deeply and she cries out, her back arching into me.

The scent of her perfume mixes with the aroma of our bodies and sex, creating a heady and intoxicating scent that fills the room and my lungs. Her hands take my face and I release her nipple, my breath fanning the damp, red point.

She kisses me, her lips hungry, desperate, mirroring the need I feel clawing at my insides as our tongues dance and taste and battle for control. When she pulls away, our breath mingles, the flavor of sweet and sour alcohol and her own delicate taste invading my senses.

I carry her to the bed, lowering her down as I use the floor to add more power to my movements, and her legs wind around my hips. My pace seems to be perfect for her as her fingers grip my shoulders. Her nails dig into my back, scratching gently and sending fire along my body.

I feel her hips tilt into me, begging me to keep going, to give her more, to take her over the edge of pleasure, and I want to do just that.

The way her legs wrap around my waist, I can feel the clench of her thighs and know she wouldn't let me go for anything right now. I pull all the way out, feeling her try to hold me in place with her legs and her warm softness, but I'm not going to stop just yet. I reach between us, pressing a thumb to the delicate bundle of nerves between her thighs.

She gasps, her gaze meeting mine as I work circles around the spot, feeling her body tighten up. With one hand, I guide myself back in her, the other hand pressed on the flesh between her hips, my thumb never leaving her button.

With a moan, a whimper, I watch her squeeze her eyes closed, her head pressing back into the bed. Working circles around that sensitive spot, I feel her tighten around me, her body on the brink of pleasure as I continue pushing in and pulling back, giving her a long, sliding sensation with every thrust and retreat.

She sucks in a deep breath, her eyes flying open to meet mine as her lips quiver. "Lark, I..."

"Shhh," I whisper, reaching up to brush a lock of sandy-colored hair – with just a hint of red when the sun hits it – away from her face. My thumb traces her lower lip, and her eyes roll back as she grips me tight, then begins to spasm deep inside.

I lose myself in her, in the way she tastes and feels, in the way she moans. It's like we were made for each other, our bodies fitting together perfectly, completing each other in ways I never thought possible.

The room is filled with the sound of our ragged breaths and the slapping of sex.

"Finally," she whispers, hands roaming over my back, as my body swells and my orgasm threatens.

“Were you in a hurry?” I tease, feeling the rising tide of pleasure.

She shakes her head, and I suddenly realize she’s obviously used to much quicker encounters, even though this one didn’t last all that long.

“More,” she breathes the word, and it's all I need to hear as my body explodes. I spill deep within her, feeling her body still fluttering around me as I give her everything I am.

Dropping beside her on the bed, I breathe ragged breaths, my heart beating so hard I worry I might pass out. As we come down from our high, I gather her in my arms and hold her close, feeling her slowing heart beat against my skin and her breaths cooling my skin.

“You are amazing,” I whisper into her hair.

“You don’t have to sweet talk me, I already gave it up,” she says, a teasing note in her voice.

“Since you know I don’t have to sweet talk you, then you also have to know I have no reason to lie. You’re incredible.”

She lets out a soft sigh of pleasure.

We lay there for what feels like an eternity, our bodies relaxing, our fingers lacing together, our skin drying in a way we both know means we’ll have to peel ourselves apart... but I don’t give a damn. She feels so good right here, curled into my side, her head resting on my shoulder, her fingers tangling with mine.

Eventually I'll have to face the outside world again, but right now, she’s the escape I need and the one that’ll help get me through whatever comes next.

In the quiet aftermath, the reality of what we've shared and done sinks in. But somehow, she doesn't feel like just another fling, another notch on the bedpost. This is different; she's different. I can't quite put my finger on the difference, but I feel it and know it's there.

Rolling onto my side, I prop myself up on one elbow, watching her. She opens her eyes, and there's a vulnerability there that punches me in the gut like I'm back in that back alley ring as a teenager, squaring up against guys that outweighed me by a hundred pounds or more.

I want to ask her to stay, but I don't want to scare her off. One of the things I'd said to her was that we'd never see each other again, probably, once we went home. If she stays one or the other or both of us might get attached. And we can't have both things be true.

"So serious," she says, trailing a soft fingertip down the crease between my eyebrows. I lift my head and kiss her fingertip, bringing a smile to her lips.

I want her to stay. Obviously, I'm just hard up and need to blow off some steam – and her body's a great way to do it – but this is strange for me. I don't like strange. I don't like unpredictable. I left that world behind a long time ago. But not long enough.

Still, while I know better than to ask her to stay, I know a way around that self-imposed rule. "I want you to keep my room key," I say, capturing her hand and bringing her fingers back to my lips. Kissing them, I turn her hand and press my lips to the delicate skin of her wrist.

She seems to understand and nods, a slight hint of a smile on her lips. "Okay." Her voice still sounds breathless and has my body waking up all over again.

Maybe I'm being stupid and making bad decisions, but isn't this what my vacation is

about? Forgetting everything else and just letting go for a while?

She stands up and I watch her go, tracing the curve of her legs with my eyes. The cute crease where her bottom meets her thighs brings a smile to my lips and I watch her move with an effortless grace that makes me want to touch her again.

My body is at attention, ready to go as she pulls on her sundress. With every button, she hides more of herself from view, and I want to ask her to stay more than ever. But I know better. That's a mistake I can't afford to make. I'll enjoy my time with her, but that's it. Once this vacation is over, we'll never see each other again, and that's what I want. There's just some part of me that wants to make sure I don't break her heart.

Why do I care? I've had plenty of one-night stands. Plenty of women whose feelings I didn't take into account at all. So why am I worried about Lara?

Her gaze meets mine, a beautiful smile curving her lips. "Thank you," she says, her voice almost shy. "I had a really good time."

I nod. "Me, too," I say.

She slips on her shoes and opens the door. When it clicks closed behind her, I sit up, ruffling my hair with one hand. I need a shower. Need to clear my mind. Maybe a cold shower and a walk on the beach. Or maybe a cold shower and sleep. I don't know what I need, but I need something to get the thought of her under me, the way her lips looked when she came, the sparkle in her eyes as we laid there together out of my mind.

With quick steps, I move to the bathroom, glad, once again, that I hadn't gone with the villa. A cold shower is the only thing that'll help me get my head on straight right now.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

Shana's on the bed, legs crossed, sunlight splashing over her from the window, fingers tucking her short brown hair behind her ear. Her blue eyes are locked on mine and are narrowed with suspicion.

"Where were you last night?" she asks.

"Out," I say, toeing off my sandals and avoiding her gaze. I mean, it's not like she didn't run off with her two hot dudes to do goodness-knows-what. She's adventurous in a way I don't think I could ever have the guts to be.

"Uh-huh." I can tell she's not buying it. "What's his name?"

I lift my shoulders.

"It was the guy from the bar, wasn't it?" She sounds excited, but my cheeks are red, and I feel like I'm burning up.

She pats the space beside her on the bed. "Spill."

I hesitate, then sit, the mattress dipping under me. The room feels smaller now, as if a net is closing around me, squeezing the air from my lungs and leaving me trapped. I pick at the duvet, tracing the floral pattern with a fingertip.

"Shana, I just needed some air, okay?" The lie is about as convincing as a toddler swearing they didn't steal cookies from chocolate-lined lips.

“Air, huh?” She doesn’t look convinced. “Just air?”

I nod, too quickly, but I can’t tell her. Not everything. Not yet. This isn’t like me and I’m still riding the high of the whole situation. I’ve never been the kind of woman to go home with a guy I just met – I’ve seen way too many Datelines for that kind of behavior.

I fidget with the hem of my shirt, the light fabric twisting between my anxious fingers. I know Shana is still watching me, waiting for me to level with her and tell her where I was last night. How did she even notice I was gone? Wasn’t she out with those two guys from the bar?

“Look at you,” she says, a chuckle chasing her words and a sparkle in her eyes telling me that she’s happy for me. “Glowing like the sunrise itself.”

“Am I?” My laugh is a nervous flutter that doesn’t sound like me.

“Totally.” Shana leans toward me, her elbows on her knees. “You’ve got that just tumbled out of bed with a Greek god look. Not your usual up before dawn vibe.”

She’s just not going to quit. But I can’t really blame her. I’d be questioning her, too, if she was suddenly acting like a whole new person. “Stop it, Shana,” I say, but I’m smiling, embarrassment that I’m caught warring with amusement within me.

“Hey,” she says, her voice suddenly more serious. “I’m glad you’re having fun, really.”

I nod, thankful, even though I know the other shoe is about to drop.

“It’s just...this isn’t you. Going to a stranger’s room? Having a one-night stand?” Her eyebrows knit together, the lines of worry visible even as she tries to keep things

light. “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Nothing happened,” I say, but the lie is so weak there’s no way she’ll believe it.

“Uh-huh.” The lie crumbles under her knowing stare, and I try not to get defensive. She reaches out, patting my leg with a soft hand. “Just be careful, okay? These vacation flings, especially with bad boys, they can burn hot and fast and leave you with nothing but ashes.”

What makes her think Lark is a bad boy? “He seems nice,” I say, but she clears her throat, and I make the mistake of looking her in the eyes.

“Trust me, he’s a bad boy. I know them when I see them.” She’s so serious I know I should trust what she’s saying. “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I know, I know.” My voice breaks and I pull away from her touch. “I can handle myself, and I’m not going to get hurt because I have some time with a guy on my vacation.” I’m not some delicate flower. I love my friend, but I don’t need her to mother me right now, even though I know it all comes from a good place. “I can handle myself.”

“I’m not saying you can’t,” she says, but I can see the shadow of doubt in her eyes. “Just remember, those guys, they have a way of disappearing when you want – or need – them most.”

“Shana, I—”

“Promise me,” she cuts me off, her expression fierce and as protective as a lioness. “Promise me you won’t forget who you are for some guy with a cute smirk and a few smooth lines.”

“Promise.” The word is a rock in my throat, hard and solid. I mean it. And I’m never going to get into a situation where I need this guy. It’s just wanting. Just a need for some time to connect with someone I’ll never see again after this vacation is over.

“Good.” She smiles, her eyes warm and loving. “Because you’re worth so much more than a holiday romance.”

And this is why she’s my best friend – she’ll tell me things like they are and won’t hold back. While I might get annoyed at her sometimes, I’m grateful for reminders like this that will help me guard my heart against this bad boy during our fling.

My heart dances with excitement as I make the decision to go back to his room tonight. After all, I kept his room key.

My fingers turn over the plastic card that’ll grant me access to his room over and over in my pocket. The plastic feels heavy, somehow, like it’s weighted with every warning Shana gave me. I slide it out as I approach his door, the numbers matching the ones etched in my mind.

And I hesitate. Am I making the right choice? My body craves the pleasure he so effortlessly brought me to, but Shana’s right... this isn’t like me. But why shouldn’t I? I’m allowed to have fun, and this guy hasn’t done anything to make me feel unsafe or worried he might pull something. So what’s my hesitation?

But try as I might, I can’t think of a single reason not to do this. It’s harmless fun with someone who brings every inch of my body to life.

I touch the plastic to the lock and the light turns green. Turning the handle, I open it slowly, quietly. The soft click seems to echo down the hallway as the door closes behind me. My heart is a wild drumbeat in my chest and my lungs freeze and refuse to let any air in or out.

“You’re back,” he says without turning around. His voice is deep, gravelly, and so damn exciting.

I step closer, my eyes adjusting to the dimness. He's pouring amber liquid into a glass with practiced ease.

“I hope you don't mind whiskey,” he says over his shoulder, and I wonder if he knew I was coming.

“I don't mind,” I say, my voice steadier than I feel as I try to gather up my courage. This was easier when things between us just spiraled out of control. But this... this feels different. Like we planned it rather than two hungry souls looking for release in the heat of the moment. I’m not disappointed, just curious about the difference.

He finally turns, and the sight of him hits me all over again. That incredible body, the way his shirt hugs his muscles just right, making me hungry for more than I dare admit. His sleeves are rolled up, forearms on display, power and strength evident in the lines of his veins. I want to kiss every inch of this man, to feel his power under my lips, to enjoy him letting me do as I please.

I swallow hard, hoping he can’t read my thoughts on my face. “Nice shirt,” I say. It’s a feeble attempt at casual conversation and I doubt he won’t notice.

“Thanks,” he says, his gaze tracing over me before coming to a stop on mine. His green eyes are just as intense and piercing as they have been every time I’ve seen him. “It matches your eyes.”

A laugh escapes me, nervous, edged with excitement. “You remember my eye color?”

“Pretty hard not to. They're striking.” He offers me a drink and I take it, downing the

stinging liquor in one gulp as if it'll give me the liquid courage I need to relax. He watches me, leaning back against the counter and giving me a view that has my mouth going dry. I can see that he's hard and ready through his pants, and my cheeks sting.

"Are you always this forward?" I ask, taking a step closer to him as desire and excitement mingle in my veins. It feels good to be wanted, desired.

"Only when I see something I want." He reaches out, fingers brushing mine as he takes my glass.

Our eyes lock, and my whole being wants to step into his arms, to kiss him, to unleash all this pent-up desire flowing through me.

"Thank you," I say, feeling the kick of the liquor.

"Anytime." He pushes off from the counter, closing the distance between us in a stride. "So, what brings you to my room tonight?" There's a teasing note in his voice so I know he knows the answer. But I guess if he wants to hear me say it out loud, I better gather my courage and try to force the words out.

I swallow hard, my pulse racing.

"I want you," I whisper. Somehow my softly-spoken words seem to echo like gunshots in the room. His eyes darken with desire, and I feel something shift between us. Something deep and dangerous, something that leaves me trembling and excited.

"You want me, huh?" He runs a hand through his short dark hair, his green eyes never leaving my face as I stand frozen in place. "Let's see where that leads."

With that, he pulls me close at the same moment I wind my arms around his

shoulders. The moment our lips meet, my body melts, begging for him to work his magic like he can hear my needs and wants.

His kiss is fierce, hot enough to melt my body into a puddle of desire. The need I feel spirals out of control as his tongue slides along the seam of my lips. I open for him, allowing him anything in a way that echoes what I really want from the man – for him to do anything he likes to me.

As his hands slide between my leggings and skin, I gasp, loving the sensations.

“I need you,” I gasp between kisses, feeling his hardness against me, pressing into my belly. My hands roam over him, impatient to feel his skin against mine. Our hands fumble with each other’s clothing and when he pulls my shirt off and realizes I’m wearing nothing but perfume under it, he lets out a sharp, hungry growl that sends my heart thundering even harder.

But he backs off a step, his eyes tracing me. “Take what you want,” he murmurs, spreading his hands out from his sides in a gesture that’s less surrender and more of a challenge.

I plant a hand on his bare chest and shove him back. Obviously, he moves with me – there’s no way I could physically move this mountain of a man – until the edge of the bed takes him down. He drops onto the mattress, the wicked gleam in his eyes fueling my boldness. This man, this beautiful, drop-dead sexy bad boy, has no idea what he’s unleashed within me.

I crawl over him, every move deliberate, and savor the heat and desire in his eyes. This is more thrilling than I could ever have imagined, and I realize I like being in control. His chest rises and falls rapidly, his muscles tensing in anticipation. I position myself above him, ready to claim the length of him.

“Like this?” I ask, letting just the tip of him touch me before moving him away. He groans, playfully annoyed with my antics. But he told me to take what I want, and right now... I want to tease him a little.

I continue teasing, refusing to actually take him, and his muscles flex. His abs tighten, as if he can make me take him with just enough of a curve to his body.

I lower over him, my chest pressing to his, my fingers raking his hair, my gaze locking on his. “Or like this?” I whisper, finally letting him slide into me, feeling that perfect fit that draws a groan from both of us.

“Exactly like this,” he says, his fingers digging into my hips, guiding me.

I ride him, each movement more frantic than the last. It's not just about the physical release—it's me taking charge of my own needs and pleasure in a way I've never experienced before. He watches me intently, green eyes darkened with lust, his jaw clenched. The sight of him—so strong, yet so willing to give up control and power – if only for a moment - sends me spiraling toward ecstasy.

“More,” I cry out, not sure what I'm asking for as I chase the feeling of pleasure that's just out of reach.

“Come for me,” he commands, and the edge in his voice is all it takes.

Pleasure rips through me, a moan tearing from my throat. Beneath me, his body responds in kind, his abs clenching, strain etching his features as he follows me over the edge. Then, as the tremors subside, his expression softens, and there's a moment of peace, a sense of surrender that brings me peace.

The sound of our fast breathing and drumming heartbeats are the only sounds in the silence, and I turn into him, loving his scent, his heat, the way our bodies fit together

even now. His fingertips stroke my back, making goose bumps scatter across my flesh. And for a moment, I don't care if he's a bad boy, if he's dangerous, if I'm risking having my heart broken. I'm enjoying the ride. ...Literally.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

I swear I could forget all my problems with enough time spent with her.

Not that that would solve any problems or fix the mess my life has become.

I sit at the bar, wondering if I'll see her again. Last night had been amazing, and I'd asked her to stay. But she refused, saying she needed to get back so Shana wouldn't worry about her. I accepted her reason, but felt like there was more to it – more she wasn't telling me.

As I sip my whiskey, I scan the room, looking for her smile, listening for her laughter, searching for the sense of peace and satisfaction she brings me.

The beauty of paradise means nothing to me now, and the sunshine, volleyball, swimming... it all pales in comparison to spending time with her. I'd rather drink and drown my woes, but I'd hate to miss her thanks to whiskey.

"Another whiskey?" The bartender doesn't wait for an answer. He knows.

"Thanks," I say with a nod, as he refills my glass. The liquid amber catches the sunlight, shining like gold. I take a sip, letting it burn down my throat, trying to scorch away her taste. But it's no use. I can still smell her, taste her, feel her.... See her. I'm in bad shape – I even dreamed about her. It's not like me to get hung up over some woman.

But there she is, behind my eyelids, laughing, wrapped up in sheets that smell like sex

and sin.

It almost feels like the cheery bright world, sounds of laughter and happiness, the way couples seem to be touching and kissing all around me is just the whole world mocking me. I set the glass down a little too hard and whiskey sloshes over the rim. I need to get ahold of myself.

“Are you expecting someone?” The bartender raises his eyebrows as if he has some idea of the turmoil rolling round and around my mind.

“Maybe.” I clear my throat and shift in my seat. “Or maybe not.” I really don’t know. Some part of me hopes she’ll show up and come sit beside me, but some part of me knows that’s not a good idea. She’s wormed her way under my skin and that’s dangerous.

He nods, as if he understands. Maybe he does. I have no doubts that this bar has heard more secrets than most therapists. I take another drink, letting the memories from last night play out in my mind amidst the sounds of scattered laughter and the occasional burst of noise from the street outside. Her. Just her.

I don't say anything else. What is there to say? That I can't shake her from my head? That I'm here, hoping for another round of whatever it is we started?

For now, I wait. The glass sweats in my hand, chilled and slippery. And I watch the door, waiting for striking blue eyes with a stormy grey ring.

My fingers tap an impatient rhythm on the counter as my gaze sweeps over the crowd. People are coming and going, ebbing and flowing like the tide, but she’s still not here. The need to see her again gnaws at me, a relentless itch I can’t quite scratch.

In times like this, I’d usually call my mother and get her thoughts. The woman has

been the one constant in my life, the one person I can always trust, my confidante no matter what my circumstances are. Of course, she doesn't know the whole truth, but what parent knows all their child's secrets?

But I'm not ready to give up yet, and I have a feeling my mom can't bring me comfort right now. I'm not sure what I need – other than Lara, of course – but I sure as hell want to figure it out.

My hand tightens around the glass and I take another sip.

“Where are you, Lara?” I whisper, feeling doubt that she'll show and hope that she will.

I lean back, trying to seem casual. A glance to my phone tells me I have no messages. It's just as well; there's no one I want to talk to right now. This restlessness for Lara consumes every rational thought and leaves me wondering if I'm losing my mind.

Then I see her, stepping into the bar. My heart flip flops as I drink in the sight of her. She's sunlight personified in a yellow sundress that shows off the sexy curve of her thighs. Thighs I want to kiss up and down until she's trembling and begging me to stop.

Our eyes lock. Hers widen, and she blushes a pale pink. But it's the hunger, that familiar desire, that sends a jolt straight through my gut.

“Hey,” I say, my voice rough as she approaches.

“Hey,” she echoes, her voice stirring memories best left unvoiced – and forgotten - in public.

“I didn't think I'd see you again,” I say, hoping I'm not giving away how that thought

affects me.

She lifts her shoulders, a slight curve of her lips telling me she's glad I've been thinking about her... and warning me she might have also been thinking of me.

I gesture for her to sit beside me and hope she takes the invitation.

"Sure." She slides onto the seat beside me, close enough to touch, yet seemingly miles away.

"Last night was..." My words trail off, too tame to describe what she does to me, especially in a crowded place like this.

"It was... amazing." Her words fill void, but even that doesn't seem like enough to describe what has transpired between us two times now.

"That's an understatement." I lean in, close enough to catch her scent—vanilla and something wild. "You drive me wild," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

Her smile doesn't falter, but her eyes darken with that same untamed desire that I've been unable to shake off since she left my bed last night.

"Is that so?" She teases, and I sense she believes me, but thinks it's something I say to every woman who winds up in my bed.

I don't like that at all, but don't know how to broach the topic without making things worse. So I don't.

"Absolutely," I say, my hand reaching out and touching her thigh. The contact sends bolts of electricity through me, and I see her tremble, her wide-eyed gaze meeting mine. In that instant, I know she feels it, too; whatever this pull is between us.

There's just no way I can let her go. I'm going to get her number, follow her social media, whatever she's willing to let me do to be part of her life.

I know I said we'd never see each other again, but the more time I spend with her, the less of a possibility that seems to be.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

I'm still breathless from my swim, and my teal sundress clings to my damp skin over my suit. Shana is by my side, talking and laughing about the hot surfer guys, the way the salt water messes with her hair, and complaining that she's pretty sure she has a sunburn.

"Let's grab a drink!" she says, pulling me into the same bar I tend to cross paths with Lark in. But if I pull away, that'll be suspect, and she'll know that something is going on. I don't have the energy to argue or explain myself, so I just walk in with her.

The laughter, drinking songs, and loud ruckus from a table of young men all meet my ears, and I wish for quiet so I can gather my thoughts. But no such luck, of course.

I don't see him anywhere and breathe a sigh of relief. I hadn't gone back to his place last night. I wanted to, but something in me whispered that Shana was right – I was going to wind up hurt if I kept this up. Because something about the man has burrowed past my defenses and I want to see his smile, feel his hands on me, to grab those powerful forearms and never let go.

Shana orders for us as I sit, staring out the window into the blue waves as a sea breeze cools my skin. I can't help but feel we're playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse – but he's not here this time. I don't know if I feel relief, or disappointment... maybe a mix of both.

I inhale the sea salt air and catch a hint of fruit and coconut along with sharp alcohol and sunscreen.

“Back again?” Another woman I’ve seen her every time I’ve come asks, a knowing look on her face.

“Looks like it,” I say with a smile to take any sting out of my words. I don’t meet her gaze; instead, my attention is drawn to the view beyond the open walls and windows of the bar—the sun dips below the horizon and the sky is lit up fiery orange and vivid pink. The beach is a little less crowded now, and I can hear the waves gently lapping at the shore as if whispering secrets to the sand.

“Here you go,” Shana says, putting something bright and fruity before me.

“Thank you,” I say, finishing half of the drink in one pull. Tonight, I need the liquid courage. Tonight, I’m going to end this madness.

“Rough day?” the woman asks, her eyes sparkling.

“Something like that.”

She turns away as a man takes a spot beside her.

“Making friends?” Shana asks, glancing at the woman then back at me, a slight smile on her lips.

I nod. “You know it,” I say, fiddling with my straw and taking another drink. It’s cold and tastes like a tropical dream. I finish the drink a moment after Shana sits down and she arches an eyebrow at me.

“You might want to slow down,” she says, her gaze shifting from my empty glass to my eyes. I lift both shoulders, not sure I agree with her assessment.

“I’m on vacation,” I say, as if that’ll excuse anything.

She arches an eyebrow at me, but before she can respond, I spot him . Shana seems to see the look on my face and turns to look at him, too. His imposing frame seems to suck all the air out of the room, or maybe my lungs are unable - or unwilling - to function properly.

His gaze meets mine and my heart flops around like a fish searching for water. He makes his way toward us, with his signature confident stride. He gives a roll of his shoulders, as if loosening up to do battle.

Every woman's head turns, following him, and I hear giggles, furious whispers, and sighs. The guys seem annoyed, but that's not surprising. But it's not his easy, casual look or the way his dark hair is neatly slicked back that catches me—it's those eyes. Those impossibly intense green eyes, and they're fixed on me like I'm the only person in the room.

“Hey,” he says, taking the seat beside me and nodding at Shana.

Shana's gaze shifts from him to me as if gauging the situation and how she should behave.

“Hey.” The single word almost chokes me.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” he says, but I'm not falling for that one again.

I gesture toward the setting sun as the last light of day gives way to the velvety blue of twilight.

“Very.” I can't help but be mesmerized by the view, both outside and right here next to me.

Shana seems at a loss, watching our exchange with a mixture of curiosity and

amusement in her eyes.

“Will you join me for a walk later?” He’s eyeing me coolly, as if not sure how I’ll respond. Good, I like to keep him guessing.

“Maybe.” My tone is non-committal.

“It’s hard to resist the ocean.” His smile is easy, but there’s a sharpness to it—a predator’s grin.

“I know,” I say, gesturing at my damp sundress and the suit under it. There’s a strange flutter in my stomach, not unlike the feeling I get when I’m walking home alone in the dark, or when I see the same man on every single aisle in the grocery store who follows me to check out, then out the door. It’s unsettling, sure, but it’s also exciting.

As Shanna asks him a question, something about what he does for work or some other invasive question usually reserved for someone I’m interested in dating, I excuse myself with a gesture toward the lady’s room.

But at the last moment, I drop some cash on the bar for the bartender and exit through the front door, hoping that Shana and Lark are too deep in conversation to notice.

Outside, the salt air fills my lungs, and I can finally think clearly.

“Am I crazy?” I ask myself as I make a beeline for the ocean, my words lost in the roar of the waves. My heart is a wild thing in my chest, beating a rhythm that spells trouble. His green eyes haunt me, fierce and knowing.

Along the beach I see other people wearing neon bracelets and necklaces, or glow-in-the-dark body paint or clothing, and I see bonfires burning, their smoke drifting up

into the starry night.

Earlier, alone in my room, I scrolled through his social media accounts—a deep dive into a world that spelled danger in all caps. The sleek women, the late nights, the business deals with some shady-looking individuals. I hadn't sent him a friend request. I'd decided then: no more.

But now, fleeing feels like leaving a piece of myself behind. It's not just the pull of the beach or the thrill of the night—it's him. Still, I won't let him ruin my plans. I can't. And someone doing underhanded business... that'll be a fast track to dating a felon, and I'm not interested. If he wants to screw up his life, so be it. I won't let him drag me down with him.

“Girl, where did you vanish to?” Shana's voice tells me my alone time is over.

“I needed air,” I say, walking through the sand as the cooler night air pulls the last of the day's heat from me.

“Come on, let's forget about men and have some fun,” she says, her arm looping through mine.

“Right, fun,” I say, but my gaze drifts over my shoulder, back toward the bar, toward him. I shake my head, trying to dislodge the image of those intense eyes. “I need to have fun.”

“Are you sure you're okay?” Shana's brow furrows with concern.

“Absolutely,” I say, plastering on a smile. But inside, I'm a tangled mess of thoughts and what-ifs. Avoiding him is the sane choice, the safe choice, the right choice. Yet, here I am, considering marching right back into his arms for the night.

I think I need therapy, cause clearly there's something wrong with me.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

I'm back at the bar, our bar. It's familiar and comforting in a way that places become when you associate them with someone special. Someone special like Lara. My gut twists at the thought of her.

The open windows let in the salty breeze. It plays with the edges of cocktail napkins, flirts with the fronds of potted palms, making them shiver. The beach is spread before me like a painting—golden sands kissed by a bright sun, the water blue-green and glittering under the sunshine.

I swirl my glass, watching ice cubes chase each other. Whiskey laps at the rim. It's cold, numbing. This vacation was supposed to be a chance for me to get away and enjoy myself. Instead, I'm stuck on thoughts of a pretty smile and striking eyes.

"Nice view," a musical voice says.

I glance up. A woman stands there, not the woman I want to see, just another vacationer. She smiles, all glossy lips and hopeful eyes. She's pretty, sure, but she's not who I'm looking for.

"Yeah," I say, not really feeling the conversation. I want her to go away.

"Can I—" she says, gesturing to the seat beside me, but I cut her off with a raised hand.

"Sorry, I'm actually waiting for someone." My eyes drift past her, scanning the

crowd, searching for Lara. But she's nowhere to be found.

She pauses, her smile faltering, then picks up her pride and walks away. I can't blame her for trying.

My gaze returns to the beach, to the waves playing tag with the sand.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my phone. I tap the device against the palm of my hand, restless, replaying the moment she walked out that front door. Questions circle like vultures in my mind. Why did she leave? Did I say or do something wrong? My chest tightens with frustration and something else—want, maybe. No matter how many times I replay that moment in my mind, I can't pinpoint where things went wrong.

I don't even know her number. I'd been planning to ask, but she'd left in a hurry.

Pushing back from the table, I stare at my phone. My thumb hovers over the screen and I pull up her profiles again. She's on Instagram, flashing that same smile that's been haunting me. My heart pounds as I send a follow request. It's a shot in the dark, but hell, what do I have to lose?

Minutes tick by, each one stretching longer than the last. I don't know if I expected a response right away, but not getting anything from her feels like she's ghosting me online, too. It's an unreasonable thought, but it's there. My gut twists, suddenly sour. Is it possible she sees through my mask? Maybe she got a glimpse of the real me—the guy with more scars than sense.

“Damn,” I whisper, sliding the phone back into my pocket.

A part of me wants to laugh at the irony. Here I am, Lark Carlyle, unable to get a girl to give me the time of day. But the other part of me – the one that doesn't show up in

reflections or in photographs – isn't laughing. That part of me is wondering if, for once, I've found someone I could want for more than just a fling or a thrill.

That's dangerous, reckless thinking, and I need to stop it right now.

I'm looking down into my glass when the legs of the chair beside me scrape the floor as someone slides into the seat next to me. I don't even need to look up from my drink to know it's not her. The scent is all wrong—a mix of heavy perfume and something sweet that's too heavy-handed for the woman I'm pining over.

“Hey there, handsome. Buy a girl a drink?” Her voice is low and throaty with a hopeful note.

I shake my head without glancing her way. “No, thanks. I'm waiting for someone.”

She lets out a soft laugh that probably gets most men in the mood to take her home. “Well, she's not here, and I am... so...”

Annoyance simmers deep within me. What part of no thanks comes across as a challenge?

“I'm just not interested.” My words are sharp, cold and flat. There's no mistaking that I want her to leave me in peace.

There's a pause, a huff of breath, and the seat is vacant again. I don't watch her leave. It doesn't matter. None of them do—not like Lara does.

*

Days pass in a blur of sand, sunsets, and whiskey. I try to lose myself in the usual distractions—surfing, parties, the laughter around bonfires—but it's like going

through the motions of being alive without really living.

The thrill is gone.

Everything feels empty.

At night when I close my eyes, all I see is her smile, hear her laugh, feel the ghost of her touch teasing my skin. It drives me crazy. She's everywhere and nowhere, haunting me. Sometimes I catch a whiff of her scent or swear I hear her voice. And I can't shake the thought of her in my arms, the way nothing else in the world mattered when we were together.

But she's slipped through my fingers like the sands of this beach town. And I'm left with nothing but memories of a one-night stand that's turned into an endless craving I'll never satisfy.

The ringtone cuts through the silence. I glance at the caller ID—Mom—and swipe to answer.

“Hey, Mom.” She’s going to know.

She hesitates, and I hear her pulling in a slow breath. “Is everything okay?”

She knows me far too well. After losing my father at a young age, she and I are close. She’s the only person in this whole world that I trust completely.

“Yeah, everything's fine,” I say, the lie bitter on my tongue.

She’s still not convinced. “Uh-huh. Met someone, didn't you?” There's a knowing tone in her voice, along with a smile.

“Nothing serious. Just a fling.” We’re close, but this is tiptoeing a little too close to uncomfortable territory. I tap my foot against the floor, wishing the conversation would end sooner rather than later.

She snorts. “A fling has you moping on your vacation, huh? That’s interesting.”

“Mom—” Sometimes her ability to figure things out is uncanny.

“Sweetheart, you've got that tone. You know, the one you get when—”

I don’t want her to finish that thought. “Mom, really, it's nothing.”

“Okay, okay,” she says, but I can tell she's not done with this conversation just yet. Next time we talk, I’m sure it’ll come up again. “Just don't close yourself off, Lark. Life's too short for what-ifs.”

I tilt my head back, looking up at the ceiling. I know she’s right, but my hands are tied. “Got it, Mom. Talk later, alright?”

“Take care.”

I hang up, sighing. She's too observant for my own good. And the worst part is, she might be right. But it's just a fling. It has to be. What other choice do I have if Lara is avoiding me?

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

Home sweet home.

I inhale a deep breath of the calming scent of my home. The place isn't as big as we need it to be, but I'll fix that as soon as I get my business off the ground. Which won't be long, now.

"Morning, Damon," I call out. The sun catches the spokes of his wheelchair as he rolls in to meet me. He's quick to throw his arms around me, and I pat his shoulder.

"I missed you," he says. "Did you have fun?"

I nod. There's only three years' difference between us, but he's almost childlike some of the time.

"Tea?" I ask, moving toward the kitchen. He grunts as he follows me with an ease that belies the strength it requires. His hands grip the wheels, fingers calloused, his arms more powerful now than they ever were before.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the room, and I decide I'd rather have the hit of caffeine, even though I might regret it later. Who wants mid-afternoon jitters? Me, I guess.

"Sure." His voice is bright and there's a gleam in his eyes—a spark of that old mischievous brother I know lurks beneath the surface.

I watch him for a moment, the determined set of his jaw as he positions himself by the window. While his attention wanders, I can't help but feel inspired by him. He's resilient, not willing to let the past define his future or stop him from living life to the fullest. He's not just sitting; he's claiming his space in the world, refusing to let the chair restrict his life.

"It's a beautiful day," he says, and I nod, pouring hot water into one mug and coffee into the other.

"It's too beautiful to stay cooped up inside." He knows I like it when he goes out and gets some fresh air and sunshine.

"Got plans?" he asks, thanking me softly as I bring him tea and sit at the table opposite him with my coffee.

"Maybe." It's a half-truth. My heart shivers, betraying the secret I'm not ready to share.

"Spill," he says, without looking at me. It's eerie how he can read my silence.

"Later," I say, deflecting as I burn my mouth on boiling hot coffee. Inhaling a breath through my mouth to cool the burn, I avoid his gaze as if that'll make him believe nothing is going on.

We're more than siblings; we're allies in a world that hasn't always been kind to either of us. This is home, this is my family. And nothing will change that—not even the secret I'm afraid to vocalize for fear that'll make it come true.

We lapse into silence, then I realize things have been quiet for far too long, and I look over at him. Something isn't right. I recognize that look in his eyes, and it's one that chills me to the bone.

“Damon,” I whisper. “Talk to me.”

He turns, lips pressed into a thin line. “Just... old ghosts,” he says.

I know what he’s talking about – the boys who ruined his life.

Anger fills his expression. “They got off scot-free while I’m...” He gestures to his legs, a bitter laugh escaping him.

“Hey.” I walk over to him and crouch by his side, taking his hand in mine. “You’re so much more than what happened to you.”

A muscle twitches in his jaw. “Am I?” There’s defiance there, and pain—poison emotions I can’t swallow for him.

“Always,” I say. “You’re the bravest person I know. Probably the strongest, too.”

“Bravery didn’t keep me on my feet, did it?” His words are sharp, but they don’t cut me. They’re not intended to hurt me. They’re his outlet, a way to come to terms with what happened to him and vent the unfairness of it all.

“No.” I know better than to remind him that bravery wouldn’t have saved him anyway. “But it keeps you rolling forward. That counts for a hell of a lot.”

“It doesn’t feel like it some days.” He looks away, the pain in his eyes still so fresh and raw.

“Listen to me, Damon.” My tone is steel, unbreakable and strong. “I’m here for you. No matter what. You’re not alone.”

“Even if that means sacrificing your plans for the future and the life you want to

live?" He shakes his head, as if doubting he's worth that.

"Whatever it takes." My response is immediate. Fear clamps down on my heart, but I push it aside. For him.

"It isn't fair to you," he says, but I shake my head.

"Life isn't fair for anyone. But you're my favorite person in this whole world, and I love you." I squeeze his hand, willing him to believe it.

He nods, but I sense he's not convinced. I don't know what else to say, so I decide to push forward instead of looking back. "Now, how about we tackle the day? Together." Except one thing I have to do alone.

"That sounds like a plan," he says, and there's a spark of something that wasn't there before; hope or trust. Either way, I'll take it.

*

I'm in the bathroom, trying to keep from throwing up. My hands tremble as I tear open the package, the crinkle of paper loud in the silence.

"Come on," I whisper to myself, willing my heart to settle down. "It's just a test."

A test that could redefine everything and alter the course of my life forever.

I follow the instructions, feeling numb and refusing to let myself to think beyond each step. The seconds drag into minutes. My heart clenches, my hands shake, and I can't control the urge to bounce a leg as I sit and wait.

And then, there they are—two little blue lines in the white test window.

“Damn it.” The words are a whisper, and tears blur my vision, but I blink them back. This changes nothing. Alex needs me, and I've got plans, big plans that don't include diapers, midnight feedings, and sleep deprivation.

Twin tears slip down my cheeks. We don't need this. Damon needs my attention, even though he's very capable on his own. But neither of us can handle a baby in the mix.

But the truth is, it's not just about Alex. It's about Lark—the only man I've slept with in the last six months, and therefore the only man who could be the father of the baby growing within me.

I squeeze my eyes closed and see his face; the bad boy with a smirk that could melt steel and a reputation that could freeze hell over. Lark, the man who knew my body better than I knew myself and made me feel incredible in ways no one else before him could.

But I can't tell him. The man is dangerous. Chaos, personified. Fun for a fling, but not someone I can let into my life for good. Just tying myself to him as the father of my child is too much. He has the power to ruin my plans, my future, my life. I can't let that happen. For Damon. For me.

My hand touches my belly low between my hips, as if I'll be able to feel something there. But the area is flat. Still, I know there's something there, a baby.

What do I do now?

“Trouble follows you, Lark,” I whisper, into the empty room, my mind struggling to solve this riddle I'm facing. “I won't let it follow my child.”

And just like that, everything falls into place. I'll figure things out, just like I always

have. I wipe the last tear away, toss the evidence of my new reality into the trash, and square my shoulders. Life might have just thrown a curveball, but I've got my eye on the ball, and I'm not striking out.

“Whatever it takes,” I whisper, the memory of my earlier promise to my brother mixing with a new vow made in my heart.

“Whatever it takes.”

I pull out my phone and call Shana. I want to ask her to come over so I can share the news.

“Shana,” I blurt out before she can even say hello, “I'm pregnant.”

A heartbeat passes, then another, then she speaks so softly I wonder if I've made up her response. “Oh, Lara, that's—wow.”

“Yeah, wow doesn't quite cover it.” I still haven't come to terms with the turn my life has taken.

“Have you... Who...” She doesn't finish the questions, but I know what she's asking.

“Only Lark,” I say, his name slipping over my lips like a secret I shouldn't tell. “He can't know, Shana. He just can't.”

“Understood,” she says in her ride-or-die tone, and I breathe a sigh of relief that she's firmly in my corner. What would I do without her? “What do you need?”

“Everything. Nothing. I don't know.” My laugh is a puff of breath, disbelief still clinging to my thoughts and mind. This can't be real. This isn't reality. It's a dream I'll wake from. And then I'll shake my head and go about my life as usual.

“Girl, I got you,” Shana says, a laugh in her voice. “Need me to be your baby's daddy?”

The laugh that bursts from me is real this time, and loud. “You'd look terrible with a beard.”

“Oh, please. I'd rock a beard,” she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

“Thanks, Shana,” I say, the weight on my shoulders easing an ounce. “For making me laugh when I feel like crying.”

“Anytime, Lara. Anytime.” Her promise wraps around me like a hug I so desperately need right now, and I'm grateful for her. I hang up, and my laughter fades, replaced by a quiet strength. I can do this.

“Whatever it takes,” I whisper to myself.

And I believe it.

I've got this.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

Five years later...

Maybe I should be nervous, but as I adjust the cuff of my dark suit, I'm feeling nothing but confident.

I push the frosted glass door open and a waft of polished marble and wealth greets me. The air is cool against my skin, refreshing after being in the summer heat of the city. I step onto the gleaming marble floor, the click of my shoes echoing in the vast open space.

"Mr. Carlyle ?" A receptionist looks up, her voice dainty.

"Yes. I'm here for the two PM appointment." Of course, she knows that – there's no way I'd get into this building otherwise.

"Right this way." She gestures toward the corridor lined with towering potted ferns that sway ever so slightly from the air conditioning vent above. The other wall is glass, overlooking the city below.

The office is a maze of modern artistry, walls adorned with abstract paintings swirling like smoke, but touching some primal part of me deep within. I pass sculptures that twist into impossible shapes, metal glinting under the subtle overhead lighting. It's like walking through an upscale gallery where every piece feels like it costs more than an average person's yearly income.

I'm stopped by another receptionist, who points to a sleek black sofa beside a low-set coffee table stacked with tech magazines. "Please, have a seat."

I nod my thanks and sit, taking in the atmosphere of my surroundings. The room smells faintly of some relaxing combination of juniper and a hint of something floral, probably from a hidden scent diffuser meant to relax people. It's working.

"Miss Mills will see you shortly."

"Thank you," I say, but she's already gliding back to the other side of her desk.

I'm alone again, surrounded by wealth and ambition. The silence gives me too much time to think, to anticipate what comes next. So instead, I focus on the details around me—the way each plant is meticulously pruned, the absence of dust on any surface, the soft hum of the air conditioning blending seamlessly with the stillness.

This is where I belong. And I'm going to make sure they know that fact by the end of this interview. There's no reason they wouldn't hire me. In fact, it would be stupid of them not to hire me.

"Mr. Lark?"

I stand, turning to face the voice, ready to earn my place and make my mark.

Confidence surges through me as I follow the receptionist. Her heels click on the marble floor and the scent of her perfume seems upscale, just like her silk shirt and dark, pencil skirt. The office oozes wealth and success, and I can already imagine my name etched into the legacy of this company. I know tech; and innovation has been the cornerstone of my climb from the bottom. This job is mine.

I'm led into an empty room, and the receptionist nods her head at me before leaving

the room.

I wander, looking at huge paintings on canvas, taking in the blue, gold, white swirls that remind me of the ocean. It reminds me of five years ago, on a specific beach with an incredible woman. But those memories have no place here. Still, no matter how hard I've tried to banish them over the years, I've failed every single time.

"Mr. Carlyle ?" I recognize that voice the moment I hear it, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I pivot on my heel. Time seems to grind to a halt. It's her. Lara. The woman who's haunted my thoughts and dreams for the past five years, no matter how hard I've tried to forget her.

"Miss Mills." My voice is steady, but my heart? It's beating like mad. I feel woozy, as if I might fall down, like the time I'd been stabbed in a deal gone wrong and lost a lot of blood. It's that same disorientating sensation that I'm fighting against now. Only this time, I'm not at a real risk of dying. I think.

She hasn't aged a day. If anything, she looks more radiant, more... formidable. That same energy crackles between us as if the passing of time has done nothing to dim the desire between us. Her sandy hair is pulled into a sleek bun, and her professional dress has me drooling as much as those cute sundresses had. And her legs... this woman and her thighs could destroy me in the best way possible.

"Mr. Carlyle, you're staring." The amusement in her voice matches the sparkle in her eyes, and I lift both shoulders.

"I feel like I've seen a ghost," I say, and the words aren't a lie. She's a ghost of my past I thought I'd never see again, outside my dreams and memories.

Her gaze sweeps my face, then my body, and come back to my eyes with an almost intimidating coolness. “Do I need to cross you off the list?” she asks, arching a single eyebrow in a silent challenge that demands I forget the past – or at least, never bring it up again – and I swallow hard.

I need this job. I want this job. This is my dream position in an up-and-coming company that’ll be a springboard to opening up my own tech company – in a non-competing area, of course.

So, I shove down the memories of our wild nights together and what I know she looks like under that dress, and nod. “No need to cross me off the list.”

She nods, a victorious gleam in those striking eyes. “Then please, come,” she says, her tone all business. But the words... they leave my body confused and hard, ready for her. I remember asking her to do the same, without the please .

“Of course.” I follow her. What are the odds that she’d be the one hiring? What are the odds I’d wind up at her company after all these years of being apart? And why do I still feel the exact same tug toward her that I did then?

We enter her office, and I have no answers for any of the questions that fill my thoughts. Plants line one wall; the other are floor to ceiling windows that show the city from high above the streets. The marble underfoot gleams, and the wainscoting adds texture and an unexpected rich depth to the space.

But as beautiful as her office is, she has all of my attention. I can’t look away; she’s mesmerizing. There's strength in the way she moves, confidence in how she takes her seat behind the desk before squaring up and looking at me.

“Your resume is impressive,” Lara says, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Thank you.” I match her gaze, unwilling to back down. “I’m ready for this.”

“Good.” She nods, a single, decisive motion. “Let’s get started.”

As we dive into discussions about the position, my initial shock slowly settles into an even deeper need to land this job. Lara Mills is an unfinished chapter in my past, one I want to explore more, but this job is my future. And I’ll claim it, no matter what memories stand in my way.

The silence stretches between us. Lara’s eyes lock onto mine, recognition shining there as if she wants to address the past, but she’s all ice and control.

Lara shifts papers on her desk. She clears her throat.

I sit across from her, the leather chair cool against my skin. My heart races but my voice is calm. I can’t help but wonder if she’s weighing the past as part of her decision, and that thought constricts my breathing like a boa constrictor. “I believe I’d be a great fit for your team.”

She gives a very slight nod. “Indeed.” A pause. “But let’s get one thing straight, Mr. Carlyle .” Her gaze doesn’t waver. “This is strictly professional. Nothing personal. Nothing romantic. The past stays there, understood?”

“Understood.” The word is like ash in my mouth. I expected as much, yet it still stings to be rejected, especially when I still have unfinished business with her. This isn’t how I’d hoped this would go when I learned she’s the one hiring me, but I can’t say I’m surprised. For all I know, she’s married with kids now.

But as my gaze darts to her hand, I see no ring. Not even a tan line where one would be if she’d taken it off. It’s an important detail to the plans slowly coalescing in the back of my mind.

“Good.” She exhales, then something shifts in her expression. I can only hope for the best, because we both know I’m well-qualified and if she refuses me, it’s based on the past that she just said needs to stay behind us. “You’re hired.”

And just like that, my future snaps into sharp focus. Despite the romantic rejection that burns low in my gut, I sense a whole new future opening its arms to me. What now?

Stepping out onto the bustling street with skyscrapers towering above, I dial my mom’s number. It rings twice before she picks up.

“It’s me.” She’d asked me to call her when the interview was over and let her know how things went. And I’m honoring that request.

“Tell me everything!” Her voice is filled with hope and worry.

“I got the job,” I say, adrenaline still pumping through my veins.

“Of course, you did. Congratulations!” Her soft support and lack of surprise are just the boost I need to remind me that my trajectory these last five years has been steadily onward and up.

“Yeah, but there’s a... complication.” My pace slows as I thread through the crowd walking along the sidewalk. “Lara’s the boss. Lara Mills.”

“The vacation fling Lara?” Her sharp intake of breath is audible through the phone and I nod, even though she can’t see me.

“One and the same.” I stop at a crosswalk, watching the traffic lights change.

“Goodness...” Mom goes silent for a heartbeat. “Do you think... maybe the universe

has plans for you two?" She sounds hopeful, but I shake my head as I walk.

A cab honks nearby, breaking to avoid rear ending an unsure driver. "I'm not really into cosmic signs, Mom."

Besides, Lara said no romance. The memory of those words still stings like alcohol in a fresh wound, even though I know they were necessary for us to have a good, solid, working relationship. I'm not about to tell my mom that, though. I don't need to. She knows that being professional is important to me. I have a slightly smudged past to make up for, after all. Even though she has no idea how dark that smudge is, thankfully.

"Still," she says, a hint of wonder coloring her tone. "Life is strange."

"Life is unpredictable," I say, crossing the street. "But that doesn't make coincidences some plan the universe has laid out for us. And besides, I've got plans, and none of them involve rekindling old flames." The words sound like a lie in my ears, but that's not a productive thought, so I ignore it.

"Alright, honey. Just be careful, okay?" The concern in her voice has me smiling. I know she's afraid I'll get hurt, have my heart broken, and it's a valid concern. One I share, if I'm being honest. Lara messed me up for a long time, but that was in the past. Hopefully, it stays there.

"I always am." With that, we say our goodbyes and hang up. I pocket my phone as the office building looms ahead once more.

My future awaits, and this time, I'm playing by my rules.

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Lara

How is it that after all this time, his stare – that’s somehow even more intense – has so much effect on me?

I thought I could be impartial, forget the past, but my body didn’t forget Lark.

Sunlight filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting a golden glow over the marble floors of my office. He’d been sitting right there, across from me, so recently I can still smell the thick, piney scent of his cologne if I move just right.

I stand in the center of the room, surrounded by the proof of my incredible success, the millions in my bank, but things feel different.

“Whatever it takes,” I say to myself.

And I’d meant those words, spoken so many years ago in my bathroom right after learning I was pregnant with Lark’s child. Of course, that’s a secret I plan on keeping, now and forever. The people in my life know to guard that secret to protect my son.

But the Lark that showed up today... he wasn’t the same man. And as I take out my phone and check his social media, I see that he’s really cleaned up his image. Still, that doesn’t mean he’s less dangerous, it just means he’s learned to hide his dealings better.

As long as none of his trouble creates issues here at the company, I don’t give a damn what he does in his down time. That’s none of my business.

A sharp, insistent knock on the door has me glancing up from the computer screen on my desk. “Come in,” I call out, wondering who is at my office door and how I can help.

Shana pokes her head through the gap, her sleek brown ponytail swinging side to side. “So? How did it go with Lark?” The curiosity in her voice is mirrored by her big blue eyes. She walks in and sits down across from me, her pretty blouse shining under the lights of my office. Her pencil skirt is no-nonsense, and I think about how far we’ve come in five years, starting up this tech company together when so many people told us women don’t belong in this industry.

I lean back in my chair, fingers interlocking in my lap. “I hired him.”

Her eyebrows shoot up in both surprise and skepticism. “Really?”

“Really,” I say. I guess she didn’t expect me to actually hire him, no matter how good he looked on paper. Of course, he looks amazing in real life, too—I shut those thoughts down and continue talking. “He’s qualified, intelligent, and an asset to the team.” But even as I list his professional attributes, doubt fills me. Not doubt at his abilities, but my ability to work with him and keep things strictly professional. The man makes me want him to do dirty things to me right here on my desk.

“And you think you can keep things... professional?” Shana leans forward, arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

I nod, once, firmly. “Absolutely. I made that very clear to him.”

“Right.” She doesn’t look convinced. Her lips purse slightly, eyes narrowing as if she’s reading between the lines of a script I didn’t know we were following. And I wonder if she remembers how much he affected me back then. How strong the pull between us was. Heck, I think I’d forgotten until I saw him again, but I need to keep

that part of myself under control, because that's the only option.

A memory fills my mind—the heat of a tropical sun, conversations and laughter, the magnetic pull of Lark's gaze. The way his hands knew every inch of me, the raw power in those muscly forearms... I push the thoughts away. That was then. This is now. That part of my life – our lives – is over.

“Shana, it's just business. Nothing more.” I adjust my laptop before me, pretending to read something important on the glowing screen.

“Of course.” But there's a hint of worry in her tone, and I know I haven't convinced her one bit.

“Remember how much he used to drink?” I blurt out, then immediately regret it. Why am I bringing this up? Then it occurs to me – if I point out his faults and flaws, she'll have to recognize I'm not interested in him.

“He was on vacation. Everyone drinks on vacation,” Shana says, her gaze unfocusing as if remembering how much we drank then, too. Which was a heck of a lot more than we typically do. Her attention returns to me. “But his drinking is none of our business, right? As long as it doesn't affect his work.”

“Right.” It's none of my business. Except for the tiny, irrational part of me that worries. Lark had really gotten to me all those years ago. What's to stop that from happening again? Can I really stand firm and not let him in? I have to. There's no other option.

“Okay.” Shana pushes off my desk, relaxing back in her chair while studying my face in search of answers I don't have. “Just remember, office romances are always a bad idea. Always.”

I manage a tight smile. “Noted.” The last thing I want is another complication in my life.

I lean back in my chair and let out a slow breath as Shana’s expression softens.

“How's Win doing?” she asks, a smile on her face as she asks about my son.

The mention of his name brings a smile onto my lips, warmth spreading through my chest at the thought of my little boy. “He's good. Growing too fast.” I picture his bright, infectious laughter, his green eyes sparkling with mischief—Lark's eyes. I’d named him Winston, but Win suits him, because he is a win in every sense of the word.

“Sounds like he's keeping you on your toes,” she says with a laugh. “Maybe we should do dinner on Thursday.”

We often had “family dinner nights” where Shana, myself, my brother, and win all sat down as a family. Shana might not be related by blood, but she’s the family we picked, and she’s closer than pretty much anyone else in our lives.

“Always.” My heart swells as I think about him and how much I love everything about him. Even the parts that remind me of Lark. “He's curious about everything. Just yesterday, he asked me why the moon follows us.” I laugh, thinking about the concern in his face as he asked if the moon is a stalker.

I smile as I think about how I’d had to explain that it’s simply an optical illusion. Then we’d dived right into other kinds of optical illusions and spent the night tricking our brains and having fun.

“He’s a smart kid.” The fond sparkle in her eye has me nodding.

“I swear he gets it from his uncle,” I say. “Speaking of Damon... Those two are thick as thieves. Damon taught him how to make paper airplanes last weekend. You should've seen the house.” I laugh. My brother's time spent in a chair have led him to learn everything he can over the years. He's intelligent, and driven to be able to answer all of Win's questions. And I love that about him.

“I bet you made him clean it all up.” Shana grins, probably imagining the chaos.

“Definitely. With a little help from Gigi.” My housecleaner works so darn hard to keep up, and that's why I give her huge bonuses... especially after fiascos like the paper airplane incident. “But it's worth it, seeing them together. Damon's been amazing with him.”

“I'm sure Damon loves the company. Did you ever find a nurse he's willing to work with?”

I shake my head. “He insists he doesn't need anyone, but I'm so afraid something will happen when I'm not home, you know?” I love my brother and don't want anything to happen to him. I'd never forgive myself.

Shana reaches out and pats my arm. “You're doing great by him. All you can do is voice your concerns; you can't make him accept them.”

She's right, but he's such a stubborn ass. “And it's good to hear they're both doing well.”

“Thanks, Shana.” I meet her gaze, grateful for the moment of peace she's given me in a morning filled with stress and worries mostly focused on Lark's return. “It means a lot. How have things been with you?”

She shrugs. “Same old, same old.” I know she doesn't get along with her family

much. Her mom burned bridges and her family assumed the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. It's sad, really. Sometimes they invite her for holidays, but she spends them with us instead, saying we're more like family than those strangers.

"I'd love to do dinner on Thursday," I say, answering her question from before.

She nods. "Anytime," she says, standing up. "You've got a great family, Lara."

"I couldn't agree more; and you're part of it." A soft smile crosses her lips and I smile back. After she leaves, I study the fiddle-leaf fig that stands in the corner. Its broad leaves reach for the ceiling, leaning toward the light streaming in from the windows.

I stand up and make my way to the plant, then trail a finger over the glossy surface of one leaf, appreciating the simple act of caring for something that asks for so little in return. Maybe I'm crazy, but I talk to my plants. I love them, and they thrive here.

"Don't you?" I ask. "Thrive with a bit of light, water, and love." I give the plant an affectionate stroke. "If only it were always that straightforward."

With a sigh, I stand at the windows a moment, looking down over the city before making my way back to my desk. The polished surface is uncluttered, save for a sleek laptop. I'd hidden the single framed photo in a desk drawer when Lark came in. It was a photo taken on a day when the world seemed lighter, easier. The picture of me and Win is a freeze-frame of joy in a sea of calculated perfection.

I crave predictability and order. So why did I invite the chaos that is Lark in? The true disorder is this tangle of restless emotions stirring within me since sitting down with Lark.

I pivot slowly, taking in every detail of the space I've created. This is my space, my home, my safety. This is something I've created through hard work, sacrifice,

sleepless nights and too many tears to count. It's not just an office—it's a part of who I am, a success, calm, controlled, and well-cared-for.

Ready or not, this is where I find out what I'm really made of.

I tap the pen against the contract, each click echoing my racing heartbeat. The ink on the dotted line is an offer for me to seal this choice with a sense of finality. But given that I've read and re-read the contract and my lawyer's notes about it over a dozen times and remember nothing about the deal, I can't sign. Not yet.

"Am I crazy?" I ask myself, my gaze drifting to the photo on my desk. It's turned away from prying eyes. It might be smarter to hide it in a drawer, a protective measure, like all the others I've taken.

The office around me is silent, save for the distant hum of the city beyond my windows. I need to get my head on straight, because I'm already losing myself and Lark hasn't even started yet. What is wrong with me? I've always found solace in this space, but now I just feel caged.

I need to focus. I force my gaze back to the laptop screen. Numbers and projections play out before me, but they might as well be in another language. My mind rebels, slipping away to thoughts of Lark; his careless charm, his rare smile, two nights that never faded from my memory.

"Stop it," I whisper to myself, shaking my head as if to rattle away the memories. "I need to work."

But even as I try to concentrate, my vision blurs with the weight of what-if's and could-have-beens. The email that confirmed his hiring glares at me as if asking me what I'm thinking. I have no idea at this point. That he's an asset to the team?

“Can you keep a secret?” I whisper to the empty room. The irony isn't lost on me—I'm asking an empty room a question meant for the man who doesn't even know he has a son. A son with his eyes, his smile, his little mannerisms.

That's enough. I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against marble.

There's nothing more I can do tonight. But I'm betting that, after I sleep on things, all these problems will vanish or become clearer by morning. I can handle this, I'm sure of it. I just need to have faith in myself and to be smart about how I approach him as an employee.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll face things with a rested mind and time spent preparing myself. But right now, I'm going to go home to the two people I love more than anything in this world.

The door swings open and two tiny arms envelop me in the world's biggest hug. “Mommy!” I inhale my son's scent, remembering that everything is worth it for him. I can get through anything for him.

“Hey, buddy!” I scoop him up as his laughter chases away the day's worries. “Where's uncle Damon?” I ask and my son points to the living room. As he does so, music starts playing, Win's favorite song.

“Look, Mommy, like this!” Win's little feet patter on the marble floor of my luxury penthouse, a little dance of pure joy.

We'd needed space before, and now we have it.

I mimic my son's moves in an exaggerated and goofy manner, earning a string of giggles. His green eyes shine bright, that usual intensity melting into delight at my antics. He throws his head back, all untamed happiness, and starts belting out the

words – or what he thinks are the words – to the song.

I watch him spin in place, still singing, a squeal following the movement.

“Round and round we go!” I say, watching our reflections in the window turn into a dizzying blur of smiles and pure, undiluted joy.

He’s still singing and dancing, his little body feeling the music so deeply I can’t help but be jealous at the depth of his enjoyment. Right now, he has no stress, no worries of adulthood. He gets to be a child, to have fun, and for the moment, so do I.

He puts both arms out, running in a little circle like a plane. I follow his lead, making plane sounds as he continues singing at the top of his little lungs. The dance changes to steps that suspiciously remind me of the hokey-pokey, but I’m not about to call him out on his artistic style.

When the music finally ends, we collapse together onto the floor, a heap of giggles and tangled limbs. He nestles into my chest, small breaths evening out as the last notes fade away.

“I love you, Mommy,” he says, eyes closing.

“I love you more, my little man. To the ends of the earth and back.” My heart swells, bigger than the skyline, the city, or even my fears. Being his mom is the greatest gift I could ever hope for. And in this moment with him, nothing else matters but us and that means everything to me.

Lark

My gaze crosses the glow of the laptop screen before me, cursor blinking on the last sentence of the report. Beside it, the second monitor displays fluctuating graphs, numbers ever shifting and warning of highs and lows in our industry.

There's a coffee cup to my right - dark roast, two sugars, no cream - nearly empty, just a cold puddle at the bottom of the paper cup. My gaze travels from the cup to the windows. The city sprawls below with people living their lives far removed from us and our work. I'm perched high above it all, the glass walls of my office granting me a different kind of oversight. The hum of the city – honking cars, the rumble of vehicles, the shouts of people communicating - is silent at this altitude.

The sound of footsteps clad in all manner of professional shoes, from loafers to high heels, all the steps are quick and full of purpose.

My colleagues dart past my door like a school of fish in the vast ocean. They're always moving, always busy. It's a relentless pace here, but it's exhilarating. There's always some sense of hurry and excitement, from whispers of a merger to the hush-hush of something new on the horizon. Each person here is a cog in an intricate machine, and I, arrogantly, consider myself irreplaceable already.

“Another late night, Lark?” Lara’s voice is warm with concern, an emotion that has my stomach tightening and my brain setting off all kinds of alarm bells. I can’t let her kindness break down the barriers we’ve so carefully erected between us.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I say, finally raising my eyes to meet

hers. She's breathtaking, having traded the sundresses I remember for killer designer dresses that hug and compliment her form so much I instantly jump to memories of her naked in my arms. Her arms are crossed, but there's a playful hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Careful, or you'll turn into part of the furniture."

"Then I'd be the most handsome piece in the room," I say, leaning back in my chair and allowing myself a moment of humor and fun without the press of spreadsheets and projections. She laughs, a sound that lingers in my mind like a song I can't get out of my head.

"Arrogance suits you," she says, though there's more playfulness in her voice than anything else, and the twinkle in her eye suggests she finds it more endearing than she lets on.

"Confidence," I say, correcting her, but it's a half-hearted statement. We both know the line between the two is paper thin.

I wish she'd just step in, close the door behind her with a click, to give us a moment alone. But I also worry a moment like that might spiral out of control like we had on vacation. I'm happy to keep up this playful banter and never let her get too close, because that's not safe for either of us.

When she leaves, I find myself both relieved she's gone and missing her all at once. As she goes, I notice the way Mark's gaze lingers on her ass a little too long, his eyes tracing her every move as she crosses the office.

His attention on her sends a jolt through me, a primal urge to protect her. I push back from my desk, fingers curling into fists at my sides.

“Mark,” I call out, my voice low but firm. He startles, tearing his eyes away from Lara to look at me as if he had no idea he’d been so obvious staring at her. “A word?”

In my reasonably secluded office, I fix him with a stare that has made seasoned investors flinch. “She’s my boss. She’s your boss. You want to get canned?” That’s not the real reason, but he doesn’t need to know about the jealousy churning in my gut.

He swallows, nodding quickly. “You’re right. Won’t happen again, Lark,” he says, his voice out of breath as if he knows his livelihood – and life – are on the line.

“Good.” I pat his shoulder, a mock-congenial gesture designed to draw attention from the steel in my tone. “Wouldn’t want you to get fired, Mark.”

He nods, then hurries off.

As I sit down behind my desk again, I hear some kind of a commotion coming from the main office. My first thought is that little Marky-Mark must have run and told on me for my little warning. But as I make my way to the door, I’m proven wrong instantly.

My mom smiles at me, offering a package of her homemade cookies to me. They’re still warm, and gooey chocolate clings to the plastic wrap. “How did you get in here, Ma? The place is guarded like Fort Knox.” That’s an exaggeration, but I still wonder how she got past the guards.

“Your mom is a smart cookie,” she says, elbowing me before making her way to Lara with a huge basket of assorted baked treats. Lara’s eyes light up as my mother offers her the basket of treats. “You can share them or keep them to yourself. But I did make an extra package just for you,” my mom says, handing her another little package.

“That’s so kind,” Lara says, glancing at me, then at my mom.

“This is my mom, Carol Carlyle.” It seems like now is the time for introductions.

“Mrs. Carlyle , that's so kind.” Lara's voice is genuine, her smile wide as she takes the basket and the extra package. She turns and offers the basket to Shana, telling her to please put them in the break room, and Shana hurries off with a nod of her head.

I watch several employees sneak into the break room, no doubt wanting cookies while they’re still warm.

But Lara and my mom are still standing close. My mom leans in, whispering loud enough for us to hear, “He really is a good man, despite the tough exterior. Thank you for giving him a chance.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment, but Lara chuckles, her laughter soothing the emotions bubbling up within me. As Mom makes her rounds, meeting my coworkers and learning as much as anyone can share, Lara slips into my office, closing the door behind her with a soft click.

It’s not quite how I hoped this fantasy would play out, but I’ll take it.

“Your mother is sweet,” she says, leaning against the door, both palms pressed to the wood framing frosted glass. There's an unreadable expression on her face, one that has my heart skipping a beat.

“Too sweet for her own good,” I say, trying to mask my discomfort with humor. “She means well.”

Lara nods, her hands smoothing her hair as if a single shining lock would dare to be out of place. The room feels smaller with her here. She steps closer, and I can see the

depths of gray-blue in her eyes. There's a warmth there that I've come to associate with Lara.

Her gaze pins me to my spot behind the desk, and I sense there's something she wants to say, but isn't vocalizing for some reason.

She inhales, as if finally finding her words, but the way she speaks has me wondering if she changed her mind last second. "I don't know what you're up to, but don't," she says, her voice offering a soft warning.

Wait, does she think I put my mom up to this? I mean, she doesn't know my mom, so I guess it's possible.

"I didn't plan this," I say in my defense, raising my hands in innocence. "Mom's surprise visits are just that—surprises."

Her eyes narrow slightly, searching mine for the truth. I meet her stare, willing her to see that I'm being honest. Finally, she nods, the tension leaving her shoulders.

"Okay. Just..."

"It won't happen again," I say, finishing her sentence. But she smiles, giving her head a little shake as her lips purse.

"I didn't say that. She's welcome to visit whenever she likes. I'll let the guards know." She lifts her shoulders and there's a hint of sweetness in her voice, a softness I'm not used to anymore. Softness she hasn't really afforded me since I got here. Playfulness, sure. Not soft sweetness.

I nod, wondering if my mom's treats have opened yet another door for her. I don't know what she puts in her cookies, but she gets everyone to do her bidding. Come to

think of it, that could be a problem.

Lara offers a small smile before opening the door and leaving my office, her heels clicking against the marble floor. I release a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

Not long after, I'm rolling my neck to work out some of the tension I'm holding when I hear Lara's voice again.

"Fern, go home," Lara says, her tone leaving no room for argument. "You need rest. You have a new baby waiting, and I don't want you worrying about work right now."

There's a muffled protest from Fern, but Lara cuts it off with kindness.

"It'll be paid time off, but I'll make sure it won't affect your accrued PTO. We've got this covered here – go home and take care of yourself."

I lean back in my chair, warmth spreading through my chest. Lara's compassion, her strength in caring for those around her—it's one of the things that draws me to her even now. One of the things that keeps me here, silently hoping for more than just memories of a past we share.

My pulse races, but for a different reason than it had when she came in and closed the door behind her. Lara never ceases to amaze me. She's made it to the top, but she won't step on anyone to get there. And that's beyond admirable.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

I catch a glimpse of Lark walking past, on some mission that only he knows about for the moment.

He's changed since he first walked into my office; his rough edges have smoothed out even more, but that intensity in his gaze? That remains unchanged from the first moment I met him. Same with his effect on my body. Even now I'm feeling overheated and resist the urge to fan myself or turn the thermostat down.

I notice him walk back by, his nose in a book, giving the words more attention than the subject matter deserves.

"Find something interesting?" I ask, my voice casual as I face him fully. Is it an accident that he's slowly walking past my office?

"Always," Lark replies, looking up from the book and pausing in place to talk with me. "But nothing as interesting as the view from here."

My breath catches and I want to remind him there's no chance of romance between us... until he gestures past me to the twinkling lights of the city under the darkness of night.

I almost laugh as memories on the plane bring me back to the moment he said the view was amazing and I thought he was complimenting me. This time I'm both disappointed and relieved he's talking about the view.

His eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, it feels like he's not talking about the cityscape at all. I force a smile, my heart thumping a rhythm that's too quick, too telling. It's that easy for me to be pulled right back into the endless desire for him. I can't let that happen. I won't let that happen.

"This city has a way of making you feel on top of the world," I say, shifting the focus back to the concrete jungle outside.

"Or on the edge of a cliff," he says, moving toward me with slow, deliberate steps.

"Depends on the day," I say with a tilt of my head, debating if I should stand up and meet him halfway. His presence fills the room, that undeniable energy somehow as compelling as it is alarming.

"Today was a good day, though, wasn't it?" he asks, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips.

"It was productive, at least." I stand and walk around my desk, maintaining a professional distance, despite the slamming of my heart and the way my body demands I move closer still, until there are no barriers between us anymore. How long can I fight this?

"Productivity is good. Success is better." His tone is teasing, but there's an undercurrent of truth that warns me he's not quite where he'd like to be at this stage of his life. I'm right there with him; I plan to keep moving forward and up.

"Success is the goal," I say, moving toward the window as he falls into step beside me. The reflection shows both of us, our images like ghosts over a city that never slows down to breathe. It's a powerful visual, one that reinforces why I'm here.

"Goals are meant to be achieved," Lark says, shifting his weight, close but not too

close. “And I've never seen you fail to achieve yours.”

I like the compliment – it means so much more than calling me pretty, because I have to work for success – but I realistically wonder how he knows. He’s been out of my life for years now, and there are plenty of things about me that he doesn’t know.

“Let's keep it that way,” I say, holding his gaze in the reflection before turning away. There's work to be done, and no matter how unsettling Lark's presence might be, I can't afford distractions. Especially not the kind of life-altering distractions he brings with him.

“Let's,” he says in a way that tells me he’ll fight to help me every step of the way. I can also hear the smile in his voice as I step away, putting physical space between us once again. If I don’t... well... all bets are off. This man has an effect on me I can’t control or deny.

No matter what, I won't falter—not in business, and certainly not in whatever game we started five years ago and still haven’t seemed to concede, despite mutual promises to keep things professional. It occurs to me that maybe, just maybe, he’s struggling just as much to maintain that distance between us. But that’s not possible... is it?

I walk down the hall with purpose, my arms heavy with cardboard carriers brimming with coffees and bags of takeout that boast a variety of dishes and flavors.

I worry about my people, the stress lines etched into faces, evidence of long hours and relentless work. They’re long overdue for a break. With a few helpers who were in on things, Lark, Shana, and Mark, we carry things to the break room.

“Alright, everyone. Let's eat!” I say, the announcement leaving the space suddenly silent as heads pop up like prairie dogs alerted to a change in the wind.

“Is that from Gianni's?” one of the developers asks with a hopeful lilt as he sniffs the air.

“Yes – I got everyone's favorite.” We set down the feast on the large central table, and the team converges with an enthusiasm that warms my heart. “You've all earned this.”

And I'll never let anyone who tells me that keeping a spreadsheet of everyone's favorite meals is crazy again.

A chorus of thanks transforms the room from a high-stress office to a communal dining space filled with conversations and joy. Smiles replace furrowed brows, and the music of unwrapping, pouring, and contented chatter replaces the frustration.

As the room buzzes with energy and happiness, I feel a gaze linger on me. Lark. It's been weeks since I told him that we're keeping it professional, but the tension remains—a live wire we're both trying desperately to avoid.

“Great idea bringing in lunch,” he says, leaning against a column with a casual elegance. “It's like you can read our minds.”

“Or stomachs,” I tease, keeping things light. Can I trust him? His presence is a pebble in my shoe—small but persistent. Every time I think I'm safe, I start to doubt and worry that he's going to slip back into my life in a romantic sense... and that can't happen.

“Both are important for morale.” His eyes hold mine a moment too long and the intimacy there unsettles me, leaving my heart fluttering and my face warming.

“Morale is key to an engaged, happy, work environment.” We might as well be quoting from some business handbook, but there's an undercurrent that has me

wanting to sidestep the conversation, so I move to help distribute plates and utensils.

“Can't have the troops going hungry,” Lark says as he follows close, but not crowding. His help isn't necessary, but it's not unwelcome, either. As he moves plates in stacks along the table where everyone can reach, I take a handful of plastic forks and move them beside the plates.

“Exactly,” I say, feeling the weight of his attention. What does he want?

“Especially when the general sets such a formidable pace,” he says, voice low, just for me.

“Focus on your own plate, soldier,” I tease, while taking a step back, but my heart skips. Why does he do this? Push and pull, teasing that could be innocent or not, a professionalism that leaves me longing for something else entirely.

“I always do,” he says, flashing a wink at me that dries up every drop of saliva in my mouth. How? How does he do that? Like he has some orders on command that just make my body respond without my permission.

“Good,” I say, even as questions swirl. Lunch continues around us, a pleasant gathering that I use as an excuse to turn my attention from him. I hide my worry behind a smile and focus on my team; their laughter, their camaraderie. They are why I'm here, why we're all here.

“Enjoy, everyone!” I call out, raising my cup in a mock toast before slipping away from the room and back to the safety of my desk.

Only when I'm safely back in my office do I exhale. Try as I might, I can't shake off Lark's lingering presence that clings like sweat to my skin. Why does he have to be everywhere? The way his eyes hold mine, that slow, knowing smirk—it's too much.

His casual touches leave me trembling inside, and desperate for what we shared in the past. But the past is past. That's not my future. He's not my future.

"Come in," I say when a knock interrupts my thoughts. The door opens and, of course, it's him. My hands tremble and I lower them to my lap, casually smoothing the material of my dress. The color matches the gray ring in my eyes and manages to be both professional and sleek all at once.

"Hey." He steps into my space, all casual confidence and rugged charm. This is my empire, my rules, yet here I am, a bundle of nerves because of this man. How dare he?

He extends a plate toward me, its contents colorful and arranged with care. "I noticed you didn't eat." His voice is soft, yet it reverberates through me, sending ripples through my body, much like the pleasure he'd—

"Thanks." The word catches in my throat. It's ridiculous, how just a few simple words and a thoughtful gesture like this can reduce me to a quivering puddle. I'm strong, damn it. But with Lark, my strength seems as substantial as a wisp of steam.

He nods, and there's that look again—the one that makes me feel seen, vulnerable. I take the plate, our fingers brushing. A jolt of electricity tingles up my arm from the point of contact, and I jerk away, nearly dumping the plate.

Despite my movement, he holds onto the plate, even when I let go. Flustered from his touch, I smile at him and he places it on my desk. There's a look in his eyes, an acknowledgement that he felt the same shock when we touched. And suddenly, my office feels too small, too intimate. We shouldn't be in here alone.

"Sorry," he says, the word brushing across my skin like his fingertips had when we—. Why can't I stop thinking about those nights in his arms?

His eyes assess me as if he's trying to read the moment. I can only hope I'm not giving him clues; I don't want him to know I'm barely hanging on to a thread of self-control right now. I want to jump on him, pin him to my desk, and take the pleasure he so effortlessly gave.

But I can't do that. We can't do that.

He steps back, one corner of his mouth lifting in an apologetic half-smile while his eyes seem to be asking questions I'm afraid to answer.

Feeling like I'm failing to hide in the fortress of professionalism I've built, I scramble for what to do or say next, but come up with nothing helpful. "Work is..." Work is what? Brain, come on, give me something to work with!

"Important. I get it." The softness in his voice almost annoys me because his concern shouldn't be able to break through my defenses.

To my relief – and dismay – he turns and makes his way to the door. But with his hand on the knob, he pauses as if to say more. Then he seems to change his mind. Instead, he pulls the door open and slips out toward the voices in the break room and I'm left staring at the plate of food, so thoughtfully arranged, wondering what the heck just happened.

I sit there, staring at the space where he stood, the emotions left behind, lingering like a ghost. I draw in a shaky breath, turning my attention back to the food on my desk, wondering why it feels like a peace offering in a battle I didn't know we were fighting.

"Damn you, Lark," I whisper to the empty room. No matter how tall I've built my walls, he finds a way over them, under them, around them. And each time, it scares me more—because falling isn't just a possibility; it's starting to seem inescapable.

So... maybe hiring him was a mistake.

The silence wraps around me, a reminder that I'm alone again, left to wonder what game we're playing—and why I'm so scared that I've already lost.

I push the plate aside, untouched. I can't afford distractions. Not when everything I've worked for is at stake. Not when my heart is the prize, and Lark doesn't even know he's competing for it. Or does he?

Another knock at the door has me worried he's back again, maybe to say whatever he'd left unsaid before. But the door opens to Shana instead. Her gaze meets mine and I can see the concern there.

I wave her in and she sits, her ribs deflating as she lets out a huge breath. “What happened?” I ask, almost afraid of the answer.

“Another rejection,” she says, her voice steady despite the setback.

I lean forward, planting my elbows on the desk and pressing my fingertips together as I absorb the news. “We need someone who fits, not just anyone.”

“Right.” Shana sighs, flipping through the profiles scattered across the table. “But time isn't exactly on our side.”

“Quality over quick,” I say, my tone firm. “Our third partner has to share our vision.”

“Agreed.” She pauses, then looks up with a determined gleam in her eyes. “We'll find them. We have to.”

“Absolutely.” I stand, stretching the tension from my limbs. The office fades away as I picture my son's smile, the real reason behind all this striving.

“Mommy!” A blur of energy greets me as the door swings open. My brother sits there, grinning as my son launches himself into my arms.

“Hey, buddy!” I laugh, lifting him up high.

“Uncle Damon and I made an obstacle course!” Win says, wiggling to be set down. I follow him as he takes my hand to show off what they’ve done, and Damon follows.

They've turned the living room into a labyrinth of cushions and blankets, chairs and boxes.

“Looks impressive,” I say, when he looks over his shoulder at me, his smile wide and excited.

“Watch this!” he exclaims and dashes off, navigating the makeshift hurdles with the unbridled joy only a child possesses.

“Careful!” I call after him, but he's already giggling, disappearing behind a fortress of pillows.

Damon meets my eye, and I want to tell him he’s the best uncle in the history of uncles.

“Good job with the setup,” I say to him, warmth swelling in my chest for his support. “You’re the best uncle a kid could ask for.”

“Anything for my nephew,” he says, a hint of pride in his tone.

“Alright, little man,” I say, as Win pops back into view while rolling up my sleeves. “Show me how it's done.”

He leads me off and I drop to my hands and knees, the marble floors cool against my palms. Together, we crawl under the dining table, transformed into a mountain tunnel. I'm not dressed for this, but I don't give a damn. I love these moments with my son. They make everything else worth it.

"Come on, Mommy!" my son's laughter trickles from the other side. He's quick, darting ahead with the grace of a child used to a lot of movement.

"Slow down," I say, a teasing note in my voice, but there's no stopping him; he's across the makeshift bridge of couch cushions before I've even cleared the mountain tunnel.

"Your turn!" He turns to me, eyes wide with excitement, a challenge in his adorable grin.

"Alright." I eye the "river" – a sea of blue blankets spread between us. With an exaggerated leap, I land on the other side and he grabs my hand as if to keep me from falling. "You saved my life!" I say, squeezing his hand.

His little hands clap, pure joy radiating from him.

"Great jump, sis," Damon says from his chair. He's playing referee in our game of make-believe with a warm smile and encouraging nods.

"Thanks for this, Damon," I say, catching my breath as Win continues on. "He loves it."

"Of course," Damon says, as if he's surprised at my comment. I chase after my son as he weaves through the labyrinth.

"Gotcha!" I scoop up my son as we tumble into the fortress of pillows, his giggles

infectious and punctuated with a sneeze. These moments are the ones that make all the hard work worthwhile. Hearing his giggles, playing with him, watching him learn and grow. These are the memories that get me through the tough moments.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

She hasn't been at work for three days now.

I don't know why she's not here and it's driving me crazy.

I tap my pen against the notepad, giving up even the pretense of pretending to work. The space is too quiet, and people are too subdued without her around. Her absence has an effect on everyone, and it's not good.

Standing up, I make my way to the painting that hangs on my wall. It's an abstract flurry of blues and grays, like a storm captured on canvas. With a sigh, I make my way to the window, watching people far below scurry about their lives. An hour slips by with me trying to imagine where Lara is instead of tackling the mountain of paperwork.

"Tell me," I ask the empty room, "what's keeping you away?"

Of course, the room doesn't answer or offer any sympathy for the frustration and fear running circles in my mind. What if she's hurt? What if it's something serious? Why wouldn't she call me?

"Maybe she's just busy," I say, taking a few steps to stretch my legs and hopefully shake off the restlessness.

Or maybe she's avoiding you, the skeptic inside me counters. Maybe bringing her food was too intimate. Maybe I'd crossed a boundary I didn't know existed.

I shake my head, refusing to entertain those ideas. She wouldn't run. Not again. Not from her own company. She'd fire me if she needed an escape.

I sit down and try to focus on work once more, but my thoughts keep drifting back to her and worrying. It's no use.

The clock ticks too loudly, a steady beat that annoys my distracted mind. I swipe through screens, watching the data blur as my eyes unfocus to think about her instead. Emails go unanswered. I swear the silence grows teeth.

I don't know how she has this effect on me. I went five years without seeing her. Now it's been a few days and I'm falling apart. She's just... gone. No good mornings exchanged, no quick glances that linger too long. Nothing.

The keyboard feels alien under my fingers. Numbers and projections all blend into a meaningless mess my brain can't decipher.

"Damn it," I say, pushing away from the desk. My chair lets out a squeal of protest.

I grab my jacket, the office walls closing in on me. I want to tell her to get out of my head, but I know that's a losing battle – she won't listen. She never has, not since that first meeting on the plane.

When it's finally time to go home, I feel like I've accomplished nothing and that makes me feel weak. This isn't like me. Obsessing over her isn't a good look, nor does it feel good.

Home is a welcome space and mom's voice cuts through the fog of my thoughts as she hands me a steaming mug. "You look like hell," she says.

"Thanks," I say, taking a sip of the coffee. I had no idea she'd be here today, but I'm

glad she is. She's had a spare key to my place since forever, and I wouldn't dream of things being any other way. But it's rare that she'll drop by without a warning.

"Is it work? Or... her?" Mom's eyes search my face as if she'll find an answer.

"Both." The word sends relief through me, as if just saying it out loud that she affects me helps me come to terms with and deal with everything that comes with that implication. "She's been gone for days now. Shana won't tell me anything, and no one else seems to know."

I hate not knowing more than anything.

"Maybe she's sick," Mom says, leaning against the counter.

"Then why wouldn't she tell me?" I frown, staring down into the dark liquid with an urge to add something a little stronger. "Why would she shut me out?"

"Maybe she can't help it." Mom's voice is soft.

"Can't or won't?" The distinction feels important, but my mom doesn't have that answer, and neither do I.

"Enjoy your coffee," she says, effectively ending the conversation before leaving the room. But the question remains, a splinter in my mind.

"Can't or won't?" I mutter into the cup, watching my breath make ripples on the surface of the coffee.

*

It's been another two days, and she still hasn't come back or contacted me.

I stand by the elevator, waiting to head up when I catch a familiar whiff of perfume. My heart thunders and I turn. Our eyes meet and she looks caught, guilty, maybe even afraid. But why?

The elevator dings and the doors slide open, revealing the empty space. She steps inside and I follow, aware of how her presence immediately fills the confined space. I hesitate for only a second before speaking; long enough for the doors to close behind me.

“Morning,” I say, my voice sounding more casual than I feel as I struggle to hold back the flood of words that want to come crashing out.

“Good morning,” she says so very softly, her eyes not meeting mine as she touches the button for our floor.

My heart races as I take a deep breath. “You've been out for a week.”

She stiffens, still avoiding my gaze. Her fingers stroke the strap of her handbag, and I'd swear she's trembling. The black dress she's wearing seems so harsh, and her hair is smoothed back into a slick bun that makes her features seem sharper. She looks... normal. Right down to her heels and touch of makeup that looks like she's wearing none.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, concern bleeding through, despite my attempt at staying professional.

“Everything's fine,” she says, but there's a curt edge to her voice, as if I don't have the right to ask her questions.

We ride up in silence, but it's suffocating and there are so many words I want to say. As the floors tick by, I can't contain it anymore. My protective instincts, dormant yet

powerful, surge within me, demanding action.

“Look, if something urgent came up, you should have told me.” My tone is firm, insistent.

Her head snaps up, surprise filling her beautiful features. “Why on earth would I inform you?” she asks, her voice sharp and cautionary.

“Because—” I stop myself. Do I even know why?

“I’m your boss, not your friend,” she says, her eyes now intent on mine. Her words are a cold reminder, a verbal shove back into my place. “You work for me. That’s it.”

I can’t breathe around the lump of anger and frustration in my throat.

The elevator comes to a halt and dings. The doors slide open, and she steps out without another word, leaving me wondering how to get through the invisible barrier she’s reinforced between us.

With my elbows on my desk and my fingertips pressing into my temples, I scan the digital spreadsheets. A notification pops up in the corner—her name in bold. I click, expecting a work-related memo, demands, or maybe another sharp-edged reminder of where I stand.

Sorry about this morning , her message starts, disarmingly gentle. My son was sick.

I blink. Once. Twice. My hands hover over the keys, uncertain if I should respond or how. Son? The word bounces around in my head, sounding more and more unreal as it plays on repeat.

She has a child? She’s guarded that fact like a state secret; I’m not sure I’ve ever

heard it mentioned around the office. Shana probably knows, but I wonder if anyone else does.

And what else don't I know? I type out a response before I can stop myself.

Is he okay? The concern that fills the words might not be obvious to her, but I sure as hell feel it. I can't imagine being a father, but I'd think having a child so sick I had to miss work would be an awful experience. But again, she'd reminded me that I just work for her, so that concern is something I'm not supposed to show.

Minutes crawl by, each second stretching longer than the one before. Then, three dots bounce on the screen. She's typing.

Yes, much better. Thank you. I swear I can hear her surprise in the words.

Good to hear. I lean back, my eyes tracing the ceiling's precise lines. Why share this with me now? She's not the type to share her secrets, and I can't help but wonder where this newfound trust is coming from.

Thanks for your... understanding. Another message from her shows an unexpected softness. This might be the moment that chipped at the barrier between us, but I won't hold my breath.

Anytime , I write back, but I want to say more. I have so many questions, but I don't think now is the time to ask them. She already let me see more than she tends to share, pushing might cause this fragile trust to break. But why now?

See you tomorrow , she sends.

See you then , I say, though it's just text on a screen.

But tomorrow, maybe, just maybe, the walls between us might be a little thinner, easier to topple or scale. And as I shut down my computer, I realize I'm looking forward to finding out.

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Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

I remember saying my goodbyes to Win this morning, and hearing Damon's promise he'll keep an eye on the nanny and win while I'm gone.

At work, tears swim in my eyes at the heartbroken look on Win's face. And now, behind my desk, my trembling fingers clasp the cold metal of my phone, making it hard to focus on the image.

I press the device against my cheek, lips drawn tight over my teeth. The office—usually buzzing with the click-clack of keyboards and murmured conversations—seems quiet, but I'm in my own world right now, trying to figure out how I'm going to manage going on a work trip and being away from my son for two days. But Shana can't make this meeting, so the responsibility falls on me.

"Is everything okay?" Lark's voice startles me, and I drop my phone into my lap.

"I'm fine." The words are a reflex.

He arches an eyebrow, those stunning green eyes tracing my face before coming back to my gaze. "You don't look fine."

I force a smile, but I'm certain I'm not convincing. "Just... family stuff." My thumb brushes over the dark screen, swiping away invisible smudges, anything to avoid his intense scrutiny.

"Do you need to step out and get some air?"

Damn him and his concern. And damn Shana for insisting I take him on this trip. I'm going to be stressed and missing my son, I don't need any other... complications.

I shake my head no. My heart thuds a frantic rhythm against my ribs. If he only knew the truth. But he doesn't and I'm glad.

"Okay, then." He nods, but I catch the flicker of concern in his features before he leaves me in peace.

Alone again, I draw in a ragged breath and bite down on my lip, tasting the bitter tang of anxiety. I can do this. I'll get through this. For my son and all those moments I cherish so much.

I shift in the passenger seat of the company car, the hum of the engine a low purr that does little to soothe the fluttering in my stomach.

Lark's hands are steady on the wheel as he navigates us out of town. I'd offered for us to take a driver so we could relax, but he likes to drive, so I let it go.

The concrete and lights of the cityscape blurs into greens and browns as we speed toward our destination, an out-of-town conference that feels more like torture.

"At least the traffic is light," he says, glancing my way. "We'll make good time."

I'm not going to study the square shape of his jaw or notice the crinkles at the corners of his eyes, or think about how we're going to be in a hotel room together. Sure, it's a multi-room suite, but that's still too close for comfort.

"Great." My response is terse as I fix my attention on the passing scenery. I can't shake the discomfort boiling within me and I still regret telling him about my son. Why did I tell him about my son? I'd felt bad about the hurt in his eyes when I put

him in his place in the elevator. So I reached out with an olive branch of sorts, but it was a stupid choice.

“Is something on your mind?” he asks, his voice taking on a softer edge.

“Nothing important.” The lie tastes bitter, but it's necessary. He can't know what I'm stressing about. And if he ever meets my son, sees those familiar mannerisms, those eyes too much like his own... No, I can't let that happen. I shouldn't have said anything.

“Okay.” He doesn't push, and I'm grateful that he's letting it go.

The miles stretch on, and with each one, the tension in my shoulders winds up tighter. I hate being away from my son and there's a pull, an undeniable attraction that I've spent years trying to ignore. It's there in the way his jaw tightens when he concentrates, in the subtle scent of his cologne that fills the car, those powerful forearms and hands.

“Beautiful day, isn't it?” His attempt at small talk almost makes me smile, mostly because it's like he knows I'm wound up tight and stressed, and he's trying to find any way to get my head out of my thoughts.

“Sure is.” But I'm blind to the beauty of the day. My reality is split – at home with my son and in this car with him much too close for comfort. We should have brought a driver; this feels too intimate. But my thoughts lock on the man beside me who is unknowingly the father of my child.

“Shana couldn't make it, huh?” he asks, breaking the silence with another attempt at small talk.

“Her sister needed her.” I shrug, feigning indifference. Shana's the one who tends to

do the out and about meetings and conventions. She's better with people, and I prefer to bury myself in work... just not this kind.

Lark nods, and we fall back into quiet. I wrestle with the urge to reach out and touch his arm, or to speak up and have a conversation, anything to bridge the gap between us. But I can't. Not when there's so much at stake.

"Hey." His voice pulls me from my internal battle. "You're doing that thing again."

I glance at him, confused. "What thing?"

"Chewing your lip." He points it out casually, but I swear I can hear concern in his tone, too.

"Oh, yeah." I stop immediately, pressing my lips together into a flat line both to stop myself from biting them and to keep my secrets locked inside. I thought this would be easy. I thought wrong.

"Look, Lara..." He trails off, glancing at me, and the question in his eyes leaves my heart beating too fast.

I glance at the road, indicating for him to watch where he's driving because I want to get home to my son safely. "Let's just focus on the meeting, okay?"

"Okay." He nods, his full attention on the road. Somehow, that's not a relief. I know the conversation is going to come up at some point, and I'll have to tiptoe because too many details will tell him the whole story about who Win's dad is... him.

I lean back against the seat, closing my eyes. I will fight this pull, I have to. For my son, for our lives that are better off separate. This is just a business trip, nothing more. I repeat the words in my head until they lose meaning, and all that's left is the

thumping of my heart.

I unlock the door and offer him a slight smile over my shoulder. The bellhop trails behind with our luggage as we step into the room. It's as luxurious as the images led me to believe. There's not a single white wall in the place; over our heads, wooden slats create a warm, inviting ceiling.

The living area boasts plush, velvet sofas in deep jewel tones, and a grand chandelier hangs elegantly from the center of the room, casting a soft, golden glow. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of the city skyline, the lights twinkling like stars against the night sky.

To the right, a white marble fireplace makes for a cozy, intimate, even romantic feel and a sleek, modern kitchen gleam with stainless steel appliances and granite countertops. The bedrooms, separated by sliding glass doors, feature king-sized beds with the whitest of white plush blankets that look like laying on them would be like sleeping on a cloud. I'm not even tired, but I can't wait to go to bed.

I walk over to the windows, drawn by the view. "It sure is beautiful," I say, before turning to him. He smiles, joining me at the windows.

"It's perfect," he says, standing a little too close for comfort. But I don't want to move away.

The bellhop discreetly places our luggage by the door and leaves an extra key card with them. "If you need anything, please don't hesitate to call," the bellhop says with a polite nod before leaving us.

I want to beg him to stay, because with every second that passes, the thought of being alone with Lark in a hotel room – even one as large and spacious as this – seems like a worse and worse idea.

I spend the next few minutes exploring the suite, marveling at the attention to detail. He seems to also feel the need to separate, because he begins to hang his neatly-pressed shirts.

The bathroom is spa-like with a deep soaking tub, a rain shower, and plush robes hanging near the door. A bottle of champagne chilling in a metal ice bucket and a tray of chocolate-covered strawberries grace the dining table, a welcome gift from the hotel.

As we settle in, I can't help the rising uneasiness. I don't like being away from Win. And being alone with Lark seems like a mistake. A big mistake. Especially since last time we were in a hotel room together... well, I wound up pregnant.

Not this time, I promise myself. Not this time.

"It's a nice place," Lark says from behind me, his voice too close for comfort.

"Corporate standard." My words are clipped as I swallow, fighting the fluttering in my chest. I concentrate on unpacking my suitcase, lining up my toiletries with military precision. Anything to avoid the gaze of – and desire for – the man watching me from where he leans on a doorway like a Greek statue.

I sense him moving, and I stiffen, bracing myself for whatever he might do next. But he only heads to the windows, drawing back the curtains with a casual sweep of his hand. "Good view."

"Sure." My voice sounds distant, even to my ears. I can't let him in, I can't let him get close. I can't risk everything. My heart won't calm down in my chest, and my mouth is so dry I feel like a dying man in a desert.

Lark wanders out of my room and I exhale, trying to breathe normally. Which is

impossible with him around.

My phone rings, the sound startling me. Why now? I snatch it up, thumb swiping the screen with a tremor no doubt left over from my frayed nerves with Lark so close.

“Hey, sis!” It's Damon, but his usual cheer is missing and there's a note of fear in his voice.

“What's wrong?” I'm already imagining the worst, my body frozen in fear.

“Win... he climbed the fridge. Took a spill. I guess the nanny has never seen anything like it and wasn't paying too much attention when I told her to keep an eye on him so I could use the restroom.”

Panic crushes my throat. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Put it on speaker,” Lark's says, his voice calm and steady.

I do as he says without thinking, holding the phone between us.

“My son climbed the fridge and fell,” I say, catching him up.

“Did you guys call nine-one-one? Or are you taking him to the emergency room?” Lark says into the phone, his tone even, controlled.

“Damon can't drive,” I say.

“Alisha can,” Damon says.

“The nanny,” I tell Lark, since I know he has no idea who she is.

“Is he awake?” Lark asks.

“Yes, but he’s hurting.”

“Baby, are you okay?” I ask, worry winding around my heart like briar bushes, poky, painful, and tight enough to cut off blood flow.

“Uh-huh. It hurts.”

“You’re being really brave. Did you hit your head, bud?” Lark asks.

“Yes,” Win responds.

“We’re coming home.” Lark is already grabbing bags, taking charge.

And it’s a good thing, because I feel frozen in place. What if my son is really hurt?

“Home,” I whisper, all thoughts of work leaving my mind as I worry about the safety and wellbeing of my child. “We’re coming home, Win.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

I end the call after making my brother promise to keep me updated, and the nanny, too. Lark's eyes flick to mine, a question forming. But questions will have to wait; our son needs me.

“I can’t drive,” I whisper, my whole body shaking as we make our way back down to the entrance of the hotel. Lark is already talking with the front desk on his phone, hurrying us out as quickly as possible.

“I can.” Lark’s still so calm.

“I need to get home.” My voice cracks, brittle as thin ice.

Lark's hands land on my shoulders, offering me comfort and bringing me into the moment. “I'll drive, we'll get there, and we'll do whatever it takes to make sure your son is safe,” he says. There’s no room for argument, but the thing that sticks in my mind is hearing him say whatever it takes . Those words remind me of the promises I’ve made to myself over the years, promises I’ve stuck to.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my heart in my throat.

We're silent as we rush to the car. He tosses the bags in and gets into the driver’s seat, the engine roaring to life.

Lark maneuvers through the traffic with a focus that's both terrifying and reassuring. I'm grateful for the silence between us; it gives me a chance to gather the shreds of my composure.

The hospital lights are too bright, the corridors too long. We reach the ER, and there he is—my little man, arm in a sling, but his eyes are bright when they find mine. “Mommy!”

I hurry to his side, pulling him into my arms, careful not to jostle his sling. “Win,” I whisper, holding him close. His small arm – the uninjured one - clings to my neck.

“I’m so sorry,” Alisha says, words bursting from her.

“It’s okay,” I say. I know my son is quick, and I know to make sure I include that he has to be watched closely from now on.

“It’s only a sprain, thank goodness.” The doctor pops in, smiling at us as he walks over to my son again. “The radiologist checked for hairline fractures or breaks and didn’t see anything.”

“Thank God,” I whisper, peppering his forehead with kisses, each one filled with fear that much, much worse could have happened. But it didn’t. He’s okay. Win is okay.

“Thanks for being here, Alisha,” I say, grateful that he had someone he knew with him.

“Of course,” she says, her voice filled with guilt. But I’m not upset.

“These things happen,” I say. “And this little man is never still.” I want her to know that everything is fine.

“Let’s get you two home,” Lark says, and I hear an odd note in his voice that has my blood running cold in my veins.

“Thank you,” I say, holding my son tight and wondering how I’ll ever let him go now. Relief leaves me lightheaded, or maybe it’s the side effect of fear.

“I already grabbed his car seat from my car,” Alisha says, nodding toward the familiar item resting against a nearby chair.

“Let’s go then,” Lark says, and I hear something more in his voice—if he hasn’t figured it out, he’s close, for sure. But I don’t have the space for that worry right now. Right now, I need to hold my son, to make sure he’s safe and knows I’m here when he needs me, always.

As we leave the hospital behind, I lean on Lark’s strength, feeling oddly secure in his silent presence. We can talk later. Right now, I just need to calm my fears.

*

The door clicks behind us, the familiar sound of home echoing in the huge open space. I carefully place Win on his feet, not letting go until he does. His grip on me tightens, then relaxes as we stand in the living room.

The scent of vanilla lingers in the air, and I inhale, glad to be out of the dry, stale hospital air.

Damon rolls out, checking in on Win, who runs over to give him a one-armed hug and share the news that it's a sprain and he has to be careful, and the person who took "pictures" – x-rays – of his arm gave him an ice pop.

Damon listens to the animated recount of events, but his gaze shifts to me, then Lark. "I'm glad you're okay," Damon says before leaving the room, a calculating look on his face.

"Come sit down, buddy, please," I say, reaching out to Win. He walks over, his stride long and playful as he swings one arm but keeps the other tucked. When he sits, I fluff the pillows around him.

Lark hovers, his gaze flicking between Win and me, a strange new distance in his eyes.

"Can I get either of you anything?" His voice is low, careful, as if he's walking on broken glass.

"No, we're good, thank you." I force a smile, but it feels stiff on my lips.

Lark nods, but he doesn't move to leave. Instead, his eyes fix on Win, studying him with an intensity that makes my stomach churn. Win, oblivious to the tension,

wiggles to get comfortable.

“Mommy, look!” Win attempts to reach for the toy car on the coffee table, but as he twists, I see him wince. “Oopsie.”

“Careful, honey.” My fingers brush his hair back, my heart contracting at the sight of his small face scrunched up with pain.

“Does it hurt?” Lark's question is directed at Win, but his eyes never leave mine.

“Just a little,” Win says in his bravest big boy voice.

Lark steps closer, the polished marble under his feet making him look taller somehow. He squats down to Win's level and holds his gaze. “You're pretty tough, huh?”

“Uh-huh.” Win nods, and I can't help but smile at how dang cute he is.

“Win has always been adventurous.” The words slip out before I can stop them, my attempt at trying to keep things normal in this charged moment.

“Yeah?” Lark's eyebrow arches.

“Like his dad,” I add softly, instantly regretting the comparison.

“His dad must be brave too then.” Somehow, the words feel more like an accusation than a statement, but I'm not ready to hear that.

“Something like that.” My throat tightens. I hate lying to him. I hate this secret I'm keeping. Now that he's here, the whole situation feels... slimy. I know why Damon took off in such a hurry – I bet he wanted nothing to do with the uncomfortable

tension in the air.

Lark stands, looking down at Win with an expression I can't read. Then his gaze shifts back to me, searching for a truth I'm not ready to share. I feel naked under his intense stare, exposed, even. It's as though he's sifting through my memories, picking out the pieces that fit together too neatly.

"Is there anything else you need?" Lark's tone is steady, but his eyes betray him. I can feel the doubt and suspicion rolling off him like mist of early-morning mountains.

"No, really, you've done enough." I could kick myself for my choice of words, but it is what it is. I wrap my arm around Win, pulling him close.

"Alright." Lark hesitates, then gives Win a gentle ruffle on the head before walking toward the door. "Take care of that arm, buddy."

"I will. Bye-bye!" Win waves with his good arm, and Lark offers a small smile in return. Then his gaze shifts to me and my gut twists up tight. What I'm doing, keeping his son from him... it isn't right. I've made a huge mistake.

I can't tell him the truth. I just can't. But as I hold my son, the secret feels heavier than ever, a planet pressing down on my shoulders with so much force I might just be crushed under the weight, because I sure as heck can't breathe.

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Lark

One week later...

Why did she want me to come to her home to talk to her? I swallow hard as I step out of the elevator and into her world.

Her penthouse is like walking into a magazine spread – one where you can't afford anything on the page, but you're drawn to the beauty anyway. The air smells faintly of vanilla, and soft light spills from floor to ceiling windows, creating a warm, inviting, and safe-feeling atmosphere.

I loved her place the first time I visited, and I love it this time, too.

“Thank you for coming,” she says in a soft voice that instantly has me hard. Then again, she does that to me more often than not, so it’s a low bar to set, I think.

“Of course.” My gaze forgets that her beautiful home exists, because now she is all I can see. Her smile. The way she tilts her chin up. Those incredible legs that haunt my dreams. The sparkle in her eyes that warns me she’s a fighter. Everything about her pulls me in, even though I know I should be fighting against the current.

“Come in, make yourself comfortable,” she says, gesturing toward a sleek, inviting sofa.

I look around, hoping to hear the pitter-pat of little feet, but Win is nowhere to be seen.

“Thanks,” I say, taking a seat and wondering what she needed to tell me so badly she was willing to bring me here, to her home, possibly alone.

“Drink?” Lara offers, already gliding toward a bar that’s modern and carefully hides away a collection of alcohol bottles, all looking top shelf, because, of course, they are. She doesn’t do anything in halves, and I admire that about her.

“Sure,” I say, still mesmerized by the view – and I don’t mean the one out the windows, either. I watch her move as she shifts her weight from one hip to the other, looking pretty and comfortable in dark leggings with a loose sweater on over the top. Her hair is pulled up into a messy bun that’s adorable. She looks relaxed, in her element, and just as beautiful like this as she is in designer dresses.

“Make it two,” I say, finally tearing my gaze away from her. I’ll need the alcohol to face whatever happens next. Because I think she’s about to fire me. We both know that this pull between us... eventually it’s going to become too much to fight. And when that day comes, we’ll break our the past stays there agreement.

She walks over and I try not to stare as she hands me a glass. “Whiskey, right?” she says, and I smile that she remembers my drink of choice from all those years ago.

“I don’t drink often anymore,” I say, meeting her eyes over the rim of my glass. “Only on special occasions.”

She blinks and nods, as if taking that into account. Her response tells me this is not going to be a special occasion, and that knowledge kicks my heart rate into double time.

The penthouse seems so silent after the noise I’d experienced before. Win has a huge personality and the space feels empty without him. I want to ask where he is, but I don’t want to spook her. He seems like a tender topic, and I don’t want to cause

problems. The quiet seems to amplify every small sound.

We sit opposite each other. Lara's almost got me drooling with the way her legs are crossed so elegantly while I try to match the calm in her body language.

I glance over when I hear the soft sound of tires on marble and see Damon.

"Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt," he says, halting his wheelchair before taking off toward another part of the penthouse.

"Hey, no worries," I say, but he's already gone. Lara's watching him go, a half-smile pulling at the corners of her mouth. She looks back at me, and that smile is still there, but it dims slightly. Another bad sign.

"Your brother lives with you?" I ask, not to be rude, but I'd assumed he was here before in solidarity. As I ask, I nod in the direction he disappeared.

"Yes." Her voice is soft as velvet. "I'm all he has." She lifts her shoulders as if there's no other option. "He's amazing."

"It looks like you two have a good relationship and he's lucky to have you."

She snorts. "I'm the lucky one. He's been through a lot, and he's still an amazing uncle and man."

"I love that you take care of your family." There's so much to respect about her I'm having trouble keeping track of everything.

"That's what we're supposed to do," she says, glancing after her brother.

I want to tell her that not everyone would do what she's done. Plenty of people don't

care for loved ones who need support. She's a wonderful woman and this is another piece of her, another layer of the woman who's never really left my mind for five years now.

She nods, and takes a deep breath, as if steeling herself. I try to prepare for what she's going to say next. There's no bracing myself for being fired from a job I love and losing the woman I've been falling for, but I have to try to keep calm and relaxed, no matter what.

As she exhales, I sense she's struggling, too. But when she speaks, her voice doesn't waver.

"There's something I need to tell you." Her eyes lock onto mine, unflinching.

My brow furrows. That's an odd way to fire someone. Why word it like that? It's not like her to be awkward with words.

"Go ahead," I say as the silence stretches out between us.

"There's no easy way to say this. But I feel like I screwed up and I need to make things right." Another deep breath and a lightening of her shoulders, as if some burden is being eased as she speaks.

"What could she possibly need to make right? I blink, suddenly feeling comfortable I'm not being fired, but worried what this means instead.

"It's about my son, Winston. Win." Her gaze glazes over with warmth and love, and I can feel the depth of her devotion to him. He's such a delightful little guy, I can understand why. There's something familiar about him, something I can't quite place. My guess is that it's his personality, so like his mother.

Then she seems to snap back, and her gaze meets mine. “Our son.”

I can’t breathe.

How...

I think back to those two nights, so long ago. I hadn’t used protection, and I guess she wasn’t on any, either.

“Our son?” My throat tightens around the words, and I feel the blood drain from my face.

She nods again, slower this time. “I should’ve told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

Why didn’t she? Why did she hide him from me for so long? Questions pound inside my skull, a relentless drumming like the beat of waves on the shore. How? Why? But do any of them matter in the face of the realization that I have a child? I have a son. I’m a dad.

“Does he... does he know about me?” My voice sounds like it’s coming from far away, and distorted like I’m speaking under water.

“He knows he has a dad...” She trails off, as if internally wrestling with – or justifying – something. “I wanted to wait for the right moment...”

The right moment? To tell him that I’m his dad?

“Were you ever going to tell me?” I ask.

She freezes, and I sense her fear this time. I’ve asked a question she doesn’t want to answer, but I need to know. I don’t know why I need to know, but I do.

Her tongue darts across her lips and she blinks, then begins to ever-so-slowly shake her head.

No.

She was never going to tell me about my son.

“Why?” I ask, pain taking a stranglehold on my throat. “Why weren’t you going to tell me?”

She sighs, as if deciding that she’s already told this secret, what’s the harm in coming completely clean. “I looked you up all those years ago. I ran because I learned...” She swallows hard. “That you were... in business with some shady people.”

She’s right. Some of the jobs I did back then were less than legal, but they were all to claw my way out of generational debt and poverty. I did what I had to to survive and to take care of my mom after my father died.

But instead of coming to me with her concerns and learning my side of things, she’d run away, cut me out, and hid my son from me. Anger rises up in my throat, sour as bile and burning.

“I know I messed up, and I don’t know what I can do besides say I’m sorry.” She sounds genuinely pained by the whole situation, but she’s not the one who has lost four years of her son’s life. I am.

There's so much I've missed, so much I don't know. So many years lost that I'll never get back. I'll never get that time back, never get to hold him as a baby never get to see his first steps, never get to hear his first word. I've missed so much and the anger within me turns to pain.

“Can we tell him now?” The question bursts out, fueled by a sudden, desperate need to connect to this new reality and my son.

“Of course,” Lara says, her expression softening. “He's asleep right now, but soon.”

Soon feels like far too long after all the time I've lost.

I can't get that time back, but I can make sure I don't miss another moment moving forward. “As soon as possible, please. I've already missed so much time.”

She looks like I've punched her in the gut; her face goes pale and pain fills her features, and I think, for the first time, the reality of what she's done sinks in for her. She was there for everything I missed.

“Thank you,” I say, my heart racing a thousand unnamed emotions. I'm a father. The thought is both terrifying and exciting. I can't wait to be a dad, to take him to games, go camping, teach him to swim, all the things I wish my dad had been there to do for me.

Lara watches me, her gaze offering a silent apology.

“Okay,” I say, dropping my hands on my knees. What else can I say after having this bombshell dropped in my lap? “Okay.”

“Are you okay?” she asks, concern filling those striking eyes of hers.

I nod and stand, my legs shaky, and my stomach twists violently, like I'm going to be sick. “I need to make a call,” I say, my voice somehow sounding more composed than I feel.

“Of course,” she says. Her kind tone only makes it harder to look at her. She stands

up and gestures me out onto a balcony and I step out. “It’s private out there,” she says.

I thank her, feeling the crisp night air on my skin. The city sprawls below, lights twinkling like distant stars, and the world I know suddenly feels very far away. Nothing has changed, but everything is different. I pull out my phone and dial the number that I call once a day.

“Lark?” She sounds happy to hear from me, but surprised, too.

“Mom?” My voice is a whisper that breaks, and I lean on the balcony.

“What’s wrong? Are you hurt?” Her voice fills with immediate concern, and I try to figure out how to tell her what I’ve learned. But I need to tell someone, and she has a right to know, too.

“Mom, it’s...” I pause, searching for words that won’t come to the front of my mind. “Lara had a baby. My baby. Our son. I have a son.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath on the other end. “Oh, Lark.” I can hear her heart break in the words and it’s almost enough to bring tears to my eyes, but I blink.

“Four years, Mom. He’s four, and I didn’t know.” Anger surges, alternating with pain. “She never told me. She wasn’t going to tell me. Ever.”

“But she did.”

“How do I forgive her for stealing four years of my son’s life from me?” The bitterness in my voice burns my throat like pure moonshine.

“Sweetheart, listen to me,” Mom says firmly, the way she hasn’t done since I was a

kid facing scraped knees or broken dreams. “Lara made a choice. Maybe it wasn’t the one you wanted, but she did what she thought was right at the time.”

“But I missed everything!” My voice cracks, and I hate how weak and broken I sound.

“Being angry now won’t change the past,” she says in a gentle, yet unyielding, voice. “But that anger could cost you a future with him. Your son needs his father, Lark. Don’t lose sight of that.”

She’s right. Of course, she’s right. I can’t throw away a lifetime for four years.

“Okay,” I whisper, the fight draining out of me, replaced by a sense of knowing what I need to do now, even if I don’t want to. “Thanks, Mom.” I can always count on her to guide me in moments like this.

“Go back to her and him,” she says softly. “Go be a dad.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“You’re going to be an amazing father. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Just like that, her voice is gone and I lower the phone, scanning the city and inhaling the cool night air for a few more moments, gathering my thoughts and composure.

Then, with a deep breath, I turn back toward the door, toward my son, toward Lara. It’s time to face whatever comes next, not as a man blindsided by the past, but as a father ready to embrace the future.

Lara did what she thought was right at the time. And I can't say for sure she was wrong. Which also means I can't hold this against her or it'll become poison in my veins.

I step back into Lara's penthouse, sliding the glass door closed behind me. She looks up, her eyes wide and worried.

"Sorry," I say, my voice rougher than I intend. "I needed... a moment." I rub the back of my neck with one hand, searching for what I want to say next. "I wish you'd felt safe enough to tell me."

Lara's gaze meets mine, and there's a vulnerability there that tightens something in my chest. She brings one leg to her chest and winds her arms around it while her other foot rests on the floor. Planting her chin on her knee, she looks up at me.

"I wasn't afraid of you. Just... the company you kept."

Well, that would have been her mistake. I wasn't much more trustworthy than those I was working with at the time.

"And I didn't know how." There's something hopeless in the way she lifts her shoulders and lets them drop.

"Can I see him?" The question slips out, then more thoughts and ideas follow. "Can I take him home? Just for a bit? My mom—his grandma—she'd love to meet him."

It's a big ask. I know that. Four years of life, of missed first steps, words, birthdays. Four years of being a ghost father. And now I'm here, trying to scoop up lost time like it's something you can hold.

But Lara shakes her head, a slow, pained motion. "I'm not ready, Lark. This is... it's

too much.”

I understand, but this isn’t easy for me, either. Surely she can see that.

“Another day won't make it easier,” I say, the words so quiet I’m not sure she hears them at first.

“Please,” she whispers, and the weight of that single word nearly crushes me. “I need time.”

And just like that, the future I'm trying to build crumbles around the edges. Another moment gone, another memory I won't have. It's torture, this waiting, this wanting. But I nod because what else can I do?

“Okay,” I agree, the promise feeling like shards of glass in my throat. “We'll wait.”

Lara’s eyes soften, and for a moment, I see a flicker of the woman I once knew.

The woman I started to fall for all those years ago when we share time and two passionate nights together on a vacation that’s still embedded in my mind as a memory I play on repeat.

I can tell by the trembling in her shoulders that this isn’t easy for her, either. Of course it’s not.

I take a deep breath, knowing that if she’s not ready for me to take my son for a night or to meet his grandmother, then she’s also not going to be ready for the other thoughts that’s been chasing its tail round and round my mind.

“Thank you.” She sounds so relieved I want to walk over and wrap my arms around her. But I know that if I dare touch her, this night will turn out very differently than

what either of us intend. And I know she feels it, too, this impossible pull between us that even now whispers for me to close the gap between us and kiss her. To say the hell with our agreement and take what's mine. What should be mine. What I claimed years ago. Her .

And as I stand there with my thoughts, I try to figure out the best way and time to tell her the whole truth. Because I guess I haven't been totally honest with her, either.

She lifts her head and looks at me. "What do you want to do now?" she asks in a delicate voice.

My face must have given away the dirty thoughts in my mind, because she inhales, quickly looking away. "Should we talk more? Make plans? Set boundaries?"

Her amended question sounds a lot less fun than what sprang to my mind, but hers is more practical and necessary.

Because it's not just about my son. It's about her, too. Lara. I want her in my life, too, not just as the mother of my child, but as someone I care about deeply.

"We could do any or all of them, if you're ready and willing." The words ready and willing have an effect on her. She shivers and goose bumps break out across her arms.

I swallow hard. I want to be there for my son, to make up for lost time, but I also want to be there for Lara. I want to win her heart and make her mind. I want to convince her to spend her life with me. There's no one I'd rather share in the joys and sorrows of life with.

"I think we should sleep on it," she says, refusing to meet my gaze.

I nod, knowing full well that sleep isn't going to change my mind or my plans. "Whatever it takes," I say, and she stiffens, throwing an unreadable glance at me.

I know one thing for certain: I'm not going to give up. Not on my son, and not on her.

I'll wait, as long as it takes. Because some things are worth fighting for. And this, this is one of them.

Lara

Candle flames dance like tall grasses in summer breezes, their soft glow illuminating the darkness of the upper level of the exclusive restaurant, Lux, Lark brought us to.

Overhead, the glass roof lets in the silvery moonlight and the quiet of the space is broken only by the delicate piano music playing from somewhere.

The place is like a scene from a dream, and we're alone.

"How did you do this?" I ask, my voice tiny.

"I rented the whole place for a night and had them close it down so we'd be alone." His intense green eyes stand out even more with his dark suit. He's so handsome I could cry. Not that I'd want to smudge the makeup I'd applied with a careful hand. At least any mascara that landed on this dress wouldn't be obvious; I'd chosen a little black number that's a touch too short for my liking and shows off far too much of my thighs. But we're alone, so I'm not too worried.

"For you," he says, offering me a bouquet of yellow roses, baby's breath, and pretty blue puffball flowers I don't recognize with a gentle tilt of his hand.

"They're beautiful, thank you," I say, touching one of the blue flowers with a fingertip, only to discover the tiny flowers that make up the ball are fuzzy.

"Shall we?" He gestures to the table set for two, a private spot in the middle of the loft area.

“Sure.” My voice steadies as I follow him, my heels clicking on the floor.

We settle into our seats, the clink of fine china and the rustle of fabric filling the silence. I glance up, only to be caught in Lark’s intense gaze. It pins me, holds me captive. There’s something unreadable there, a depth that invites and warns all at once.

“It’s a beautiful night,” I say, trying to sound casual, as if I can ignore the tightness in my chest.

“Perfect for a dance with a beautiful woman,” he replies, a corner of his mouth lifting.

I want to make some joke about him finding me a pretty woman to dance with, but I’m far too nervous. “Maybe after dinner.”

“Of course.”

I never would have expected a gesture like this, and I’m at a loss. This feels like a date, but is it? Is there some chance that he and I can be something more? Maybe we could— no. I’m being a silly romantic. If I entertain a relationship with him, I’ll lose myself in the process. I know that.

Needing to escape for a moment, I slide my chair back, the soft scrape the only sound. I make my way to the windows and Lark follows. Side by side, we look out over the city. The lights all around us twinkle like we’re floating in a galaxy all our own.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper, before glancing over and catching sight of his profile. He’s handsome against the skyline, and the scent of his cologne warms my lungs.

“You’re beautiful.” His voice is confident, smooth as the velvet sky above us.

“It must've cost a fortune to close down the whole place.” I can't help but let out a soft laugh, colored with disbelief. The restaurant, usually bustling with life, is now quiet and surreal.

“That doesn't matter.” He turns, and that gaze—so intense, so full of something I don’t dare name—captures mine. “I wanted it to just be us tonight.”

A shiver runs through me, desire and caution tangling like ivy on old stone walls. I want to lean into that gaze, to accept what he’s offering. But that wouldn’t be smart, for either of us. We work together now, and mixing business and pleasure is a really bad idea. Besides, we both agreed to let the past stay there. But Lark seems intent on building a future.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I say, hoping my humor masks the shiver and my worry that he’ll see right through me.

“Everywhere?” he asks, arching an eyebrow and making his thoughts clear.

A blush warms my cheeks and I look away, taking in the beauty laid out before us. How can I respond to that when all I want is for him to pull me close and kiss me? Coming out with him was a mistake. But when he asked to take me to dinner, I didn’t think we’d be alone in this intimate of a space. I thought he wanted to talk business, or about our son, or to make plans about being a father. This feels like none of those things.

“Are you trying to impress me?” My words are playful, but my heart pounds so hard I feel faint. There’s no way he can’t hear my pulse, but thankfully, he doesn’t say anything.

“Maybe.” A half-smile plays on his lips. “Is it working?”

“Perhaps,” I say, feeling the pull of his presence. “But don't think we should take this further.” Why does it hurt to say the words? I'm making the right choice... it shouldn't make breathing painful.

“I wouldn't dream of it.” His reply is soft, and almost certainly a total lie. He didn't bring me here with the intention of talking business or about our son. This is a date.

Thankfully, we're interrupted by the waiter. He places a bottle of wine on the table with a soft thud. Two glasses follow and he looks everywhere but at us, as if trying not to invade our privacy. He vanishes into the shadows, and Lark leads me back to the table.

We sit and Lark's fingers curl around the neck of the bottle, expertly tilting it over two crystal glasses. The wine pours, a rich crimson ribbon catching the flicker of candlelight.

“Chateau Margaux,” he says, as if the name holds some significance. I don't drink a lot of wine – or much alcohol in general – so I'm not an expert by any means.

Still, I give a polite nod, watching the dance of shadows on the black tablecloth. My fingers brush against the stem of my glass, feeling the cool, smooth glass and wishing I wasn't so warm. Though I doubt the heat I feel has anything to do with the temperature.

“Why are you doing this, Lark?” I ask, the question bursting out of me. I didn't know I needed answers, but boy do I.

He pauses, his glass halfway to his lips, and searches my face. “Isn't it obvious?” he replies, his eyebrows twitching as he places the glass back on the table without a

taste. “I want to make things right between us.”

I didn’t know things weren’t right between us.

My confusion must be showing on my face, because he smiles and reaches out to put his hand on mine.

I didn’t expect this — not a date, not the seclusion that makes the evening feel like we're the only two people in the world. There's an elephant in the room, and it's the thought of him here for me instead of our son. It squeezes my heart, but I can't look away from his gaze, intense even in the low light.

“Make things right?” I ask, feeling a tight smile pull at the corners of my mouth. “Or is this your way of warming me up? Softening the blow before you take our son?” The words come out cooler than I intend.

He leans in, a frown creasing his brow. “I wouldn’t use tactics like that with you.” His voice lowers, sincere or convincingly feigning sincerity. “This is about us, too, not just him. Though he is a part of everything.”

The desire I've tried so hard to bury rises within me, a persistent sensation of heat pooling low in my belly as my body demands he come closer and touch me. That feeling has never really faded, no matter how much I've wished it away.

With a sigh, I let go of the breath I didn't know I'd been holding. “I remember what we had, Lark,” I say. “It was supposed to be a harmless fling, then we’d never see each other again. Then I learned too much about you...” I bite down on my lip to stop the flow of words.

His hand, still on mine, feeling warm and safe, gently squeezes. “I'm not asking for forgiveness, and I can’t change the past,” he says softly. "I’m asking to be part of

your life, and our son's, too.”

Guilt pricks at me, sharp and bitter. I'd cut him out completely, shielded myself behind walls I built to keep myself and my child safe. His child. Our child. Yet here he is, still trying to get over, under, or through the defenses I'd painstakingly constructed.

“Can we do that?” I whisper, looking down at our intertwined hands, the contact sending a jolt of warmth up my arm and through my chest.

“Maybe, maybe not,” he says, hope flooding his words. “But we can try, and that’s all I’m asking.”

The clink of dishes has us jolting apart as the waiter comes by, placing plates before us before vanishing again.

We wait until we’re certain he’s gone out of earshot, picking up our silverware as I study the delicious salmon and risotto that’s been beautifully plated. It’s almost a shame to eat the food and destroy how pretty it is. But my stomach grumbles in protest and I take a quick bite.

The food melts in my mouth and the flavors are an explosion of perfection. No wonder this place is so exclusive... the food is incredible.

But I don’t just want to eat in silence and ignore Lark. “Tell me about you, Lark. The parts I missed.”

He pauses, his fork halfway to his lips, and sets it down with deliberate slowness. A shadow darkens his powerful features, and a barricade rises behind those bright green eyes. “There’s not much to tell.” The way he deflects and flashes a half-smile tells me that there is so, so much to tell. “Dad passed when I was young. Mom and I... we've

always been close.”

His words are sparse, but they carry a lot of weight. I sense the pain lurking beneath the surface, even though his facade doesn’t slip.

“Your mother is wonderful,” I say, remembering her treats and how she’d made the whole office happy the day she’d come in.

He nods, a genuine softness in his features for a moment. “She is. I’m lucky to have her in my life.”

Then, with the subtlety of a charging bull, he turns the conversation toward our son. “Winston. What’s he like?”

A swell of pride warms me as I speak of our child. “He’s high-energy, fun-loving, and sweet. He has your smile and eyes.” Even as my heart swells, it constricts, too. Lark’s presence means sharing—splitting time, splitting memories. It stings more than I expect.

“Sounds like he’s going to keep us on our toes,” Lark says, a twinkle of amusement lighting up his expression.

“Definitely.” My laughter sounds oddly flat, almost sad, as if the emotions warring within me are tipping toward sadness.

When the last bite of dessert—a chocolate cherry mousse—is gone, the sweet taste still lingering, I breathe a sigh. I’ve had a good time with Lark. This has been the perfect end to an unexpected evening.

Lark rises and offers his hand with gentle grace, eyes alight with something warm, something dangerous.

“May I have this dance?” His voice, a soft growl, sends a flutter through me.

My mouth opens, but no words come out. I want to say yes. I want to say no. I want to stall and try to figure out what the heck to say or do next. This isn't part of the plan.

“Okay,” I whisper, my traitorous mouth making the choice for me even though my head and heart say this is a very bad idea. My hand finds his and I feel a jolt of electricity at the contact.

He leads me, steady and calm, to the middle of the open space of the loft. His touch is light on my waist, pulling me into his arms. His right hand and my left entwine, our fingers laced as he places his other hand on my hip.

Nothing else matters as we move as one, our steps small and intimate. He's an expert at leading me, and I follow with more grace than I ever thought I might. I'm not used to following. I'm used to leading, but with him, this feels natural.

“Thank you,” I whisper, unsure if I'm grateful for the dance or the way he's made me feel alive again.

Lark only smiles and I rest my head on his chest, loving the closeness and the rhythm of his heart under my ear.

His fingertips send warmth creeping across my waist and my whole body is screaming for him to do more, to touch me, to take me, to give me a taste of the passion we'd shared all those years ago. Would it still be as incredible?

“Relax,” he whispers, his breath tickling my ear.

A laugh tries to bubble up, but I push it back down. Relax? Easier said than done. I glance up at him, a question on the tip of my tongue. But my voice won't work.

I should push away, put space between us. Every instinct screams that I'm making a huge mistake, one I'll regret. Yet here I am, shifting closer, my arm winding around the curve of his shoulder. The fabric of his shirt is soft against my skin, and the scent of his cologne is as fresh as the crisp night air.

"Is this okay?" he asks, his voice rumbling.

I nod, because "okay" doesn't even begin to cover the chaos boiling away within me. My heart beats like a wounded, wild animal, and I'm hungry for something other than food. But above all, I'm hyper-aware of the spaces where our bodies meet.

"Good."

We dance on, and I let myself a moment of fantasy. We could make this work. Maybe we are right for one another. Maybe I need to just let go and let him into my life – clearly he's meant to be here.

"Remember this?" His voice is low, intimate, and I instinctively know he's talking about his touch, the reaction he stirs within me.

"How could I forget?" I whisper.

"Then why fight it?"

"Because..." The truth claws at my throat, and I swallow hard. "...it's complicated."

"Isn't it always?" His chuckle vibrates through me.

I rest there, against him, thinking all the thoughts I should be saying. That we can't do this. That we work together. That the past was likely just a fluke. That we're both very different people than we were back then. That it would be difficult to explain to

Win that his dad and I are back together when he's only meeting his dad for the first time.

I should leave. Run. But instead, I promise myself just a few more minutes. We can stop anytime – just not yet.

I've missed him. The laughter, the lightness, the reckless abandon. But it's foolish for me to think there's anything beyond our crazy chemistry.

"Tonight was unexpected," I say, feeling grateful because I am enjoying myself and have been, even if this is all a mistake.

"Good unexpected, I hope," he says, stepping closer, his warmth radiating over me.

"Very good." It's the truth, even if I regret all of this later.

Our dance slows, and he draws me in, his hands firm on my waist. The floral scent of the nearby blossoms mingles with his scent and our meals, a mouthwatering combination. His eyes search mine, and whatever he finds there seems to embolden him.

"I want to kiss you," he whispers, his breath a caress against my skin.

"So do it," I say.

A slight smile tugs the corners of his lips and he leans down. His lips meet mine, soft and full, sweet and filled with heat. For a fleeting heartbeat, everything is perfect—the hurt, the past, the uncertainties—they all dissolve.

The waiter comes by, and we regretfully pull apart. Lark walks closer to him, murmuring something to him, and I catch the words "to go" and "for two" before he

comes back to me, a satisfied smile playing on his lips.

“What did you do?” I ask, feeling curiosity.

“Ordered something for the road,” he says, leaving me more confused, not less.

I frown, about to ask more questions, but he continues, “For our son and your brother.”

My heart skips. He remembers, cares enough to think of not only our son, but my brother, too. “You didn't have to do that.”

“Maybe not.” He shrugs, but there’s a tenderness in his eyes that wasn't there before. “But I wanted to.”

The drive home is silent and all I can think about is our closeness earlier. Dancing with him. When we pull up to my door, the evening's magic feels like it’s coming to a close... and that’s a letdown.

I hesitate outside the car, the moment stretching between us as he takes my arm to walk me to my door.

“Thank you for tonight,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Thank me by enjoying it,” he replies, his tone low and smooth.

I expect him to kiss me—deep, hungry, desperate like before—but instead, he cups my face gently, leans in, and his lips brush my cheek with a feather-light touch.

The heat from his kiss lingers on my skin as I watch him walk away. My hand lifts unconsciously, fingers tracing the tingling path his lips left behind.

As the night swallows his car, one thought finalizes in my mind, never to be changed again: There's no escaping Lark. No escaping the way he makes me feel, the way he sees through my defenses, the way he quietly claims a space in my life—for himself, and for our son.

And maybe, just maybe, I don't want to escape at all.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

Sunlight filters through the tall trees, casting playful shadows on emerald grasses in the private park we're roaming. Our son dashes ahead, his small feet leaving impressions in the soft grass, his laughter floating back to us on the sometimes-swift breeze.

At my side, Lara peeks up at me. There's a new heat in her eyes, a look that gives me hope for more. To hell with the agreement that we will leave the past there. I'm going to do everything in my power to make her mine. And I'm going to do so by showing her that not only am I an amazing father, but that I'll be amazing to her, too.

"Look over there, Dad!" Win turns to look at us, pointing toward a patch of wildflowers scattered amongst the well-maintained grasses. The bright joy in his voice warms my insides, and I glance the direction he's pointing.

"Wow, amazing, buddy!" I say, bending down to his level even though he's far ahead.

Around us, the park blooms with life; vibrant flowers nod in the breeze, the sweet scent of them mingling with the piney and cut-grasses smells. A wall of trees and bushes edge the park, offering privacy and a feeling of being miles away from the real world.

"Mommy, catch me!" He runs toward her, and she kneels down, opening her arms as the wind toys with her loose hair. She's never been more beautiful, but I swear I have those words on repeat in my mind most of the time. Her pants fit her thighs perfectly,

her slightly loose blouse flowing into her dipped-in waist in a way that's flattering and makes my mouth water.

"Gotcha!" she says as he leaps into her arms. She laughs, and I just take a moment to study them. Together, they are a picture of carefree joy in a setting of pure nature and beauty.

But I have a surprise for them, and I can't wait any longer to get started.

"Let's explore over there," I say, pointing toward an area where the shrubbery creates an alcove.

"Race you!" He's off before I finish my sentence, and I jog after him, Lara by my side. There's something too perfect in this moment, I almost wonder if this is all a dream. If it is, I'd rather not wake up.

He peeks into the alcove, finding the "treasure map" I'd left behind with his name on it. With a confused look at me, then at his mom, he asks for help. Lara plays along, but I can feel her looking sideways at me.

"It's time to go on a hunt. The first thing I need you to find is a feather." Lara's eyes are sparkling.

I watch as my son, Win, lights up with curiosity and clutches the scavenger hunt list so tightly the paper crinkles. He's quick to scan the park, and I close my eyes, remembering the list. In my neat handwriting, I'd included items to get him thinking and engaged, but also to lead him to a very specific spot, without being overly obvious.

"Alright, let's do this!" Win says, his voice filled with determination as Lara stays by his side.

He's quick to search the edges of the trees, looking for a loose feather that may have drifted down, but no luck. So he moves toward the flowing water that runs through the park, and there he spots a small, white feather. It's probably from a pigeon, but I don't care about that. I want to get his little mind working and show him how good he is at problem solving. He picks up the feather carefully and hands it to Lara, who smiles and tucks it into her bag as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Now, you need a perfectly smooth stone. Hint; check around the water." Lara's voice is as curious as our son's expression, and I wonder if she's caught on that there's more to this than there seems.

We all move closer to the water, and I can see little fish darting about, only flashes of white and silver betraying their existence. Win kneels near the edge of the water, his little hands searching through the rocks for a perfectly smooth stone. When he finds one, he adds it to his collection, and I wait to hear the next instructions.

When he's worked his way through five items, the sixth is read, and I feel my pulse pounding painfully hard. This is where I learn if my gamble paid off... or if I miscalculated. All I know is that I'm ready to see what happens next.

He moves toward the last spot mentioned on the list, though this one is a go to this spot and see if you find anything interesting instruction. He does so, and I catch Lara's sideways glance. She's aware something is about to happen, but I can tell she's not sure what exactly.

She speaks softly to me before chasing after our son. "What did you do?" The words are low, playful, and bring a smile to my lips. There's no way I'm going to tell her, she's going to have to find out when Win does. And hopefully she's not mad.

I watch them, loving every second of their joy. She holds our son's hand as they make their way to the spot indicated in the clue. The scavenger hunt has been a win, I think,

and there are so many more ideas I have like this to keep things fun and interesting for our son while helping us make the kind of memories he'll never forget.

Speaking of memories... I pull out my phone and take pictures of them. I wish I could actually freeze this moment in time to revisit whenever I wish, but this will have to do.

"Look, Dad, look!" He's moving around, looking around as if he can't find anything, and I take the cue to rejoin their world.

"You're doing great!" I offer gentle encouragement, wanting to help him build up his sense of self like my mom did for me throughout my childhood.

"It's a rock," he says, looking at me like he's confused, his words as much a question as they are a statement.

"Is it now?" I feign ignorance, scanning our surroundings. "Maybe you need to walk around it, see if you can find another clue."

His face lights up with the thrill of the hunt, like a miniature explorer ready to conquer new lands. He's quick to circle the rock, then pulls a folded bit of paper from a crack in the car-sized boulder. As he unfolds the paper, I see him look up into his mother's face for answers.

"X marks the spot, little man," she says.

"Like a pirate map?" He sounds excited and she nods.

He darts off and I follow at a much slower pace, inhaling the breeze, committing every detail of this day to memory. I think about the look on his face when she'd told him I'm his dad. I don't know what I expected, but he just stood up, walked over to

me, and wrapped me in a hug. And from there on out, he's called me dad and we get along like a house on fire.

"Find it yet?" I call out, still walking at my own pace as she hangs back with me.

"Still looking!" he shouts without slowing down, his small legs racing across the soft grass.

With the final clue before him, I take Lara's hand. I want him to have this achievement all on his own, and she seems to understand. We keep a close eye on him as he searches for where the X on the map leads. The trees overhead bend and sway, their branches shivering in the wind.

Beyond the park, some sounds of the city reach us. An occasional honk of a passing car. A dog barking. A chopper somewhere overhead.

Uncertainty gnaws at me as he comes very close to the final surprise—will he appreciate what's waiting for him at the end? Lara pulls away, closing the gap between herself and our son, no doubt not liking how far away he's getting.

"I think I got it," he says, his tone mingling triumph and uncertainty.

I freeze, anticipation winding up tight within me. Lara pivots on her heel, her gaze meeting mine across the distance. It's a silent conversation, and I can't quite read the look in her eyes.

Did I overstep? Would she tell me if I did? Does he like the gift?

Then, the world explodes into sound. His delighted squeal shatters my fears about him enjoying the present. I walk over, my heart leaping with each step. He's there, perched in the driver's seat of a miniature luxury car—a pint-sized Bentley crafted

just for him.

“Vroom, vroom!” he exclaims, steering wheel gripped in eager hands.

“Push the button,” I say, and he does so. The engine comes alive, and he instinctively presses the gas. As he moves forward, his giggle is a sound I’ll never forget. A sound of pure excitement, joy, and happiness.

“Do you like it?” I ask, already pretty sure I know the answer.

“I love it!” he shouts the words, his grin so wide it nearly cracks his face in half as he turns the wheel, the tires flattening the grass here and there. The blades are quick to spring back up, and I turn to look at Lara.

But she’s focused on our son. “Can I ride with you?” she asks in a teasing tone, bending down beside him.

“You’re too big, Mom.” He sounds so adult and serious I can’t help but chuckle.

“Guess it’s just for super cool drivers then,” she says, throwing me a glance that’s both thankful and amused.

“Only the coolest,” I say, relief washing over me. The gift is a hit. And just maybe, so am I.

I close the distance between us, my steps light. “I hope that was okay,” I say softly to Lara as we watch Win driving around, making crazy turns back and forth while making loud engine noises with his mouth.

Her eyes meet mine, a softness there surprising me.

“It can always be a toy that stays at my place...” My voice trails off as I try to read her.

She watches our son, his laughter ringing out across the grass. “He loves it, so I love it,” she says, turning back to me with a smile. “Thank you.”

I reach out, my fingers brushing hers. A shiver passes through her and she inhales, making a tiny sound that instantly has my body hyper-aware of her. She laces her fingers with mine and I squeeze gently.

“There's one more thing,” I say, the words catching slightly in my throat. My other hand slips into my pocket, pulling out the little box that has been on my mind nearly the whole time we've been here. I was hoping for a perfect moment, and this feels like the perfect moment.

It's now or never.

She tilts her head, curiosity crossing her features. I press the box into her hand, then plant a quick kiss on her forehead. “This is for you.”

I hold my breath as her hand leaves mine and her slender fingers work at the ribbon, untying the bow with a gentle tug. Thankfully, the velvet box is narrow and rectangular, so it doesn't give the wrong impression.

She lifts the lid, and I watch her eyes widen—a clear blue with that stormy gray ring.

“Wow,” she whispers, tracing the heart-shaped pendant with a fingertip.

“Turn it over,” I say.

Her hands obey, revealing the initials—our son's initials—etched into the silver. She

gasps softly her gaze warm and stunned as she looks at me.

“It's beautiful, Lark,” she says, her voice wavering.

I'd made sure this was a custom piece made just for her. And the reason is simple. “I wanted you to have something special... something to remind you of today.”

She leans in, her head finding the crook of my shoulder, fitting there like it's meant to be. Win's giggles reach us from where he drives his mini luxury car across the open grass, and everything feels right in the world.

“Thank you,” she says. “This means the world to me.”

Everything I've ever wanted is right here, with her, our son, and this moment. I place a kiss to the top of her head.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

My fingers fly across the keyboard, the clacking the only sound in my office. It's late, way past when the cleaning crew nodded their goodbyes and the last of my colleagues shut down their computers and made their ways home.

Droplets of rain cling to the windows, distorting the view outside. The city lights, usually sharp pinpricks against the night, instead merge into a watercolor of light. Reds blur into yellows, streetlamps bleed into neon signs, a view that's fascinating and exciting to take in. But I'm not focused on the outside world, or anything but the words flowing across my screen.

I've powered down the second screen because I don't need it at the moment, and I ignore that, too. I've dialed down the overheads to help ease the strain on my eyes. In the gentle ambiance I prefer for these solitary work sessions, my mind can focus, even if thoughts of him do sneak in occasionally.

I lean back, stretching the stiffness from my limbs, wishing I could do the same for the soreness. My gaze lingers on the windows for a moment, trying to focus on something far away to combat the constant closeness of the screens. The technique eases the pain gathering at the base of my skull and I breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm almost there," I whisper to myself, to keep the focus that threatens to slip away with each tick of the clock. I hate late nights. Hate not being the one to put my son to bed. Hate that he'll remember mom was busy and worked late far too many times. But some things can't be helped, and that's heartbreaking and true all at once.

My reflection stares back at me from the darkened screen of my dormant second monitor. I look determined, stubborn, and tired. The set of my lips is tight, and I actively try to relax my face.

“I’ve got this,” I say, rolling my shoulders to relieve the tension that's built up over hours of hunching and rubbing the back of my neck with one hand before diving right back into the comfort of work where I can forget everything else but what’s next, work emails, and the plans we’ve made to take the next step... once we find a partner.

For now, I just need to look over one more report. Send a few more emails. Then it's nothing but the comfort of my bed and the promise of sleep, however brief, before morning brings along a whole new set of demands.

The words on the report blur together and I let out a sigh that seems too loud in the silence. The details of the report fight like needy children for my attention. My eyes ache. I rub at the tension clawing the back of my neck, wishing it away. Why do I do this to myself? This could wait until morning, but some part of me won’t let me rest until this is complete.

“Working late?” A familiar voice startles me, and I almost fall out of my chair.

Lark stands in the doorway, but his presence fills the room like an unspoken demand for my attention. What the heck is he still doing here? It’s late, and there’s no way he still has work to do.

“Always,” I say, not turning to face him. “Deadlines don't sleep.”

“Neither do you, apparently.” He walks into my office, and I can feel his gaze on me, intense and oddly warming up my core.

“Can't afford to.” I try to sound nonchalant, focus on the screen where the words continue to blur into meaningless shapes.

“Let me help.” It's not a question, but a demand that I let him take over. But I'm not about to let anyone make demands, not even him. Outside this office, maybe he can lead, but in it, this is where I lead.

“No, I've got it.” I force my attention back to the work, wondering why he's still there, still studying me, still not making a move to go so I can get back to work, because when he's looking at me like that, I can hardly breathe, let alone accomplish anything.

He doesn't move, doesn't speak, just watches. I can almost hear the wheels turning in his head, calculating, assessing, planning.

“Go home, Lark.” My tone is sharper than I intend. “I'm fine.”

“Sure doesn't look like it.” This time concern fills his words, and I push that away, too.

“Looks can be deceiving.” I finally glance at him, meet the intensity of his gaze. And we stay like that, both refusing to look away as we come to an impasse.

“Alright then,” he says with a nod, but even as he retreats, I sense this battle isn't over. Which is just what I need, more complications as I struggle to complete the tasks at hand.

I exhale, a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I'm back in control, and I need to get back to work, no matter how much Lark clings to the edges of my thoughts.

I go back to the numbers that need taming.

“Almost done,” I whisper, more to myself than anyone else. And maybe, just maybe, I believe it.

The soft sound of footsteps has me looking up, ready to do battle with Lark again, but this time, it’s not the infuriating man I can’t stop thinking about. It’s Mark with a lifeline of hot caffeine in his hands as he approaches me with warm, brown eyes and a hint of a tired smile I feel to the depths of my bones.

“I thought you could use this,” he says, that familiar, friendly warmth I’ve come to expect from him coloring his tone.

“Thanks, Mark.” The words are automatic as I reach for the coffee, its heat seeping into my fingers. He lingers, looking past me at my screen as if trying to figure out if I’m working or avoiding going home.

“Need any help?” His gaze flicks to mine, concern deepening the slight lines in his forehead. “Shouldn’t you get home? I’m sure you have someone waiting.”

I don’t share my personal life with anyone I work with but Shana, and now Lark.

I feel a twinge of guilt that I’m not home, but I shake it off. “I appreciate it, but this is something I have to do alone.” Polite firmness and a cool distance remind him that I’m the boss and my life isn’t public knowledge or a topic for discussion. I encourage my employees to share with me so I can make sure everyone has days off they need, and everything else that comes with being a boss. But my own life? That’s off-limits.

But Mark stands rooted in place as if I didn’t just politely tell him to go away and let me work.

He doesn't move, his brows knitted as he studies my face as if searching for the truth. He’s going to find it, and when he does, it’ll be clear I’m not looking to be rescued.

Mark inches closer, the warmth of his presence pushing against my personal space. “How about a neck rub? You look tense,” he says, hands hovering in the air like he's ready to land on my shoulders.

I pull back out of reach, a refusal already crossing my lips. “That's not necessary, but thanks for the offer.” I don't want him to touch me, and I don't want this incredibly intimate moment to continue another second longer. Maybe he's not trying to be creepy, but this is getting awkward. I press my fingers to my temple, hoping to convey end-of-day exhaustion instead of discomfort.

He leans in too close, lowering his voice to a whisper. “You always do so much for everyone here. Who's taking care of you?” His words fill my ears, trying to find a place in my heart.

My pulse quickens, not from his question, but from the sudden surge of adrenaline. This is an overstep. I've already made it clear I'm not interested, so for him to continue is unacceptable. I'm about to tell him off when another voice fills the room. A deep, unexpected and familiar voice that leaves me relieved.

“Is everything okay here?” Lark asks, an air of authority to the set of his shoulders and the tightness of his features.

I turn, relief flooding my veins. With a silent, grateful thank you to the universe that sent him my direction, I speak up. “Everything's fine, Lark.” I lift my coffee. “Mark thoughtfully brought me coffee and offered help, but he's going now.”

I catch the faint lift of Lark's eyebrow, the way his eyes lock onto Mark's. There's something there, some undercurrent I don't understand and don't have the energy or time to devote to figuring out.

Mark's posture straightens, like he's quickly recalibrating his demeanor. “I'm just

trying to be helpful,” he mutters, in Lark’s general direction. But neither Lark nor I miss the defensiveness in his words and movement. He’s off-balance, whatever plans he had suddenly turned upside down by the new presence in the room.

Lark crosses his arms, his eyes narrowing just a fraction of an inch. “Oh, he’s leaving now?” The question is directed at me, but it feels like a warning shot across Mark’s bow.

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry. “Yes. He’s leaving now. I told him I don’t need his help, and I’m pretty sure he was going.” Of course, I know Mark had no intention of accepting no as an answer, but I want to make things very, very clear. And if he doesn’t get it this time, I’ll start looking for his replacement in the morning. Heck, I might do that anyway. I don’t need someone being pushy and trying to take advantage of moments when I’m tired, stressed, and trying to focus.

I want to sound assertive, remind them both that I’m not some damsel. But Lark’s intense stare warns me he might not even be hearing me anymore. He’s too intent on Mark.

Mark’s eyes dart between Lark and me, as if trying to figure out if there’s more going on than he knows. With a tight nod, he makes the smart choice and retreats. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He spins on his heel and makes a quick, almost urgent escape. Only then can I breathe easier.

Lark seems to read my sense of relief and comes closer, placing his powerful hands on my desk and making those incredible forearms flex. “You sure you’re okay?” Concern softens the hard lines of his face and makes his voice gentle.

I nod, a shiver trailing down my spine at the look in his eyes. “Yes, I’m fine.” My voice is a whisper, barely audible over the hum of the air conditioner still running full blast. “Thank you for checking on me.”

His gaze doesn't waver. I'd swear he's searching my face for something more than the words I'm saying, as if he's not quite sure I'm being completely honest. And maybe I'm not, but I really want to get work done and get home to my comfortable bed. Because it's been a long day and I'm tired.

But his gaze lingers, holding me captive in the stillness of the office. Then, as if satisfied with what he sees, he relaxes slightly, the protective edge melting away. "Good. I just want to make sure you're safe."

Something about his words leaves my heart thumping faster than it should and I wonder why I'm having a reaction to his protectiveness. I don't need a man to keep me safe. I wouldn't have hesitated to mace Mark if he got too bold. But still, knowing Lark's deep-seated need to protect me... it's exciting in all the wrong ways.

And in that moment, with rain trickling trails down the windows and the quiet hum of the room, I see something more in Lark's eyes. Something that tells me this isn't just about my safety. This is about us.

Lark stays put, his presence filling the room in a way he has no right to do. My heart races, each beat a drum echoing through the quiet office. I catch my breath and try to steady myself.

"Thanks for stepping in," I say, needing to fill the silence between us and tell him how I feel about the whole situation.

"It's my pleasure," he says, the words resonating through my body and leaving me thinking about the nights we spent together. With this man, pleasure is a trigger word that unleashes memories that could drown me if I let them.

I want to dismiss him in some desperate struggle to keep things professional, though I know I've been failing pretty spectacularly at that. But there's something between us,

some pull I can't quite fight against. Maybe I don't want to fight. And the words just won't come. I swivel my chair slightly away in a delicate attempt to put some distance between us and hopefully break free of this intense tug trying to pull us together.

"Late nights are part of the job," I say, keeping both my words and tone casual, though I feel anything but. "You know how it is."

He nods, but his gaze doesn't waver. "Doesn't mean you have to face them alone."

That's an offer if I've ever heard one. I can feel the weight of the necklace around my neck, the one he'd given me, and I see his gaze travel down to it between the lapels of my deep purple blouse. His gaze meets mine and I resist the urge to reach up and touch the pendant. It's special to me. Like him. Like our past. Like our son. But just because something is special doesn't mean it's worth risking everything for. Right?

"Thank you again," I say, as if that'll shoo him off. Of course, it doesn't work, and his offer still stands between us like a whole other person, tempting, dangerous. We're colleagues, we're friends—no, not just friends. The shift between us is obvious, and I know we're both aware of it. But that doesn't mean we can do anything about it.

Spending time with him has been fun, but that's where it has to end.

"Maybe," I say, finally addressing his offer, hoping that'll be the ticket to getting him out of my hair. "But some things can't be shared." There, I said it.

"Like what?" His voice drops lower, oddly intimate despite the very real possibility that some other late-stayer might pop into my office to make my world more bizarre.

"Like... certain responsibilities." My answer is weak, and I don't have a stronger one.

So I turn back to the screen, pretending to focus on the words in the report that are still blurring before my eyes like the traitors they are.

“Everyone needs help sometimes and there’s nothing wrong with that.” He leans closer, his scent flowing around me.

I stand abruptly, turning to face him. “And some of us need to learn to manage on our own.” There’s a place I can go that he won’t follow, and I’ll go if I have to.

His brow furrows with either confusion or concern—it’s hard to tell. “Lara...”

Nope, I’m not doing this right now. We’re not doing this right now. Not tonight.

“Look, Lark,” I cut him off, my voice stronger now. “I appreciate it, really. But this,” I gesture vaguely at the space between us while meaning the tension, the attraction, the deepening need between us, “it’s not what I need.”

He studies me, searching for answers to questions he’s not asking out loud, and I’m not sure if he finds the responses or not. But he gives a nod and straightens up, his posture suddenly so closed off I have to wonder if I’ve just broken this delicate thing between us. But if it’s that fragile, then it wasn’t meant to be and it’s better to cut my losses and run anyway. “Okay,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, though my insides twist with the effort of trying to make him think I don’t care what happens next, even though I very much do.

He turns to leave, and every fiber of my being screams to reach out, to call him back. But I don’t. I can’t.

This, this thing we’re doing – whatever it is, I have no idea how to quantify it – it’s dangerous. And I know if I don’t step back now, if I let him sweep me off my feet, I’ll

lose more than my balance—I'll lose myself.

As he walks out the office door, a shiver runs through me. I'm safe, yes. But at what cost? And why can't I shake the feeling that I've just broken something that might not be able to be fixed, no matter how hard I try?

And if I've broken it, why is it so hard to remind myself that anything so fragile isn't real anyway?

Besides, the more concerning part of all of this is how much I wanted him to pull me into his arms, pin me between my desk and his powerful body, and take us both to the past and those scorching hot nights spent together.

I squeeze my eyes closed, the memories of his hands, his body, the pleasure that he unleashed in me...

Opening my eyes, I breathe out and tell myself I did the right thing. Back then, being with him, I knew we'd wind up out of control. I'd lose myself. And I know now that the same will happen if we take this leap.

And I can't afford to lose myself in a relationship with a man. Even if that man is my child's father. I have too many plans, too big of dreams, too much ambition to be held back by someone, even if that someone makes me feel alive.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lark

Stepping into my childhood home is like walking back in time to when I was younger.

Even when I offered to buy my mother a bigger, newer, more upscale place, she'd refused. She told me she wanted to live here with the memories of raising me and the time we'd had with my father while he was still here.

That thought squeezes my heart as my finger trails along the craftsman cabinets my father had built into the front room to hold shoes and jackets.

"Your dad was so proud of that," Mom says from the kitchen, her voice warm and filled with a bittersweet nostalgia.

"As he should have been." It's impressive, really. The man's ability to build literally anything had been something my mom remembers fondly and often when reminiscing about the man.

I wander into the living room, drawn to the mantle. Or more accurately, the pictures above it. I can close my eyes and remember stockings hung here every year, cozy fires, times spent drinking hot cocoa on the couch with my mom.

There he is, Dad, frozen mid-laugh in a frame of tarnished silver. Beside him, a little me grins toothlessly, likely just happy to hear his laugh. I wonder, as I have so many times before, what made him laugh like that? Was it something I did? Some silly baby antic that made him burst out laughing? I swear if I clear my mind enough I can

hear his laughter, though there's no way that's possible.

"I always thought I'd follow in his footsteps," I say, thinking about his skill woodworking. But I'd gone a totally different direction.

"Still can." Mom's optimism never wanes; it's one of the things I love about her.

"Maybe in another life."

I turn away, eyes catching on the familiar scuffs along the hallway—battle scars from indoor soccer matches and reckless sprints from imaginary monsters. Each mark, each dent in the hardwood, a story. A memory. Time spent with a mother who raised me to see the value in myself and how a good parent can make or break a person. I only wonder what my life would have been like with both her and my dad.

"This place hasn't changed a bit," I say, my whisper meant more for me than mom.

"It wouldn't feel right if it did." Mom leans against the doorframe, apron-clad, flour dusting her hands. "And I don't have the heart to change a single thing." Her gaze wanders the memories, a faraway look in her eyes telling me she's in another place, another time.

"You're right." Of course, she is.

I continue wandering, wondering if it's healthy that the place feels like a museum. Dad's recliner sits untouched, the leather creased from years of use. The TV, ancient by today's standards, still has a VCR attached—mom never cared to upgrade or change things, preferring to be here alone with her memories after I left home.

"You should've seen him trying to fix that thing," Mom says, pointing to the VCR. "He swore it just needed 'a little love'." Mom's soft laugh fills my heart even as

sorrow creeps in.

“Love couldn't save it from obsolescence.” I think a moment about how far we've come just in my lifetime, but my mom isn't quiet.

“Nothing does.” Her smile fades, just for a second.

We stand there, lost in the past, of what used to be. The house seems too quiet, as if holding its breath while we remember a man who was taken from us far too soon.

“Sometimes it feels like he's still here.” Mom sounds heartbroken even after all these years, and I can't imagine how hard things have been for her.

“Maybe he is.” I'm not one to believe in things like that, but I know mom finds comfort in thinking everything happens for a reason, and that just because we can't see something or touch it or quantify it doesn't mean it's not real.

Mom nods and wipes her hands on her apron, ready to return to the kitchen. “I hope so.”

I pace the length of the living room, my gaze lingering on a photo of me as a toddler perched on my father's shoulders. My heart tightens; I am a father now, too.

The weight of that truth settles heavily on my chest. Love for my son swells within me, fierce and protective. Yet there's this gnawing fear, an agonizing whisper warning that I could lose him—and Lara. I lost my dad. I'm no stranger to the unfairness of life.

I know firsthand the pain of growing up with an absent father. I can't be that. Won't be that. But fear is a constant companion that likes to whisper doubts and regrets. What if I fail him? What if I can't keep him safe? What if he grows up and we grow

apart?

“Still pacing like a caged lion?”

I glance up at mom, who’s smiling at me from the doorway. She’s told me at least a hundred times that I can’t help her make dinner, but I’m about to make that a hundred and one.

“Can I help?” I ask.

She shakes her head. I know she sees right through me, always has.

“I know that look,” she says, stepping closer. Her eyes are deep with understanding. She reaches up, her hand cupping my cheek as she rises on her toes. I bend down slightly, meeting her halfway. Her lips press against my forehead, a warm peck that smells like home and cinnamon.

“You have nothing to be worried about,” she says in an attempt to assure me. It doesn’t work, because my mind has decided to run through every possibility of what can go wrong, and I can’t make it stop.

“Now stop torturing yourself.” A smile deepens the creases at the corners of her eyes.

“Easy for you to say,” I say, the corners of my mouth quirking up despite the tightness in my chest.

“Because I’m right and you know it.” She steps back, hands on her hips, looking me up and down in a way that makes me feel like a child again. “You’re a good man, Lark. A good father. Your boy knows that.”

“Does he?” He hasn’t really had the time to come to know me or that fact. And what

if I'm not a good father? What if I'm screwing everything up?

"Without a doubt." She moves past me, fussing over some trinket on the mantelpiece. "Love isn't measured in minutes or miles. It's the quality of those moments you do get, the depth of your presence when you are there."

I blink, thinking about all my interactions so far with my son. If she's right, then I'm doing pretty good. That thought brings me some relief.

"Thanks, Mom." I exhale, suddenly feeling a little more at ease about everything.

"Thank me by relaxing and enjoying tonight." She glances back at me, her expression stern but loving.

"Okay, Mom," I say with a playful attitude like I'm a teenager again.

"Good." She smiles, not at all fooled by my response. "Now, help me with these plates."

"Sure thing." I follow her into the kitchen, ready to face the evening ahead and grateful she's finally letting me help out.

A steady knock sends my heart through the roof. Mom's hand gives the small of my back a gentle nudge, propelling me forward.

"Go let them in," she says, excitement filling her voice. "I'll finish setting the table."

With a swift spin, she disappears into the kitchen, leaving a trail of excited words about meeting her grandson and the woman who stole her son's heart. I can't help but smile, her anticipation and excitement have her more animated than I can remember her being in a long time.

I shake my head, refusing to let nerves darken my mood. We're going to have a good time and enjoy a family dinner together. But what if things don't go well tonight?

I shove the thought out of my mind as I stand before the door. "Relax," I mutter under my breath, steeling myself before pulling the door open.

Lara stands there, our son's hand clasped in hers, both of their faces lighting up at the sight of me. His eyes, bright and wide, shift past me, eager for adventure.

"Hey, buddy," I say, my voice soft but filled with warmth as I hunker down to his level. He beams, squeezing his mom's hand before stepping toward me.

"I have something to show you," I say, winking at Lara before leading our son toward the backyard.

His gaze finds the towering wooden play structure. It's a fortress of fun, a place for his imagination to run wild and for him to work off some of that endless energy he has while he's here. His squeal of delight has me chuckling as he gives me a quick hug around the knees and dashes off.

"You never cease to surprise me," Lara says, watching him with a mix of pride and relief.

"I'd do anything for him," I say. And this is such a small gesture, making sure he feels welcome here because it'll be one more home he gets to enjoy as he grows.

We turn back inside, entering the warmth of the dining room. The scent of roasting chicken fills the air, mingling with a subtle hint of fresh herbs. My mother stops moving, studying Lara's face before opening her arms to the woman I love.

"Hello, Lara," she says, her voice rich with sincerity.

Lara glances at me, then steps into my mother's hug. The embrace seems to last an eternity, and to my amazement, Lara hugs her back. It's like a silent surrender to the love offered.

"Thank you for this," Mom says, pulling back just enough to look Lara in the eyes. A tremor of gratitude leaves her voice unsteady and Lara nods.

"Of course," Lara says as if there was no other option; this is something that had to happen. And I'm grateful she sounds warm and happy and not bitter at that fact.

I stand there, watching these two incredible women connect over my son. For the first time in a long while, I feel the edges of my worries start to crumble. Things are amazing, and I have trust that they'll only get better from here. And if they don't, well, I'll find a way to stack the deck in my favor.

Our son's laughter drifts in from outside, a sound that never fails to bring joy to my heart. I'm looking forward to dinner, and as I help my mother finish placing food on the table, I make my way to the back door.

"Time to wash up, champ," I call out toward the backyard. He barrels through the door, grass stains on his jeans, his little face red with heat and excitement, and twigs in his hair.

"Grandma says I can have ice cream now!" His voice is high-pitched with glee as he skids to a stop in front of us.

"Is that so?" I arch an eyebrow at Mom, feigning surprise. She winks at him, the same mischievous glint in her eyes that I remember from my own childhood. Dessert before dinner is a family tradition, and I love that she's already sharing them with him.

“Let’s get your hands washed,” she says, leading him toward the kitchen as Lara creeps closer to me.

“That’s so cute. I love that you have that family tradition,” Lara says.

“It’s a reminder that you can’t always save the best for last, since you never know which moment will be your last.” It’s a rule that took root after my father passed, and it’s one that I love coming home to. It’s not one I tend to apply to my own life – I don’t often have dessert, to be honest – but when I come home, it’s a cherished memory.

They come out of the bathroom, and he somehow looks squeaky clean. His hair is combed, and he’s a perfect model of a young man, save the grass stains on his knees.

“You clean up well, young man,” I tease.

I feel Lara elbow me in the ribs. “Like his father.”

I know she’s teasing me, but she might not realize she just admitted she thinks I look good, and that’s a thought that’s thrilling and telling all at once.

“Thanks, Grandma!” he says, rushing toward his mom to get a hug.

“Thank your dad and Lara,” my mom says, nodding toward us. “They said it was okay for you to have dessert first.”

“Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad.” He’s quick to leap into his seat as my mom leaves the room and comes back with ice cream and bowls. Mint chocolate chip, because she knows what the best flavor is.

“I have to hear the backstory for this one,” Lara says softly into my ear, and I promise

to tell her when there aren't little ears around or a dinner I want to bring sadness to.

Win digs right into his ice cream and I can't help but chuckle. "Slow down there, buddy," I say, ruffling his hair. "Don't want you to choke, or worse... get a brain freeze."

He nods seriously as if the thought of a brain freeze is certainly worse than choking.

We settle into our seats, the table heavy with comfort food that warms the room and makes my mouth water with the rich scents. The conversation drifts naturally around our son – and grandson - the center of our universe.

"He's doing great in school," Lara says. "Well, not school. But he's already being tutored, you know? And gymnastics class—he loves it."

"Really?" My mother's eyebrows lift, clearly pleased by how amazing her grandson is, which makes sense.

"Yep, and he's got a whole circle of friends. Play dates almost every weekend." I watch Lara talk, loving how animated she is and happy to talk about him. I love that about her; she's an incredible mom and it shows in him, the way she talks about him, and his ability to thrive.

"You're doing an amazing job with him," I say, meaning every word.

Her cheeks flush a soft pink, a color that somehow suits her and softens her intensity. She looks away, but not before I catch the twinkle of unshed tears. I can't imagine how hard this has been for her, being a single mom who is both a career woman and incredibly involved in her child's life.

"Thank you," she says, poking a bite of chicken.

“Your son is wonderful, Lara,” Mom chimes in, echoing my thoughts. “And it's clear you've been an incredible mother.”

“Thank you, both of you.” She sounds embarrassed this time, but I don’t mind that. I want her to know that not only do we see that she’s done a fantastic job, but that we’re in awe and proud of what she’s accomplished and the life she’s given him this far.

“Family is everything,” Mom says, reaching across the table to squeeze Lara's hand.

“You’re right,” Lara says, her tone sweet and soft.

I can’t help but wonder if this is the start of something new. A friendship. A family coming together for the sake of our son. A group of people who will champion one another every step of the way because that’s what family does.

No matter what, I want to see what happens next, and I can’t wait to see what the future holds for all of us.

“Can I go play again?” Win asks, his tone wistful. His plate is clean and us adults glance at one another. Lara nods and my mom smiles at me.

“Of course, you can,” Mom says.

He’s quick to take off and the joy in the air is unmistakable. There’s nothing like a child and grandchild to bring people together.

Plates clink softly as we clear the last remnants of dinner. Mom's hands are quick, efficient, but she pauses, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes as Win rushes back in, offering to help.

My mom nods. “If you help,” she says, “then we’ll have to build a fortress. What do you think of that?”

He nods, his eyes wide and excited as he learns how to stack dishes in the dishwasher.

But I take the dishes from them. “He helped. Time for you guys to go build a fortress,” I say, and my mom gives me a smile, her hands on her hips. But Win is already dashing toward the living room, excited.

“I’ve got this, Ma,” I say, washing dishes as Lara takes the spot by my side. Mom leaves the room and Lara and I clean up, shoulder to shoulder, a sense of comradery and comfort filling the space between us.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” I ask, not meaning the dishes.

She glances up at me, startled. “I mean, it’ll be hard, but I’m okay.”

I can’t imagine the emotions she’s feeling. “Well, I’m here if you need to talk, or need company.” And before she can give me that look, I hold up a hand. “As friends, nothing more.” Of course, I want it to be more so very badly, but small steps. I need to take small steps.

Once the dishes are washed and the dishwasher is humming along, we step out into the living room, where hundreds of pillows transform the space into a fortress. I see Win peek out. “Who dares go there?” he asks in his best grown-up voice.

“Your parents, oh great king,” Lara says, laughter in her tone.

“Oh!” Win says, suddenly himself. “Is it time?”

I look at Lara and she nods, her throat flexing as she swallows hard. When he comes out, Lara kneels beside him, her voice soft but firm. “You've got my number, sweetie. Any time you want, just call and I'll be here.”

His gaze locks onto hers, so sincere it breaks my heart a little. “I'll be fine, Mommy.” His voice is steady, braver than his years.

Lara's smile looks more like she's about to cry. “Promise?”

He nods, strong for the both of them. “Promise.”

Lara rises, looking to me, and I smile.

“Go on, then.” I nudge him gently toward the fortress. “Show Grandma how it's done.”

With a nod, he hurries back into the fortress. And I hang back, leaning against the doorframe, watching them. Pillows and blankets fly through the air. Mom laughs, a sound I haven't heard in ages, her movements animated as she helps him.

Mom catches my eye as she straightens up, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “He's quite the architect,” she says, pride filling her tone.

“Yeah, he gets that from—” My words trail off, the bittersweet edge of memory filling my mind. From his grandfather. Dad would be so proud looking down on us now, I know it. I'm not sure how I know it, but I do.

Lara's hand takes mine. “Let's go,” she says softly, and walking out the front door feels like starting the rest of our lives together. And I can't wait.

Lara

I know we shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't be here, but one thing led to another...

And now I'm on Lark's yacht. Alone with him. The deck beneath my feet sways gently to the rhythm of the waves. Salt air fills my lungs, the sun shine warms my skin, and the breeze feels like heaven. It's just the ocean, the sky, me, and Lark.

"It's a perfect day for sailing," Lark says, his voice breaking through the sound of seagulls.

"I couldn't agree more." I smile in his general direction, squinting against the glare off the water. As far as I can see, shades of blue and sparkling white stretch on to the horizon.

He grins. He's the captain of this vessel and a master of making my heart beat far too fast. I know Win is safe at his mother's house, but I'm not used to being without my son at home. It's different when I work and come home to him, but this... I couldn't go home. I couldn't face the emptiness or Damon's silence.

While my brother is happy that Win gets time with his father and grandmother, I sense that he misses when it was just us and all the quality time he's spent with his nephew. I understand the feeling. Sharing my son won't be easy, but it's what's best for him.

"Uh-oh, you're looking too serious again," Lark says, and I glance at him. His white shirt flutters in the ocean breeze and sleeves rolled up to the elbows, revealing those

mouthwatering tanned forearms. The way the sunlight plays on the sharp angles of his face is breathtaking. Handsome doesn't even begin to describe him; the guy is a damn God.

"Just thinking," I say.

"Well, stop it. You're out here to get away and have fun. Care for a tour?" he asks, motioning around the yacht with a sweep of his hand.

I nod my head. "Lead the way."

Lark grins, his eyes sparkling with excitement and a hint of pride. I find myself wondering who he can trust and brag to about his accomplishments. With a mental note to ask later, I exhale.

He takes my hand, and we start our tour. The yacht is even more impressive than I expected, with sleek lines and polished wood that gleams in the sunlight.

"This is the main deck," Lark says, gesturing to the spacious area around us. "Perfect for lounging and soaking up the sun."

I can already imagine myself sprawled out on one of the plush white loungers, a book in hand and the gentle sway of the yacht beneath me. But Lark is already moving on, leading me down a set of stairs to the lower deck.

"Here's the dining area," he says, pointing to a long table surrounded by comfortable chairs. "I did have a plan for eating tonight, if you'd like."

I nod, already looking forward to the evening. The thought of a candlelit dinner on the water with Lark sounds perfect. It shouldn't. I should be putting on the brakes, but I'm starting to worry that's not an option anymore. My heart doesn't want that, and

even my head knows it's a bad idea... and wants it anyway.

Lark continues the tour, showing me the cozy cabins, the state-of-the-art kitchen, and even a small library filled with books. Finally, we reach the upper deck, where a hot tub bubbles invitingly.

“And this,” Lark says with a grand gesture of throwing his arms wide, “is my favorite spot.”

I can see why. The view from up here is breathtaking, with the endless expanse of the ocean stretching out before us. I take a deep breath, feeling a sense of peace wash over me.

“This is amazing,” I say, turning to Lark. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

He smiles, his expression softening. “I’m glad you like it. Now, how about we take a dip in the hot tub?”

I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in days. “Sounds perfect.”

Hand in hand, we make our way to the hot tub. Lark removes his shirt and pants, revealing his swim trunks and I pull off the cute deck dress that’s hiding my suit. I catch him glancing at me with an appreciative look that has me feeling warm and wanted all at once.

Lark steps into the hot tub first, the steam rising around him as he settles into the warm water. I follow, feeling the tension in my muscles melt away as I sink into the bubbling water.

“This is heaven.” I sigh, leaning back and closing my eyes.

Lark chuckles. “I knew you’d like it. It’s the perfect way to unwind.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a while, the only sounds the gentle lapping of the waves against the yacht and the soft hum of the hot tub. I open my eyes and glance at Lark, who is gazing out at the horizon with a thoughtful expression.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask, curious.

He turns to me, a small smile playing on his lips. “Just how lucky I am to be here with you.”

I feel a blush creep up my cheeks and look away, the warmth of the hot tub suddenly matched by the heat in my chest and core. “I’m the lucky one,” I say.

Lark reaches out and takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “We’re both lucky, then.”

We stay like that for a while, holding hands and enjoying the peaceful moment. Eventually, the sun begins to set, casting a golden glow over the water. The breathtaking view leaves me feeling comfortable and happy with a sense of awe rising within me. Today has been amazing, and I’m grateful to Lark for making what would have been a very rough transition easier.

As we part ways for a while, I make my way to the main deck and perch on the edge of a plush sun lounger, my legs dangling off the side. The yacht bobs gently, lulling me into a tranquil state, but my heart strings tug with an ache that’s both sweet and sour. I miss him—my little boy with his too-big laugh and boundless energy. Yet here, with Lark, excitement bubbles through my veins.

“Thirsty?” Lark appears with two bottles of water, offering one to me, and I can’t help but smile. How did he know?

I nod, unable to speak in the moment because the pain of missing my son and my gratefulness for a drink and this time together are intent on choking me. He hands me a bottle of water, condensation beading on the glass like morning dew.

“Thanks,” I say, popping the cap and taking a generous sip. It's chilled, combatting the heat of the sun and my body in a way that's refreshing and cooling.

He settles next to me, close enough to touch if either one of us moves. And when his forearm brushes my leg, tingling heat explodes through me. His leg presses against mine, firm and unyielding, and it's as if he's holding me in place with nothing more than the excitement of his touch and this closeness. My heart slams and I glance at him, stunned by the depths of this need I feel for him.

“Good?” he asks, and I'm not sure if he's talking about the yacht, the water, or his touch, but all three are good. Very good.

“Very,” I whisper. And I'm not just talking about the drink. My fingers tighten around the bottle, the coolness of the glass seeping into my palm.

“Are you enjoying the view?” he asks, a hint of humor in his voice, and I know he's not just asking about the ocean.

“I can't complain.” My gaze shifts to his profile—sharp, handsome, every bit the bad boy millionaire who once captured my heart and never quite returned it. Not that I'd ever admit that to him, of course. I struggle to admit it to myself.

I set my glass down with a click against the deck, drawing in a deep breath to steady the sudden heat flooding my system. I'm playing with fire, toeing the line between what I want and what I should do. But oh, how tempting it is to just let go and let him in again. The pleasure he promises, the pleasure I know he'll bring me... it's so tempting. Too tempting.

As if reading my thoughts – or sharing them - Lark leans in, his body demanding mine get closer. His breath warms my ear as he whispers, “I want you.” The words, soft as they are, echo around my brain louder than a shout. His scent—salt, pine, and masculinity—fills my nostrils, intoxicates my senses.

“Here?” I whisper, unsure as I glance around. The ocean stretches as far as the eye can see and there are no other boats within eyesight. But still...

“Here,” he says, his gaze intense and making my heart and body do strange things. I’m heating up and trembling, too hot and too cold all at once, and desperate to do what he’s asking.

Still, if I was smart, I’d remind him and myself that we’re supposed to leave the past behind us and move forward. We’re in business together, work together, and I’m his boss. Sleeping with him would be a very stupid move.

But maybe I’m stupid, because I want nothing more than to say yes.

My gaze drops to his lips, full, inviting—silently begging him to kiss me. He understands, he always has. His mouth claims mine, a kiss that tastes like the past, like mistakes, like the most thrilling moments of my life.

This is a mistake, but I’m going to enjoy making it.

The yacht rocks gently beneath us, and there's no hesitation as his hands strip off my clothing. I tuck my thumbs into the waistband of his shorts and work them down, revealing every glorious inch of him ready for me.

I lean in, tasting the tip of him and he lets out a sharp growl, pushing me back and pinning me to the plush lounge.

"You're driving me crazy," he murmurs against my neck, his breath hot and exciting. I arch into him, wanting more, needing all of him.

"That was kind of the plan," I whisper, gazing up at him.

He trails kisses down my body, setting every inch of me on fire until I'm squirming, desperate for more. I arch into his touch, a primal need driving me to meet his every move. His touch consumes any rational thought or lingering doubts, and I'm just hungry for him. All of him.

"Are you sure about this?" he whispers against my ear, his voice husky with desire.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life," I say.

He doesn't hold back, his hands roaming over my body with a hunger that matches my own and I tilt my hips, ready to take him as I feel the hot tip of him brush my inner thigh. I want him to stop teasing me and to actually fill me up. I've been waiting years for this to happen again, and he's going so slow it's almost frustrating.

"Please," I whimper.

He seems to take pity on me and I feel him press against my entrance. I exhale as he gently pushes in a fraction of an inch, his expression intense as he works himself into me bit by bit.

I grip the side of the lounge, my fingers digging into the upholstery as he continues to enter me. It feels like a dream, like I'm finally where I belong. He slows his pace, his eyes locked on mine as he looks for a response.

"You feel so good," I manage to whisper, my voice barely audible over the sound of the water lapping against the sides of the yacht.

“So do you,” he growls, his teeth scraping the side of my neck.

I pant, feeling the exquisite pleasure and pain of his slow, deliberate entry. Every inch of him pushes in, then pulls back a little bit, then pushes in again, like he has to work his way inside me and it’s intense and delicious all at once. I can barely breathe, and when he’s finally fully inside me, I let out a gasp.

He raises himself up, hovering over me, his gaze locked on mine. “Did I hurt you?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“This is crazy,” he says, his voice hoarse.

“Maybe. But it’s what I want,” I reply, my voice shaky.

His lips crash down on mine. As the thrust of his tongue matches the movements of his body, my heart feels ready to explode. I can feel myself stretching around him, feel him demanding I yield to him, and the pressure inside promises pleasure like I’ve never experienced before.... even with him. Talk about an impossibly high bar to set. His movements become more urgent, more frantic, and his hunger only heats me up more. I grab his shoulders, my fingertips digging in as I tuck my ankles behind his thighs as if to keep him from leaving.

He pushes in deep, his breath ragged as our bodies come together completely. The pleasure builds, unbearable yet extraordinary. I’m lost in the passion, the raw emotions we’re sharing.

His lips move to my neck, his breath hot and eager. “I want you so much,” he groans, his hips never stopping.

I moan, lost in the sensations. I'm flying higher and higher, the pleasure building until I can't stand it anymore. "I need you to... I need more," I don't know what I need, but I want to feel the pleasure crash over me.

He seems to understand. His pace quickens, his thrusts deeper. I arch into him, grasping for more. My breath catches in my throat as I near the edge. I'm close, so close... Only one more touch away.

I gasp as he thrusts into me, his pace desperate. This feeling, it's overwhelming. I'm lost in the heat of the moment, in the way our bodies fit together so perfectly. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer, wanting him in me as deep as possible.

His thrusts become harder, faster, and I can feel the edge of orgasm nearing. I arch my back, matching his movements, and he groans, his eyes closing as he loses himself in the moment. His body pins mine, holding me close as he speeds up.

"I'm close," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the sound of the water and our ragged breathing.

"I need this," he growls, his eyes opening to find mine again. "I need you."

I moan softly, feeling the pleasure building within me

His eyes, locked on mine, tell me he knows just what I need. He pushes me over that edge with a final, deep thrust, and the world comes crashing down around us. The pleasure explodes, shattering every expectation I've ever had.

"God, I've missed this," he groans.

I want to say that I've missed it, too, but the pleasure tearing through my core and rippling through me leave me voiceless.

“You’re still so perfect,” he says. I feel his body agree as he grows even harder somehow and explodes within me.

Sated, we collapse into each other, our breaths mingling. He traces my eyebrow with a fingertip, trailing it along my temple, down the side of my face in front of my ear and curving to the point of my chin. “You’re amazing,” he whispers, leaning in to kiss the tip of my nose.

“You are, too,” I say, feeling my heart begin to slow to a more normal pace. As we lay entwined, his fingertips trace my back, my spine, every inch of me that he can reach and he speaks, his voice low and possessive.

“You’re mine,” he says.

A laugh escapes me, breathless and light as I lift my head to look at him. “I’ve always been yours,” I say, my eyes locked with his. “After you, no one else stood a chance.”

He smiles, a wicked curve of the lips that promises sin. That sounds good to me. His hands explore me and I lose myself in the sensation. His hands are everywhere, tracing skin they’ve touched before, yet it feels new, it feels right. The way he whispers my name... it sends a shiver down my spine and tightens my nipples to hard pebbles. He has an effect on my body that I can’t deny... and I’m tired of trying.

But how can we make this work? Doubt creeps in, chased away – for the moment – by his words.

“Tell me you want this,” he demands, rolling onto his back and bringing me with him so I’m straddling his hips. He’s already hard and ready to go again.

“More than anything,” I whisper, telling him the truth.

His smile as I rise up and slide down every inch of him leaves me breathless.

The rhythm we find is urgent, a quick movement that promises a quick orgasm. His hands claim my hips as he moves with a precision that sets every nerve ending alight, drawing out the pleasure until it's almost too much to bear. With each whispered word from his lips, I'm falling deeper.

“God, you're incredible,” he groans, admiration mingling with desire in his tone.

My body responds to his every move, and he's quick to draw the pleasure out of me. And as my body clamps down tight around him, the pleasure exploding through me and leaving bright dots of white in my vision, I bite down on my lower lip to keep from crying out.

“Don't do that,” he says, and I open my eyes to look at him. “Don't hold back.” His thumb traces my lower lip and I let go and give into the incredible sensations screaming through my body.

A frightening thought tugs at the edges of my mind—I am in trouble, because this isn't just about desire anymore. I'm falling for this man, and that's not safe or sane. What am I going to do about it?

“Are you hungry?” Lark asks, breaking the silence once our breathing has returned to normal and our hearts are beating in unison. I love being curled into him, and the past doesn't hold a candle to what I feel and felt today in his arms.

I nod, feeling a sense of contentment wash over me. “Definitely.”

Lark rises and I regretfully let him go. But he returns a few moments later with a platter of fruits, meats, cheeses and crackers, a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a wine opener. Placing the platter on the lounge, he stretches out on the other side of them,

his eyes tracing my face.

I reach for the grapes, plucking them from their stems and popping them into my mouth. They're sweet, bursting with flavor. Lark sits up and uncorks the wine with ease, pouring the drink into our glasses.

"Eat," he says, pushing the plate of assorted meats and cheeses toward me. I nibble on a cracker topped with a slice of sharp cheddar, savoring the rich taste. "You'll need your energy," he says, and I'd swear my heart stops in my chest.

"Everything's delicious," I murmur, my eyes wandering over the spread.

He smiles, watching me eat and I feel safe, loved, and cared for.

There's an easiness between us, a comfort that shouldn't be there after all these years and yet it is.

"I've been thinking about the future," I say, hesitant but needing him to understand. "For our son... I want to build something lasting, grow my wealth. Not just for me, but for him."

Lark nods, his gaze intense. "I get it. I'm aiming for the billionaire mark myself. Five to ten years, that's the goal."

"More than money, though," I say, twirling a grape stem in my fingers, "I want to be the kind of mom who's there. To give him a life full of love, the kind I missed out on."

"That sounds perfect." He reaches over, his hand covering mine. His touch offers a silent promise of support and I'm grateful.

“And my brother...” I hesitate, but the words need to come out. “He needs me, too. I want to make every day count, infuse it with love. You know?”

“Absolutely.” There's no hesitation in his voice, only conviction.

I look up at him. The warmth in his eyes nearly undoes me. It's a look so tender, so full of emotion, that it steals my breath.

For a moment, I'm lost in that stare, wondering if it's possible that he sees me as more than just a past fling, but as the woman he could love.

Lark

The gymnasium doors swing open and he barrels out, a blur of energy and flushed cheeks. “Dad!” His voice is a bright sound in the cool air.

“Hey, buddy.” I scoop him up in a hug that swallows his small frame. The trust Lara has in me, letting me be here for this, it warms me more than my jacket does.

“Did you see me? I did a handstand!”

“I missed it by a minute, buddy. I’m sorry.” I ruffle his hair, and his grin doesn't waver. He launches into a blow-by-blow account of his day, each word punctuated with the enthusiasm only a child possesses, and I find myself wanting to make sure I don't miss his next meet.

“Are you hungry?” I ask as his tale winds down and I buckle him into his car seat.

“Starving!” He pats his tummy for emphasis.

“Let's fix that.” I close his door and pull out my phone; one quick call to an old friend who owes me a few favors secures lunch and I slide into the driver's seat.

As I start the car, Win's chatter fills the space, his excitement infectious. “Can we get burgers, Dad? With extra fries?”

“Burgers it is,” I say, smiling at his enthusiasm. “And maybe a milkshake, too?”

His eyes light up as they meet mine in the rearview mirror. “Chocolate?”

“Of course,” I reply, pulling out of the parking lot. The drive is short, but Win’s stories make it feel even shorter. He talks about his friends, his favorite games, and the new trick he’s learning in gymnastics that sounds really complicated, yet fun. I love his ability to approach challenges with curiosity and excitement.

We arrive at the diner, and I park the car. Win practically bounces out of his seat when I unbuckle him. How does he have so much energy even after a gymnastics class? I grab his hand and we walk inside, the familiar smell of grilled food and the sound of clinking dishes welcoming us. It’s a far cry from what I’m used to, but that’s fine. Sometimes it’s fun to just get back to basics.

“Hey, Lark!” My old friend, Frank, calls out from behind the counter. “Long time no see.”

“Hey, Frank. Thanks for squeezing us in,” I say, giving him a nod.

“No problem at all. Anything for you and your little man,” Frank replies, ruffling Win’s hair. “What can I get you guys?”

“Two burgers, extra fries, and a chocolate milkshake,” I say, glancing down at Win, who nods eagerly.

“Coming right up,” Frank says, heading to the kitchen.

We find a booth by the window, and Win climbs in, his eyes wide with anticipation. “Dad, can we go to the park after this?”

“We actually have plans, buddy,” I say, leaning back in my seat. “But I promise you’ll have fun.”

Our food arrives quickly, and we dig in. Win's face lights up with every bite, and I can't help but feel a deep sense of joy. These moments, simple as they are, mean everything to me.

As we finish our meal, I look at Win, his face smeared with chocolate milkshake, and I know that no matter what, I'll always be there for him. For every handstand, every meal, every moment that I can be present for, I will be.

After we're loaded up and driving, I stop by another restaurant – this one's upscale and the order is already ready to go.

"Mr. Lark, your order." The chef himself greets us, handing over two heavy bags that smells like heaven.

"Thanks, Marco." I take the bags and place them carefully beside me in the empty passenger seat.

Back on the road, I steal glances at my son through the rearview mirror.

"What's that?" he asks me.

"You'll see," I say, glancing at his car seat. It's top of the line, of course. His safety is too important to risk, and I'm not about to settle for less than the gold standard for him.

"Where are we going now?" he asks, peering out his window at the city flying by.

"Somewhere special." I smile, keeping the secret just a little longer. My heart swells, a mix of love and fierce protectiveness. He's my world, and I'd do anything for him. Lara, too. They are my unexpected family. My chance to show that I'm a good father and man. And I'll be damned if I don't rise to the occasion every single time.

The hum of the engine cuts as I park in front of my childhood home. I unclip my son's car seat and his small hand finds mine. We walk up to the door, his chatter about the day's adventures never ceasing, and I love listening to every word out of his mouth.

“Grandma's house!” He presses his face against the cool glass beside the front door as it swings open.

“Hey!” My mom sounds excited, happy, and full of love. She scoops him up, peppering his face with kisses, and he giggles, squirming for freedom.

“I’ve got something for you,” I say and hand her one of the bags from the restaurant. “Dinner. There's enough for both of you.”

Her expression softens, a silent thank you that doesn't need words. She leans in, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek.

“I appreciate it,” she says.

“Can I go play?” Win asks, his eyes huge and soulful. My mom nods and I respond at the same time.

“Go play, buddy.” I nudge him gently toward the backyard and he dashes off, leaving behind only a squeal of excitement.

“Thank you,” my mother says, holding the bag. She moves inside and I follow as she takes the bag to the kitchen.

“Call if you need anything,” I say, lingering just a moment more. Then I slip outside and give my son a huge hug, planting a kiss on top of his head. Satisfied he's in good hands, I head back to my car, ready for the next part of my evening.

I stride into the office, my arms balancing a vase of assorted white jasmine blossoms and the other bag of gourmet food. The scent of jasmine and food fills the air around me as I head straight for Lara's office.

She's behind her desk and I study her for half a heartbeat before stepping into her office and speaking. "I've got something for you," I say, setting the vase on her desk with confidence. The blooms catch the light, their textures and variety beautiful, but nowhere near as beautiful as she is.

Lara looks up, her expression a mixture of surprise and something unreadable. I'm taking a gamble, because she could be furious I'm doing something so brazen and obvious here at work. "What's this?" Her voice is quiet as she speaks, but I see her lean closer to the jasmine, her gaze inspecting the incredible flowers.

"Flowers." I state the obvious in a tone heavy with humor, and she gives me a playfully annoyed look before reaching out to touch a petal gently. "And food." I place the bag on her desk, then gently slide it toward her. This is my silent acknowledgement that I know she never eats enough.

She accepts the bag, peering inside with genuine amusement. "How did you know I forgot to eat?" There's something so warm and pure in her eyes I want to pull her into my arms and never let her go. One day, I plan to do just that, but for now, I'll settle for making her happy and taking care of her.

"Lucky guess," I say, but we both know it's more than that. I watch her, I know her routines, and I know that she's not great at taking care of herself. And there's where I come in. I want to be the one to care for her, not just because she's my son's mother, not even just because I'm in love with her. But because I don't ever want her to feel unimportant, unloved, or alone ever again.

"Thank you," she whispers. But I'm not here to intrude, not really. So, I take a step

back and speak.

“Anytime.” My reply is gruff, an attempt to preserve some semblance of professionalism that’s long gone. I turn and walk away, each step taking me further from her office but not from what’s growing between us. I can’t help but glance back once, just in time to see her face, still turned toward me, framed by flowers and lit up with a smile that tightens the muscles in my stomach.

And hours later, while I’m sitting at my desk trying to work but thinking of her instead, I think about the next steps I plan to take.

Until the door to my office swings open and Shana stands there, her eyes locking on mine. She jerks her head toward the hallway. “Come with me.”

“Sure, I say, pushing back from my desk. I follow her lead, trying to read the situation from the set line of her shoulders, but I’m left with nothing. That old tinge of fear I’m about to get fired fills me. I did break some rules today, I think, and even if I’m skirting them, I could be facing discipline or a warning to be more covert in my wooing of Lara. I’ll take things as they come if that’s the case, because I can’t give Lara up. Not now. Not ever again.

We move through the office, past the break room, beyond people talking in small groups of two and three, discussing work, ideas, and even some personal information; and I notice the way conversations hush as we pass. Either something is going on, or my imagination is working overtime. Then again, maybe everyone knows what’s going on between Lara and me and are afraid to say anything.

Shana doesn’t speak until we reach Lara’s office. She knocks once, sharply, then swings the door open and gestures for me to go inside as she steps away and waits. I walk inside and she follows, the door clicking shut behind us.

“Have a seat,” Lara says, gesturing to the chair opposite her desk. Her expression is unreadable, and my heart begins to thump harder than I’d like.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, taking the offered seat. My palms are suddenly damp, but I hide them under the table, running them down my slacks to get rid of the incriminating moisture.

“Everything's fine,” Lara says, but something in the way her gaze flicks to Shana has me even more worried. Something big is about to happen. But is it a good big or a bad big?

I sit up straighter, preparing for whatever comes next. Being fired is unlikely; my gut tells me that much. But what else could have this level of formality and secrecy all mixed up in one?

“Thanks for picking up Win today,” Lara says, breaking into my thoughts. Her voice is steady, as if she has none of the tension I feel.

“Anytime,” I say. “He's a great kid.” And it's true—Win has become the center of my world in a way I'd never expected.

“Good.” Lara nods, her lips curving into a smile. “Anyway, we need to talk about some things.”

I sense Shana sitting down in another seat, her gaze staring holes into me.

“Okay,” I say, bracing myself for the worst. Whatever it is, I'm ready.

The silence stretches out as Lara and Shana seem to speak a silent conversation I’m not part of. Then Shana shifts in her chair, a rustle of fabric breaking the stillness before she turns to me. She takes a deep breath and I find myself wishing they’d just

get it over with, whatever 'it' is.

For now, I study them. They're two sides of the same coin, brilliant minds in sleek business attire, their gazes sharp and assessing. The deep blue dress Lara is wearing leaves my mouth watering, and whether they intended to or not, Shana's wearing a blouse in the same shade and a dark fitted skirt that's all professional.

"We've been looking for a third business partner," Shana says, her voice crisp, but not cold. It's a statement, direct and confusing. Why are they telling me this? Unless...a ripple of surprise courses through me.

"Really?" It's not so much a question as a statement designed to get them talking faster, otherwise we might all die of old age before everyone's intentions are made clear.

Lara leans forward, planting her elbows on the desk and pressing her palms together while lacing her fingers.

There's a sparkle in her eyes; she looks both determined and amused with the turn of events. "We all have the same goals for the future," she says, her gaze locking on mine with a steadiness that feels safe. "And you're trustworthy and always seem to have the company's best interests at heart. So you're a smart choice."

To say I'm shocked is an understatement. They're offering me a chance to become a partner?

I blink, processing her words, the gravity of what they're proposing settling on my chest like a stubborn elephant refusing to move. Trustworthy. Smart choice. When she and I had talked about the future on my yacht, I thought we were being more personal. That we were discussing the future in a way that hinted at living together, being together, in a relationship. Not a business sense.

Had I read that whole situation all wrong? Was she just thinking business while I was thinking about our future together? The thought stings, but I push it aside because they're both looking at me like they're expecting some kind of response or answer.

"Thank you," I say, the words almost sticking in my throat. "That means a lot." I clear my throat, watching their expressions but seeing no change in either of them.

To be honest, I'm thrilled. Honored. But the sting of possible rejection waters down those emotions and leaves me unable to fully enjoy the moment. Am I miscalculating things?

"It's a big decision, so you have as much time as you need to decide." Shana says, and I can't help but wonder if she knows the extent of mine and Lara's relationship. Fling? Whatever we call it, there's something there, and I worry it might cause problems later if she doesn't know. But I can talk to Lara later, in private, about all of that.

"Thank you," I say with a nod of my head. Over the years, I've learned to never take a deal without sleeping on it, and that's exactly what I plan to do. Well, that and have a conversation with Lara.

Because deep in my mind, there a cautionary whisper, a sliver of doubt that worms its way into the forefront of my thoughts. Is this a good choice?

The lines between personal and professional have always been clear-cut, like the sharp angles of the skyscrapers outside the window. But now, as I sit here in front of Lara, the woman who's come to mean everything to me, who is so much more than just my boss, those lines blur.

This is a step beyond mixing business and pleasure. It's a leap into a possibly devastating place for both of us if one or the other – our professional or personal

relationships – don't work out.

"I'll give you two a moment," Shana says, standing up. But she moves to my side, offering her hand. I stand and take it, accepting her shake and her softly-spoken congratulations. With that, she's out the door and gone, and I turn back to Lara.

"Would this change..." My voice trails off, unsure how to phrase the question that's burning inside me. I don't want a wedge between us, or to risk losing my son or her if things go south.

"Change what?" Lara asks, her expression softening just a fraction, as if she understands the fear I'm facing and wants to meet my concerns head on.

"Us," I say simply, because there's no other word for the tangled mess our lives have become. We're lovers, friends, coworkers, I'm her baby daddy, and I'm in love with her. It's a mess, and one that could be made more complicated by this move.

"Only if we let it," she says, lifting her shoulders like she's already considered every avenue and thinks the benefits outweigh the risks.

Only if we let it.

I turn the phrase over in my mind, trying to find comfort in her certainty. My heart thunders, my mouth feels dry, and I suddenly realize this would shorten my plans to grow my wealth, possibly by several years.

The thought of mixing personal desires and professional goals on this level is intimidating, but I can't help wonder what's the worst that could happen... and what's the best that could happen?

"Like she said, you have time. There's no need to make a decision now. I'm happy to

answer any questions you might have, though.” Lara sounds calm, but there’s an undercurrent of excitement in her tone that splashes over me.

“I don’t make deals like this without sleeping on them,” I say, just to let her know that I’m not about to jump into anything before I’m ready or have considered every possibility of how things could go well.... Or terribly.

“Well, I did draft this up,” she says, sliding a packet of papers my direction.

It’s an offer, and I plan to read every single letter, cover to cover, and take the contents to heart. I trust Lara, but when it comes to business, protecting ourselves is the only sane move. And while I don’t make the most sane choices all the time, this time I will.

But even as I take the packet, I already know I’m going to say yes.

This is a risk, but life's full of risks, and this one—this one feels right.

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Lara

The yacht rocks gently as I lean against the railing, salt spray misting my skin.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” Lark's voice pulls me from my thoughts. He'd accepted our proposal, and now, things seem so much more complicated even though I'd been sure they wouldn't be.

“Stunning.” My voice is soft. The warm metal railing under my elbows digs into my skin and the wind whips stray strands of my hair about my face as I stare out over the open ocean.

He stands beside me, close enough that our shoulders brush. His gaze, fixed on the horizon, is filled with a contentedness I wish I shared. As I blink up at him, I notice how the sunlight plays across his features, highlighting the sharp line of his jaw and the soft curve of his lips.

Lips I wish I could feel against mine.

“This never gets old,” he says, but his eyes tell me he's somewhere far away, in a thought or a memory.

“Hey.” I nudge him gently, watching him snap back to the moment, to me. “You with me?”

“Of course.” A smile tugs the corners of his lips, but I can see something is bothering him. The intensity of his stare sends a thrill through my veins and has my heart

picking up speed.

The yacht pitches slightly, a gentle reminder of the force of the ocean beneath us. Lark steadies himself with a hand on the rail, his other finding my waist. Strong. Assuring. He's there for me in ways I never knew I needed, but now worry I can't live without.

I lean into the bar to keep my balance.

"Careful now," he teases, a slight smile crossing his lips.

I laugh. "I should be saying that to you, Mr. Distracted."

"Guilty." He doesn't look away this time, and something in that steady gaze makes my heart race faster than the plane overhead cutting across the sky.

"Ever think about buying one of these yourself?" he asks, nodding to the helm visible through the open cabin door.

"I've thought about it," I say with a shrug. "But I'd prefer to let others take the wheel."

"Trust issues?" he teases, but he has no idea how close he's come to the heart of things.

"Maybe with boats," I say as his arm squeezes my waist, sending warmth spiraling through me. "Not with people. Not with you."

"Good answer."

I lean into him, the motion as natural as the waves stretching out before us. We're out

here celebrating, thrilled that he's a partner now. But Shana couldn't make it – she had previous plans. A date with a guy I haven't met yet. I feel like a bad friend sometimes, but she's been pretty secretive about him, and I don't want to push.

“Look at that,” Lark says, gesturing to a flock of birds diving into the ocean in search of food.

“Can't,” I say, though I don't tear my gaze from his face. “Too distracted.”

“By what?” he asks, glancing down at me with a look that betrays his curiosity.

“By you.”

“Ah.” A genuine smile – a bigger one this time – curves up the corners of his lips and his eyes crinkle handsomely at the corners. “The feeling's mutual.”

Hearing those words makes my heart flip flop in my chest and my gut does a happy dance. I smile, feeling a warmth spread through me that has nothing to do with the sun and everything to do with the man beside me.

“You know,” I say. “This is all a surprise, you know? Being here with you, feeling this way.”

Lark's hand tightens on my waist, and he turns to face me fully, his eyes searching mine. “Feeling what way?”

I swallow hard, unsure how to respond that's both honest and not giving away too much.

“Like... like anything is possible,” I say, my cheeks flushing. “Like we can do anything.” I leave out the part of me that includes him for that to be a possibility.

With him by my side, we can do anything, I'm sure of it. That's part of the reason I wanted him to be a partner.

He leans in closer, his breath warm against my ear. "You can, Lara. We can."

The sincerity in his voice makes my heart swell. I reach up, cupping his face in my hands, and pull him down for a kiss. It's soft at first, but quickly deepens as all the emotions I've been holding back come rushing to the surface.

When we finally pull apart, we're both breathless. Lark rests his forehead against mine, his eyes closed. "I've wanted you for so long," he murmurs.

I want to tell him that I've wanted him for a long time, too, but words just won't come. As my fingers trace the line of his jaw, I meet his green eyes and I'd swear my heart is about to beat right out of my chest.

I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. "Lark," I say, my voice barely above a whisper, "I'm afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he asks, his gaze searching mine, looking for answers.

"I don't want to lose what we have. This partnership, our friendship... it means everything to me." I have no doubt he'll be a great partner, and that the friendship we share is genuine. But if we keep going... what happens if down the road we realize we're not right for one another? It's a question that kept me awake last night, and it's one that's been relentless since yesterday.

He opens his eyes, the intensity in his gaze making my knees weak. "Lara, you won't lose me. If anything, this will make us stronger."

I nod, wanting to believe him. "I hope so. I really do." But what if he's wrong? Am I

strong enough to let him go if the time comes?

He brushes a strand of hair from my face, his touch gentle and reassuring. “Trust me,” he says softly. “We’ll figure this out together. Whatever it takes.”

Those words again.

They bring back a flood of memories, of managing being pregnant, morning sickness alongside building an empire. My brother’s endless help, Shana always being there for me.

I lean into his touch, closing my eyes for a moment. The sound of the waves lapping at the boat and the warmth of his hand on my skin create a sense of calm that I desperately need. “Okay,” I whisper. “Together.”

He smiles, and all is right in the world. “Together,” he says, the conviction in his voice almost making me believe. Almost.

We stand there for a while longer, just holding each other, letting the moment sink in.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

I can’t help but smile. He’s always so concerned that I’m not eating enough or drinking enough water. I think about the beautiful vase of jasmine flowers on my desk at work. I think about long nights working and days alike that he brings me food and makes sure I’m okay.

“A little,” I say.

“Then let’s go,” he says, taking my hand and leading me down to the kitchen. This time, we’re not alone on the boat; he’s brought along a captain, a chef, a waiter, and a

woman whose purpose I don't know.

We sit in the dining area and I watch as the chef, a blur in whites, flips something in a pan, and my mouth waters at the smell of cooking food. Lark's yacht, his domain, feels like another world—one where every wish is granted before it even forms on your lips.

“That smells incredible,” I say, my voice hardly carrying over the gentle hum of the yacht and the sea.

“Wait until you taste it.” Lark's voice is smooth, but there's a rough edge to it that makes me want to drag him back to the cabin to make him finish what he's started.

Instead, I smile, taking in the scene—the endless blue waves, his face illuminated by the warm glow of the sun, the comfort of knowing he's right here and all is right in our world.

“You're always so extravagant,” I tease, leaning forward and putting my arms on the table, folding them before me.

“Life's too short for mediocrity,” he says, and again, I'm thrilled at his ability to enjoy the finer things in life. The man should teach a masterclass in making money and enjoying it, too.

He's right, though; he has a taste for the finer things, and he's generous. A generosity that I've experienced with the things we've done and the memories we've made.

“True.” I glance back at the chef, who nods in our direction, a silent signal that dinner will soon be ready. “You spoil me.”

“You deserve it,” he says, his gaze holding mine, intense and unwavering. “You

carried and protected my baby. You deserve the world because that's what you've given me."

His words unexpectedly tug something deep inside me that only makes those sleepless nights and endless struggles even more worth it.

The chef plates our meal with an artist's touch, and soon, the table is graced with dishes that look like they've been pulled from the pages of a gourmet magazine.

I take a moment to admire the beautifully plated dishes, each one a work of art. The aroma wafts up, making my mouth water. "This looks incredible," I say, glancing at Lark. "You really know how to make a girl feel special."

The chef clears his throat, then speaks. "Tuna, a mango salsa." He gestures to the beautifully seared tuna steak, perfectly pink in the center, and the vibrant mango salsa. "Lobster ravioli, drizzled with a rich saffron cream sauce."

I'm excited and thrilled as he continues explaining. "For sides, a fresh arugula salad with shaved Parmesan and toasted pine nuts, and a bowl of roasted baby potatoes. Further, enjoy the artisanal breads and olive oil for dipping."

"Thanks, chef," Lark says, and I echo the words, stunned by the spread before us.

With a nod that's more like a bow, the chef walks away.

As we dig in, the flavors are even more incredible than they look. Each bite leaves me weak and ready for more. "This is amazing," I say, savoring a forkful of the lobster ravioli.

Lark smiles, clearly pleased. "I'm glad you like it. I wanted today to be special."

“It is,” I say, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. “Thank you for everything.”

He lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles. “You deserve it all, and more.”

And with those words, I realize just how lucky I am to have Lark in my life.

After dinner, we move to the deck, and sit down in the same lounge chair we’d enjoyed the last time we were here. My cheeks sting as I remember exactly what we did.

Lark wraps a blanket around us as we settle in, the cool evening breeze brushing against our skin. We sit in comfortable silence for a while, watching the stars appear one by one in the darkening sky.

“Do you ever think about the future?” I ask, my head resting on his shoulder.

“All the time,” he replies, his voice thoughtful. “Especially now, with you.”

I smile, feeling a warmth spread through me. But I also caution myself not to read too much into his comment. I’m the mother of his child; our lives will be intertwined forever now, and that might be what he’s talking about. “What do you see?”

He turns to look at me, his eyes filled with a heat that takes my breath away. “I see us, together. Building a life, making more memories. Maybe even starting a family.”

My heart skips a beat at his words. “A family?” Well, there’s no misunderstanding that. Clearly he’s put thought into more than just me being the mother of his child and all that entails. But the excitement building within me is almost too much to bear.

“Yes,” he says, his gaze unwavering. “I want it all with you, Lara.”

Tears prickle in my eyes, and I blink them away, overwhelmed by the depth of his words. “I want that, too,” I whisper, my throat mostly blocked by emotion.

He pulls me closer, his arms wrapping around me in a protective hug. “Then that’s what we’ll have,” he says against my hair. “A future filled with love and happiness.”

As I snuggle into his warmth, I find myself loving the idea and also afraid, because again, what if things don’t work out? What if, along the way, we discover we’re not a good match? How would the fallout of that affect our lives?

As I worry, my mind wanders to our little boy. Is he giggling now, caught up in some game with grandma? A pang of longing, sweet and soft, tugs at my heart. I miss our times together, and make a mental note to make sure we have more of them. Just because his life is fuller now doesn’t mean I have to be lees of a part of it.

“You’re thinking about Winston,” Lark says, reading my mind as we sit together, warm and cozy under a blanket as the night continues to darken the skies.

I nod. “Grandma's probably letting him stay up past bedtime,” I say, not a hint of upset in my voice or heart.

“They’re building memories,” Lark says, and I know he’s right. It won’t hurt Win to have his schedule thrown off once in a while. And at grandma’s, the rules are a little different. I don’t mind that one bit, and he’s always so happy to come home and go there.

“She’s so good to him.” I love how effortlessly they’ve become family. She welcomed her grandson in without question and holds back none of her heart when he’s around.

I can't help but believe this is where I'm meant to be. And while there's that lingering doubt in the back of my mind, I plan to keep it back there.

"You know, my mother believes fate brought us together," Lark says.

I lift both shoulders, watching the stars twinkle and shine. "I never believed in fate," I say softly, mostly to myself.

"Neither did I," he says, squeezing my hand. "But here we are, so maybe she's on to something."

I can't help but laugh softly. "Here we are," I say, thinking about what a wild ride it's been. Who would have thought that the fling I met on vacation and never planned to see again would be the same man who came to work for me years later and fell for me? Because I'm pretty sure he's in love with me, and that thought makes my heart do a happy dance.

I do worry that I'm being selfish, enjoying these moments of freedom. But Lark was right; his mother is fantastic with him, and I don't want to steal their moments – those are precious. It's okay for me to enjoy life outside being a mom or a career-driven woman. Besides, it's easy to tell that Win loves his grandmother and they already share an amazing bond.

"Hey," Lark says, his hand leaving mine to point toward the heavens. "Look." He gestures toward the first stars daring to shine.

"The first star of the night. Make a wish," he says in a low voice that has my heart fluttering and heat gathering low in my core. His hand comes down to rest on my thigh and I place my hand on his forearm, loving the sinewy shift of the muscles under his skin.

What could I possibly wish for?

My life is right where I want it to be. I have an amazing son. A man who loves me. A family I care deeply for. I have everything I could need or want, and things are only getting better by the day. As the contentment I feel rises, I glance at Lark, wondering how I got so lucky.

He sees me looking at him and gestures toward the stars as if telling me the view is up there. But I don't agree. In this moment between light and darkness, he's more handsome than he's ever been, and the thought of losing him, of him ever walking away leaves me aching inside.

So maybe that's my wish – something to do with never losing him.

This man I'd run away from all those years ago out of fear he'd only complicate my life more... he's become the man I want to run to when there's a problem – even the ones I can solve myself.

“Have you made your wish?” he asks, doing a double take as his gaze snags on me like he can't look away.

“I'm still deciding,” I whisper. But the truth is, what more could I ask for?

Lark's eyes search mine, a soft smile on his lips. “Take your time,” he says, his voice gentle. “Wishes are important.”

I nod, my heart swelling with emotion. “I think I have everything I could ever wish for right here,” I say, hoping I'm not saying too much too soon. But I'm comfortable with him, and I'm going to trust that comfort.

He leans in, his forehead resting against mine. “You know, I feel the same way,” he

says in a low voice, his breath warm on my chin and neck and stirring the few escaped hairs there. “But if I had to make a wish, it would be for this moment to last forever.”

I close my eyes, wondering how the heck he knows just what to say to make the moment even better somehow. It’s like a gift, or we both feel the same way. “Forever sounds perfect.”

And it does. Maybe I’m fooling myself, maybe this won’t last, but I want to try. And at least then I’ll know I gave it my all and won’t have to worry about every what if that comes along later.

Lark

My phone buzzes, scooting across the conference table and interrupting the meeting between Lara, Shana and me.

They both look at me and I give an apologetic wave of my hand and pick up the device to silence it, until I see the name on the screen. Walker. It's a name I'd never turn down a call from, an old friend back when I was living a more... unsavory life. He was a gang member a long time ago, and someone I trust with my whole being.

"Excuse me," I say, sliding out of my chair and pacing toward the window, the cityscape blurred by rain. "Walker, what's up?"

"Hey, Lark." His voice is serious and deadpan, which is to be expected from him. He's a close to the vest kind of guy. "I've got bad news. Sending you info now." My spine stiffens. Walker is not a man to be dramatic. If he says something is going on, then something is going on, and I need to take note.

My phone dings with documents and I open them, then place an arm on the steel beam beside the window for support.

"Oh, damn." My heart hammers and icy cold then burning hot fear prickles across my being.

"Your designs, they're being replicated," he says. "But with trash materials. They'll crumble and cost people more. It's dirty play – your company has the patent."

I don't even want to ask how he got this information; he's always had his ways. But I am thankful.

"Shit." The single word hisses through my teeth. Walker was one of the people I'd asked to pour some of his wealth into our venture. His was a vote of confidence we'd sorely needed. Now this.

Damn it.

"Thanks for the heads-up," I say, keeping my voice steady as I begin to form a plan.

"Watch your back, Lark," he says. "Someone on the inside is betraying you." With that, the line goes dead.

I walk back to the meeting room, where Shana and Lara sit, their faces still filled with concern at my sudden exit.

"Someone's stealing our ideas," I say. "Passing them off as ours, but with sub-par parts." I forward the documents to them both and they open the files, their faces shifting with emotion; anger, fear, disbelief... they go through so many changes.

Shana looks ill; her face has gone pale, and her hands tremble as they clutch at the edge of the table. Lara's eyes widen, stunned anger filling her features as her lips move slightly with every word she reads.

"Are you serious?" Lara's fury overflows as she nearly throws her device down in anger before realizing it's not actual paperwork and might break if she does.

But it's Shana I'm watching, because there's something in her eyes that has me curious.

Shana nods, tears sparkling in her eyes as she sets her phone down and bites on her lower lip as if to hold back the truth. But the words come anyway. “I think I know how it happened.”

“Shana?” Lara sounds betrayed and I hold up a hand to quiet her as Shana tries to explain.

“I'm so sorry,” she whispers, her voice barely loud enough to be heard. “My laptop... I wasn't careful enough with security.”

“What does that mean?” Lara sounds angry and confused at this point, but I don't need details. I need to find a way to fix this, and fast.

“God, Shana...” But Lara's voice trails off, her anger seeming to deflate as tears slip down her friend's face.

I stand there, well aware that anger solves nothing. The best we can do is move forward and make the best of things.

“We'll deal with this,” I say, glancing from Lara to Shana, wanting to assure them as I speak in a tone that's firm but not unkind. “We'll fix it. Together.”

Lara nods. “Whatever it takes,” she whispers, reaching out to pat Shana's hand.

Shana's tearful eyes meet mine, a silent thank you passing between us. Lara lets out a sigh of relief and I can see she trusts me, a fact that warms my soul. This is a setback, yes, but we're a team, and we'll handle it as a team.

“What happened?” Lara asks, sounding curious about what transpired to get things to this point.

Shana's eyes are red-rimmed, her fingers twisting a tissue into puffs of white dust.

“I met him at a conference,” she says, her low voice hushed and embarrassed. “He seemed... interested in me. Maybe a little too interested in me.”

“Your boyfriend?” Lara asks, and I stand back, wondering how the heck Lara didn’t know about her best friend’s boyfriend. But things click; if Shana had a bad feeling from the start, of course, she wouldn’t want her friend to meet him and confirm her fears.

Shana nods, fresh tears sliding down her cheeks. “I should have known—”

“Shana.” Lara's tone seems to get her friends attention and she continues to speak. “This is not your fault. Someone did this to you.”

“You didn't know,” I say, feeling bad for her. “We'll sort this mess out and you'll meet a decent guy.”

“He did invent reasons to get me out of the room when my laptop was open and on.” Her heart seems to be breaking before us and I want to hug her, but Lara does instead. As Lara squeezes her friend, I continue puzzling out what to do next.

“I feel so stupid. How did I not see this?” Shana asks Lara.

Lara pulls back slightly, looking Shana in the eyes. “You couldn’t have known. People like that are good at hiding their true intentions.”

I nod in agreement. “The important thing now is to secure your data and make sure he can’t access anything else. We’ll start by changing all your passwords and checking for any malware on your laptop.” There it is, step one of a plan that’ll help us get this situation under control. And if they’re anything like me, just having a plan in place

will help them both feel better about the whole situation.

Shana sniffles, wiping her eyes with a fresh tissue Lara hands her. “Thank you. I don’t know what I’d do without you both.”

“We’re here for you,” Lara says firmly. “We’ll get through this together.”

“I should have listened to my gut.” Shana lets out a laugh with no joy behind it. “I didn’t want you to meet him, Lara, because I knew you’d hate him and tell me to kick him to the curb.”

Lara shrugs. “He sounds like a loser and you can do better. But for now, don’t let him change how you feel about yourself or stop you from working.”

I take a deep breath, ready to get started. While I have step one of the plan already, my mind is working on the backend to form the next part. The harder part. That part that’s not just changing passwords and looking for malware. “Let’s get to work. The sooner we start, the sooner we can put this behind us.”

We gather around Shana’s laptop, ready to tackle the problem head-on. As we work, I can’t help but feel like this could be a problem moving forward. If it was this easy... security needs an overhaul. And I know just the guy to do it. Time to see if Vice is still looking for honest, aboveboard work. It would be nice to see him again, too. And as those thoughts fill my mind, another clicks into place. Not only could I ask Vice to head up security, but maybe I can convince Walker to help, too.

After all, he wanted to invest in the company. Maybe he’ll be willing to make this company worth investing in by getting rid of the impersonators. It’s worth giving him a call. And as the IT guy looks over the system, I step out into the hallway to make a call.

“I can’t wait!” Win is dragging both me and Lara along, clearly in a bigger hurry than we are, but only because we’re not four-year-olds with endless energy and an unmatched excitement for life.

We’d decided to bring him to the aquarium after I asked Lara if he’d ever been. She’d thought about it, then in a surprised voice said no. She seemed surprised because it’s the kind of place he’d go crazy for and she couldn’t believe she hadn’t thought of it before.

All the anger, tension, and betrayal of the day stops at the door, replaced by the wide-eyed wonder of our son. He tugs on my hand, eager, and I let him lead the way inside the darker space filled with tanks.

“Look, Daddy!” His small finger points to a circular tank where jellyfish hover, their tops undulating and their long tentacles drifting on invisible currents.

“Oh, they’re beautiful,” Lara says, and I give her a sideways glance. I can’t imagine anyone calling a gelatinous blob beautiful, but...

She elbows me, a smile on her face. “I think they’re pretty.”

“What? I didn’t say anything,” I tease back, leaning in to press a quick kiss to her lips as Win presses his face to the tank, clearly fascinated.

“Come on,” Win says, done with them just as fast as he’d taken interest. He grabs our hands, leading us deeper into the place and I chuckle at his excitement. He stops at seahorses, watches some pretty blue tangs and clownfish as he remembers a movie he’s watched at least thirteen thousand times.

“Dory!” he exclaims before moving on, walking in a zig-zag pattern. “Just keep swimming, just keep swimming.”

I hustle after Lark's tiny, darting form, Lara hot on my heels. His laughter echoes through the vast space alongside the low conversations of other people, the shouts of excited kids, and the soft gurgle of filtered water. He skids to a halt in front of a tank where a sea turtle glides, looking majestic.

“Big turtle, Daddy!” Lark's finger smudges against the glass, his eyes round with delight. From overhead, we see them dropping food in and the turtle lazily eats the food raining down around him. And Win watches, his expression thrilled, his attention fixated on the creature.

“Really big,” I say with a chuckle, stealing a glance at Lara. There's so much joy in her eyes it takes my breath away.

We weave between clusters of people, following Lark's excited beeline from exhibit to exhibit. He is a blur of energy who finds each display more fascinating than the last. Neon fish. Spiky urchins. We're chasing more than just our son; we're chasing his mind's ability to absorb and retain information.

“Why don't we visit the touch pool next?” I ask, knowing the sensory experience would make him even happier.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Win jumps up and down, and I lead him and Lara into the rooms for hands-on discovery, and Lark's face lights up brighter than any bioluminescent creature here.

“You really did your homework, huh?” Lara asks, crossing her arms as we watch Win rush to the tanks, then make a U-turn right back to us.

“I can touch?” he asks, looking back at the shallow pool.

“Yep, just be gentle,” I say, walking him over to the pool. We stand side by side and I

guide his small hand toward the surface. The water is chilly, but not uncomfortably so, and Win seems okay. Until his fingers graze a starfish, and he recoils. But he doesn't need me to talk him through it, he touches the starfish again, this time with purpose.

"Bumpy, hard, awesome," he says softly, awe filling his words. It's obvious he didn't expect that texture, and my heart swells, knowing I'm here for this moment of discovery.

"Starfish are tough, buddy," I say, kneeling beside him. "They need to be, living out there in the ocean."

"Tough like us?" His question catches me off guard as he peers up at me with those bright green eyes that are so like mine.

"Exactly like us," I say, surprised as always at how perceptive and intelligent he is and, as I ruffle his hair, I think about how we are all facing rough waters, but today, there's some smooth sailing.

But he's off, finding another exhibit. "Look, Dad! Look, Mom!" Win's voice pulls me from my thoughts as he hovers over the new exhibit, fingers hovering inches above a sea anemone. His fascination in the motion of the delicate pink tendrils seems to make him hesitate. Or he's steeling himself since the starfish surprised him.

He glances at us as if asking permission, and I'm suddenly aware of how close Lara is standing and how amazing she smells.

"Go ahead," I say, nodding at him. I don't mind reassuring him that what he's doing is okay. Moments like this, when I was unsure as a child, my mother had been kind and gentle. Not impatient. And I want to parent like she did.

We watch as his tiny finger descends with care as he pets the anemone. “Just don’t stick your finger in its mouth.” One of the staff bend over and talk to him about the creature and Lara peeks up at me.

“He’s loving this, so you know. You made a good choice with this place.”

I nod as the staff member explains that the anemone responds to being touched by closing slightly – but it doesn’t hurt or scare them.

“It tickles!” Win says with a giggle, pulling his hand back to watch it unfurl once more.

“Hey, buddy, let’s listen to this,” I say as a marine educator starts her talk on rays. Win’s gaze shifts, noticing that she has props, pictures, and a voice so bright with passion for rays it’s hard not to listen to her.

“Rays have different shapes for different reasons,” she explains, holding up a ray-shaped cutout and turning in a half-circle so everyone can see.

“Like superheroes!” Win exclaims, and the small crowd chuckles.

“Exactly, each one with their own superpower,” she says, agreeing with him and offering a smile. Win gives a little shoulder wiggle, a dance that tells me he’s proud to have been part of the lesson.

“He’s a special little guy,” I say to Lara, and she nods.

I watch Win with a sense of pride that I only feel for him. His curiosity and enthusiasm are contagious, and I can’t help but smile as he soaks up every bit of information offered. Lara’s hand slips into mine, and I give it a gentle squeeze.

“He’s got your spirit,” she says softly, her eyes shining.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I think he’s got the best of both of us.”

Lara nods, accepting my words, and I’m happy right here in this moment.

The marine educator continues her talk, and Win is completely captivated. I glance at Lara, her face illuminated by the soft light of the aquarium. She’s watching Win with so much love my heart begins to ache in the best way possible.

“Thank you for this,” she says, turning to me. “For everything.”

“You don’t have to thank me. This is my pleasure.” I love spending time with them. Both of them. And I have a lot of time to make up for. I know that’s not how things work, but I have every intention of trying. I lean in, pressing a kiss to her temple.

“Next time we should bring your mom and Damon.” She seems genuinely thrilled by the idea as she says it, and it only makes me love her more.

We both look up as Win’s laughter rings out as the educator lets him touch a ray’s smooth skin. His joy shines in his face and gives me a sense of fulfillment I never knew I needed. This is what it’s all about—these moments of pure, unfiltered happiness.

As the talk wraps up, Win runs over to us, his eyes wide with excitement. “Did you see that, Mom? I touched a ray!”

“I saw, buddy,” Lara says, hunkering down to his level.

He nods. “Dad, did you see?” he asks.

“I did!” I say with a nod. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“The coolest!” he exclaims, bouncing up and down on his toes.

Lara laughs, and I realize I love the sound. “What’s next on the agenda, Mr. Tour Guide?” she teases me.

I glance at the map of the aquarium, considering our options. “How about we check out the shark tunnel?”

Win’s eyes go even wider. “Sharks? Yes, please!”

We make our way to the tunnel, Win practically dragging us along in his excitement. As we walk through, surrounded by the graceful predators, I feel that everything has finally fallen into place. Well, maybe not everything – there are still some business matters to attend to – but this whole family life and dad role make me happy. This is my family, my life, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Win’s excitement is contagious, and I find myself grinning as he looks up. The water above us shimmers with the movement of the sharks, their sleek bodies gliding effortlessly through the blue. Lara squeezes my hand, her eyes filled with wonder and a hint of fear.

“Look at that one!” Win points to a particularly large shark, his voice filled with awe. “It’s huge!”

I love his excitement. “That’s a sand tiger shark. Impressive, right?”

Lara leans closer, her shoulder brushing against mine. “It’s amazing how peaceful they seem,” she says.

I nod, watching as the sharks swim. “Yeah, it’s like they’re in their own world.” Like we are. Our own happy little world, untouched by the stress and troubles of the outside world, if only for a moment.

Lara leans into me, her head resting on my shoulder. “This is perfect,” she whispers.

I wrap my arm around her, pulling her close. “Yeah, it is,” I agree, my heart feeling full. “It really is.”

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 12:18 am

Lara

The sharp ring of the phone jolts me out of thoughts of being in Lark's arms while he—

“Hello?” I say, taking the call as my heart threatens to pound out of my chest.

“Miss Mills?” The voice on the other end is official, professional, almost cold. “We have him in custody.”

My brow furrows as I try to figure out who I know who could be in trouble. Is it Lark? Has he reverted back to a life of crime? He better not have, I'll be so mad.

“Who,” I ask, feeling silly, like I should know the answer already.

“The individual responsible for the intellectual property theft, Kevin Oaks. He's in jail.”

I lean back against my desk, suddenly weak-kneed. Relief floods me and I let out a deep breath, feeling relaxed and like I can finally breathe again. But the officer isn't quite done talking just yet.

“Seems he resisted arrest or upset someone. He got a bit roughed up.” There's no remorse in the officer's tone, and I'm not searching for any. The guy probably got what he deserved. He's a low life, petty thug who hurt my company, my friend, and my life.

“Good,” I say, more to myself than to him. “So, what happens now?”

“Restitution, most likely. He won't be doing this again anytime soon. I'll be in touch.”

“Thank you, officer.” I hang up and exhale a shaky breath. This has to be some of the best news I've gotten in days, and I've had some good news lately.

My door swings open. Shana's there, her eyes wide and excited. Obviously she got the news, too, because she crosses the room in two strides.

“Did you hear—” Her voice is animated, almost breathless.

“He's locked up.” My voice is strong, and I know that no matter what, we are going to be just fine. How can we not be?

“I'm so happy!” Her arms wrap around me in a tight, warm hug. “You can relax now.” There's more than a hint of humor in her voice, but I'm happy to hear the absolute relief in her tone.

I hug her back, feeling the tension in my neck begin to relax. “Yeah,” I say softly. “Relax.” There's no way I'll do that – there's so much work to do, ideas to work on, paperwork to fill out. I can't wait to get started on the next step, because these next few years, they're the ones that are going to make us billionaires; I just know it.

The chime of my phone breaks the post-victory hush with a light melody that has me pulling back and checking the screen. Carol's – Lark's mom's – picture stares back at me. Confusion and a touch of fear pinch my brow as I answer the call.

“Mom!” The word is a giggle, all the joy in the world stocked into a single word. My heart swells.

“Hey, buddy!” I couldn't stop the smile that spreads across my face if I wanted to – but I don't. “How are you? Where are you?”

“Grandma took me to this cool place!” His voice bubbles with excitement. I imagine his whole body wiggling like a puppy as he tries to contain his excitement, his wide eyes darting around, trying to soak in everything all at once. “I painted a big picture and got to look at some really old bones!”

“What kind of bones?” I ask, waving at Shana as she heads for the door with an apologetic smile on her face. She's gone in a moment, and I focus all my attention on my son.

“Dinosaur!”

I can hear Carol's voice in the background.

“Wow, that sounds amazing!” The warmth of his happiness seeps through the phone, a much-needed antidote to the stress of the past weeks.

“I love you!” he says, and then there's the muffled static sound of the phone changing hands.

“Hi, Lara,” Mom says, her voice filled with affection. “He's having such a wonderful time.”

“Thanks for taking him. He sounds thrilled.”

“He's a delight, truly.” There's a pause, and she says, “Enjoy your weekend, dear.”

My forehead creases. “This weekend?” What the heck is she talking about? We don't have plans for the weekend.

“Didn't Lark tell you?” Her tone suggests a smile I can't see, and I want to know right now. I don't like feeling like the last person to know something and so help me, I'll march into his office right now and drag him out by the ear until he tells me what he did.

“Oh, got to go! Win's on the move.” With that, the line goes dead, leaving me with more questions than answers.

Before I can call her back or make my way to Lark's office, my office door swings open once more.

Lark strides in, a grin on his face that tells me he's up to something, even if his mother hadn't already clued me in.

“So, I just got off the phone with Carol,” I say, giving him the chance to come clean about his plans, even though I'm feeling more playful than annoyed at this point.

“Really? What did she have to say?” He's feigning innocence, but I know better and cross my arms, eyeing him with suspicion.

“She told me to enjoy the weekend,” I say, wanting him to know he's caught. His expression doesn't seem all that worried, though, and he moves closer to me.

“Are you ready for an adventure?” he asks, offering me his hand.

My hand finds his, and we're moving, out of the office, up to the roof in the crisp air of the city.

A sleek helicopter awaits, its blades whirling fast and loud, making it impossible to hear my own thoughts. Lark helps me inside, the roar swallowing any chance for conversation or questions.

As we lift off, the world falls away—skyscrapers shrink, streets blur into dark ribbons. He slips bulky headphones over my ears, but I'm busy watching the world fall away as the chopper angles toward the tree-covered mountains.

Lark catches my eye, his gaze steady over the noise. He mouths something, but I can't make it out. Yet his smile makes my heart do a little dance in my chest.

I give him a questioning look, but he just grins wider, pointing out the window. I follow his gesture and gasp. Below us, the mountains hide the city and instead, all we see is a vast expanse of green with blue rivers threading through. The taller mountains are dusted with snow even now, and I'm awestruck by the beauty of this place. We so rarely get out of the city, this is a surprise I never saw coming.

The helicopter begins to descend, and I realize we're heading toward a secluded clearing near an open meadow dotted with so many colored flowers it's hard to look at anything else. The sight is breathtaking. As we touch down, Lark helps me out of the helicopter, his hands warm and steady as he grabs my hips and lowers me to the ground.

"Welcome to your adventure," he says once the chopper lifts off and is far enough away we can hear one another again.

I look around, taking in the beauty of the place. "This is incredible," I say, exhaling as I take in the nature surrounding us. I feel tiny amongst the tall mountains and the meadow is the most beautiful thing I think I've ever seen.

He turns me around and I see a structure nestled in the trees ringing the meadow. Glass glints in the sunlight, making me wonder if it's just a giant greenhouse. And every bit of me wants to go explore.

I glance up at him and he nods. "Where do you want to go first?" he asks.

With that, I turn and make my way to the greenhouse. He follows, his hand a constant on my back, guiding me through the crisp mountain air. We walk through the grass among the wildflowers, and I study the blue, purple, pink, white, yellow and red blossoms, wondering what each of them are, but not caring because they're simply beautiful.

With every step, I'm stunned by the majestic splendor. I'm speechless as I take in the mountains shrouded in fog and snow. The green endlessness of the trees fade into blue in the distance along the mountain ridgelines.

"Come on." He takes my hand, leading me toward the greenhouse.

"What is it?" I ask as we walk.

"Where we're staying," he says.

I glance up at him. "A greenhouse?"

He nods, a smile on his face.

"It was a greenhouse. Now it's a cabin made of glass that can enjoy every bit of the view."

As we approach, I see the greenhouse-turned-cabin nestled among the trees. Its glass walls reflect the surrounding beauty, making it seem like a part of the landscape. Lark opens the door, and I step inside, my breath catching at the sight.

The interior is cozy and inviting, with a comfortable seating area and a small kitchen. The glass walls offer a panoramic view of the mountains and the meadow, making it feel like we're still outside, surrounded by nature.

Lark wraps his arms around me from behind, his chin resting on my shoulder. “What do you think?” I squeeze my eyes closed, loving the contact, the closeness.

“It’s perfect,” I whisper, leaning back into him. “Absolutely perfect.”

He kisses my temple, then takes my hand, leading me to a staircase. “There’s more. Come on.”

We climb the stairs to a lofted bedroom, where a plush bed is positioned to face the glass wall. The view from here is even more breathtaking, with the mountains stretching out as far as the eye can see.

Lark pulls me close, his eyes shining with joy and heat that has my body tingling and ready for whatever he wants to do next. “I wanted to give us a place where we could escape the world and just be together.”

I smile, feeling tears of joy welling up. “You’ve outdone yourself, Lark. This is incredible.”

He brushes a tear from my cheek, his touch gentle. “You deserve it. We deserve it.”

We stand there for a moment, soaking in the beauty and the peace of our surroundings. Then, hand in hand, we make our way back downstairs, ready to settle in.

The sound of our laughter echoes through the glass and steel, as I tell him about the first time Win learned he could climb. We laugh, we lean in close, talking about everything and nothing. How I started my business. Why he got hung up with the wrong crowd and the things he had to do to survive. The pop of a wine bottle cork punctuates our conversation, and we pour the rich liquid into glasses, toasting the moment. We joke that we both only drink on special occasions anymore, but every

time we're together, we feel like celebrating.

Together, we cook a hearty stew with the ingredients that stock the kitchen. When the food is done, we work together to get it on the table, talking every second. He wants two more kids. I want one, and I hope for a girl, not that it really matters. He wants to retire at fifty, I want to work until I'm too tired to anymore. We're so different, but alike where it matters.

We both want to work hard now to enjoy later. We want to pour ourselves into our son, to make sure he knows he's loved and important, and amazing. We want to live lives we don't need to escape from, but can choose to anytime we wish.

And as we dig into our stew, I wonder if this is what life is supposed to be like.

"Is this what happiness feels like?" I ask him as we finish our meal.

"I think so," he says, gathering up our dishes and heading into the kitchen to wash them. I follow him in and shoulder to shoulder, we clean everything and set it all to dry on the rack.

Later, when we're tired, we sit by the fireplace, listening to the crackling and popping.

He pulls me closer, his eyes filled with love, and this feels like home. Not the cabin, him. He feels like where I'm meant to be.

Over the next few days, we get out and really live. We hike up trails, savoring the firm earth beneath our boots. At the peak, we watch rolling clouds skate along the mountains far below, white over green that shifts to blue like a natural gradient.

And I feel a peace here that I've never known—a calm that seeps into my bones.

Back home, we drag a blanket out into the yard as the brilliant hues of the sunset fade.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I say as we lay on the blanket in the grass as the stars twinkle overhead.

“Thank you for saying yes,” he replies, his fingers tracing patterns on my lower back as I curl into him.

I wish the weekend would never end, even though I do miss Damon, Win, Carol, and Shana. But we’re having fun and getting lost in one another, just like I worried we might.

But somehow, it’s okay. I’m happy. This feels like it was meant to be. Like fate, maybe.

“I could get used to this,” I say, leaning into him as we watch the dawn break with hot cups of coffee in hand.

“Us?” he asks, sounding hopeful.

“Us,” I say, because there's no denying it now—I’m in love with him, and I’m pretty sure he’s in love with me.

“What do you want to do today, love?” he asks.

And I glance over at him. “Maybe stay in today?” I say, hoping he understands what I’m hinting – not so subtly – at, because while we’ve had fun, we’ve been too tired every night to make love, and I’m really craving his touch.

He gives a wolfish grin and gently squeezes my thigh, making his forearm flex. “That

sounds like a plan.”

My heart beats a little bit faster as I think about the possibilities the day holds. And all of them include me being sore tomorrow in the best possible way.

When the sun begins to set on our truly perfect day, I find myself in the bedroom, staring out over the majesty before us. Lark walks up behind me, kissing my neck and revving my body up for another round. I want to melt into him, give him anything he asks, because he’s just too perfect for me. This time away has taught me that I want him in my life as a permanent fixture.

The sun dips behind the mountains, casting a golden-orange glow across everything. Lark's hand finds mine, his grip strong yet gentle, as he continues kissing me, sending a shiver down my spine as excitement flutters in my chest.

“You are amazing,” he says, and I reach up with one hand, touching his hair before turning my head to meet him in a kiss.

“So are you,” I whisper against his lips. I can’t imagine a more perfect end to a perfect day.

His arm slips around my shoulders, the other around my waist, pulling me back into his body in a way that gets my blood pumping.

“You better stop that, mister,” I tease, remembering how he’d been the one needing a break, though the soreness in me made me gratefully agree.

“There’s one more thing,” he says, and I’m dragged back to the day of the scavenger hunt when he’d spoiled both me and Win.

“Oh no, you don’t,” I say, pressing a quick kiss to his lips.

“You can’t stop me,” he says.

“I probably can.” Our teasing back and forth has a smile on my face, until he drops to one knee. My heart stops beating and I stare at him. He has to be joking, there’s no way...

“Lara,” he says in that deep, gravelly voice that drives me wild. “I can’t imagine a life without you.”

Wasn’t I just thinking that a little while ago?

“I don’t want to imagine a life without you.” His eyes lock on mine with an intensity that makes my breath catch. “You are my partner, my friend, my love, you are my everything. Every moment with you makes me the happiest man on Earth, and I want to spend the rest of my life making you that happy, too.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I realize this is really happening. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small, velvet box. Opening it, he reveals a stunning ring that sparkles in the light.

I can hardly breathe as I look at the ring. A delicate platinum band reflects the light with a brilliant round-cut diamond in the center that catches and reflects every ray of light with a dazzling sparkle... it’s incredible. More beautiful than I ever imagined. And the thought of it being a symbol of our forever, our love, a commitment to this man...

“Will you marry me?” he asks.

I’m speechless, overwhelmed by the flood of emotions within me, excitement, joy, surprise.... But then, with a smile that feels like it might split my face in two, I nod my head.

“Yes,” I whisper, my voice trembling with joy and nerves. “Yes, I will marry you.”

He slips the ring onto my finger, and as he stands, I throw my arms around him, pulling him into a hug and planting a kiss on his lips.

I never saw this coming, but things make more sense now. I break the kiss. “Carol knew, didn’t she?” I ask.

He nods.

I love how important his family is to him, and now, we’re becoming part of that family, my brother and me. My heart pounds, not just from surprise but with every bit of love I feel for him. I feel the weight of the ring on my finger and everything feels surreal.

The rainbows cast by the diamond scatter around the room, and I’m amazed again. “I had no idea,” I whisper.

“Good. I like that I can keep you on your toes.” He presses a quick kiss to my lips.

We stand like that for a while, his arms holding me, and I rest my head on his chest, listening to the heartbeat that beats in time with mine.

“Forever,” he says into my hair, his voice filled with excitement and disbelief.

“Forever,” I say, and we kiss again, surrounded by the beauty of the great outdoors.

And in this moment, my life becomes whole. I’m with the man I’m meant to be with, even though I still don’t believe in fate.

Lara

Seven years later...

I glance at the photo on my desk, our laughter captured forever in a frame that brings back every bit of that happiness and joy.

And I remember that the billions we have in the bank isn't what fills my chest with warmth. We did it, Lark, Shana, and me. But the real victory... it's our family. Our love. The beauty and joy that fill every single day.

"Uh-oh, I know that look," Lark says as he walks past, then backs up a few steps to talk to me.

I smile. "Just thinking about how lucky we are."

"I always knew we'd make it," he says, making his way to my side before pulling me up into his arms. As he holds me close, I melt into his arms.

"But the money... it isn't everything."

"It never was." His eyes lock onto mine, still an intense green, even if the lines around them are a little deeper. I love the way his hair is going silver at his temples, and the way he's aged like fine wine. I'd love a taste. Heat roars through my body and the hairs on my arms and neck stand on end like standing outside right before an electrical storm.

It's him. Always him.

His gaze burns into me, his hands remind me that I'm his – and he's mine - and my body responds by melting into his touch. But more than that, I feel myself ready for him as that building heat within me demands release. I crave him like an addict. I need him.

“Hey,” he says in that low voice that awakens the primal desire within me.

“Hey yourself,” I say, reaching up to run my fingers through his hair.

He gives me another kiss, his hands lowering to the hem of my skirt and pushing the material up, only to find I'm wearing nothing under. He growls with this knowledge, lifting me up and placing me on the desk in our office at home. We're alone for the moment, and I can't think of anything else I'd rather do with this time.

With a quick thrust, he fills me, and my body settles around him while a groan escapes him. Excitement floods every inch of me, and I let my arms out of the sleeves of my dress, letting the fabric pool around my waist as he looks at my body with a look of such intense hunger I can't help but feel wanted.

“You feel so good,” he whispers in my ear, pushing into me before pulling back, leaning closer as I plant my hands on the desk behind me.

“I want you more than anything,” I tell him, my voice filled with desire.

He kisses me deeply, exploring every inch of my body with one hand while the other holds me close. I wrap my legs around his waist, pulling him closer.

“I can't get enough of you,” he says, his breathing ragged and his voice rough.

“Then take me.”

He does, moving at a deliberate pace that drives us both wild. I arch my back, meeting his every thrust.

“You’re mine,” he growls.

“Yes,” I say with a gasp, reaching up to clutch at his shoulders.

He speeds up, his hips pounding into me as my breasts bounce with the sheer force of his movements. With another rough thrust, he slides into me even deeper, sending waves of pleasure through my core and promising release.

His eyes lock onto mine, the intensity of his gaze making my heart race. He pushes home again, hitting that sweet spot inside me and sending skitters of pleasure throughout my entire body.

The sound of our bodies slapping together fills the room, mingling with our heavy breathing and the occasional moan. And as he continues to thrust, I lose myself in the moment like I have so many times before. His touch brings me to the moon, and I can feel my orgasm building up inside.

“I’m close,” I whisper, unable to hold back the desire coursing through me.

He smiles, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “Then let go.”

And so I do, surrendering to the ripples of pleasure that start in my center and move out to the furthest points of my body. My entire body shudders with the intensity of it, and for a moment, he’s my whole world.

“I can’t hold back any longer,” he groans, his eyes locking with mine as if he’s

memorizing every detail of my face.

“Then don’t,” I moan, my heart pounding in the same rhythm of his movements.

Pleasure overtakes him, and we both surrender to the raw, primal pleasure of his thrusts. I forget the desk under me, the thumping sounds, the slap of our skin, I forget everything but the pleasure this man brings me. With one final burst, he slams into me and holds there, pressing deeper, shuddering as he holds me close.

When we finally come back to ourselves, we’re both panting heavily, our faces flushed with passion.

“That was... intense,” I say, trying to catch my breath.

“Always is,” he says, his gaze still locked on mine.

He’s not wrong...

After all these years, the heat and need between us, it hasn’t weakened. It’s only grown stronger, better, and more exciting.

“God, I love you,” I whisper, planting a kiss on the tip of his nose right before he slides out of me, leaving me a dripping mess. He hesitates for a moment, admiring his juices on my inner thighs, and I give him a playful push.

“Stop it,” I say, but he’s giving me that look again, like he’s ready for round two. “Not going to happen, mister. We have things to do and I have to clean up.”

“I love you.” He sounds surprised by his words as I stand up, fixing the top of my dress before smiling at him and hurrying for the door.

We get ready in silence, but it's not empty. We're both throwing heated glances at one another and when I finally slip my shoes on, he's ready to go. Our clothes tell where we're headed, but our flushed cheeks and quick smiles tell the truth of where we've just been and what we've done.

“Ready?” he asks, straightening his button-up shirt with powerful fingers.

“Yes,” I say. “It’s time to remind ourselves what’s more important than becoming billionaires.”

He grins, takes my hand, and together we step out, making our way down to where our driver awaits. Because Lark has helped me appreciate the finer things in life, like limos and yachts. And I'd like to think I've helped him remember to be in the moment, enjoying those things.

We're partners in every sense; work, life, parenting, you name it. And no matter what anyone else says, it's the life we've built and the family we've created that are our real sign of success.

The hum of conversation fades the moment I step into Carol's house. Kendra's bubbly laughter rings out and there she is—our little stormy-eyed girl with black hair—spinning with an energy only a two-year-old possesses. Her tiny arms open wide as she spots me, a twirling bundle of curls and giggles as she sways, trying to run for me but dizzy from the spins.

“Mommy!” she squeals, throwing herself into my arms, and my heart swells to impossible sizes.

“Hey, sweet pea.” I scoop her up, peppering her chubby little cheeks with kisses that earn kicking legs and laughter. Her small hands cup my cheeks, her eyes bright and filled with life.

“Missed you,” she whispers, the words tugging my heart so hard I can hardly breathe.

“I missed you more,” I say, meaning the words and watching her shake her head, certain I’m wrong.

From across the room, our shared life beams back at me; my brother, Damon, flashes a grin, his wheelchair momentarily forgotten, as our mother-in-law, Carol, looks on with a smile that couldn’t possibly be more happy. The air is thick with love and with the sense of belonging.

“Your uncle's got some big news,” I tell Kendra, nodding toward Damon.

“Big news!” she says, struggling in my arms to face her uncle and point at him so we know she knows who we’re talking about.

Before anything else can be said, Lark snatches Kendra from me, leaving behind only giggles.

“Yep.” Damon rolls closer, the joy and excitement in his eyes unmistakable. “I’m moving in with Fern.”

Kendra, likely not understanding the enormity of the moment, claps her hands and squeals. I’m happy for him, too, but my heart hurts to know he’ll no longer live with us, even though he’s only there a few days a week now, because the rest of the time, he’s with Fern.

But she seems to love him more than anything, and that’s what I wanted for him all along. How often had he doubted this day would come? “Congratulations,” I say, as Carol hugs him and Lark nods his direction.

“Thanks, Lara.” His gaze shifts, scanning the room before lingering on the empty

space beside him. “She's incredible, you know? She sees me, not the chair.”

“Love does that,” I say softly, watching Kendra wriggle down to race over to her uncle.

“Does what, Mommy?” Kendra asks, curious as she throws herself into her uncle’s arms. He gives her hugs as I give her my answer.

“Love lets you see the real person inside someone, not just their faces,” I say, feeling Lark’s eyes on me as I say the words. I’m sure he’ll have some words for me later, but right now, I’m focused on her.

“Like Daddy and you?” Her adorable tiny white teeth flash as she smiles.

I nod. “Exactly like Daddy and me.”

“Exactly,” I hear Lark say at the same time.

“Love is super cool!” With that, Kendra darts back to her father, leaving me to think about how she’s right. Love has indeed proven itself super cool, resilient. Love changed our lives in all the best ways.

“Super cool,” I say, more to myself than anyone else.

“Super cool,” Lark says, and I think he’s teasing, but I don’t mind. Let him joke around, I know what I mean. I want to remember this moment when life decides to throw us a curveball like it has so many times before. We’ve made it, but we’ve had hard times, setbacks, struggles.

And no matter how vast our wealth grows, it's these moments of teaching our children what pure, real love looks like that’s truly invaluable.

The scent of home fills my lungs as I guide Kendra into the tub. I'm happy. Dinner with the family was wonderful, even if I'm still aching a little at Damon's news. I'm happy for him, of course, and excited for this new chapter in his life, but I'll miss him a lot. So will Win.

Kendra's giggles fill the room as I squeeze droplets of food coloring into the running water, turning the bubbles into mounds of colorful foam that has her little face lit up in wonder. I help her into the tub and she claps her hands, sending a spray of blue bubbles into the air.

"Look, Mommy! It's magic potion!" Kendra's voice is full of wonder, her imagination running wild with the colored bubbles in her bathwater.

"Absolutely magical," I say, watching her fingers dance through the foam and transfer handfuls to the tiles in art.

"Beautiful," Lark says from behind me, and I lean back slightly as his arms encircle my waist. His breath is warm on my neck, and I can't suppress the shiver that runs down my spine as he presses his lips to my skin. I can't help but feel the promise in that gesture, that tonight, he's going to make sure I know how much he craves me.

"Your daddy thinks so, too," I tell our daughter, smiling at the reflection of us in the mirror—our little family.

"Wow!" Kendra says, her wide smile creating deep dimples in her chubby little cheeks.

They grow up far too fast, and I've learned to try to find and infuse magic into every moment. Because far too soon, they'll move out and start their own lives. For now, I just want them to be my babies. Just for a while longer. But the moments... they fly by in the blink of an eye.

“Guess what, love?” Lark says, breaking me out of my bittersweet thoughts as he plants a soft kiss on my head. I tilt my face up to meet his eyes. “Our boy is home.”

“Already?” I glance at the clock, surprised. Time with Kendra always seems to slip away like soap bubbles between fingers.

“Win?” Kendra squeals. She loves no one more than her older brother, and he dotes on her, even though he’s at an age where he should be more annoyed by a small sibling. But he’s a special kid, and always has been.

“Let me take over here,” Lark says, already rolling up his sleeves. “Go see him.”

“Thanks.” Gratitude mixes with a rush of excitement as I plant a quick kiss on Kendra's forehead and dart from the room. I’ve missed my son, and I’m so excited to see him. I know that these little getaways are good for him, build independence, teach him countless lessons, and give him time with his peers, but I sure do miss him terribly.

“Mom!” His voice comes from the hallway, and I swear it’s deeper than I remember it being last week—yet another reminder of how quickly they're growing up.

“Hey there!” I step into the living room where my son stands, almost as tall as Lark now. His arms open just in time to catch me as I collide with him in a hug that lifts my feet off the ground. His strength surprises me every time, a stark contrast to the tiny baby I once cradled against my chest when he was just a seven-pound newborn, then all through the years.

“I missed you, Mom.” He sets me down, his arms still snug around me. I love that he’s not ashamed to tell me things like this. I have no doubt that Lark’s amazing relationship with his mom has helped rub off on Win.

“I missed you more,” I say, keeping the tradition as I pull back just enough to study his face, to see hints of the man he'll soon become. Gone are the chubby baby cheeks, the round toddler face, the soft face of my little boy. Now, he's showing angles and sharpness, and it both breaks my heart and makes me fill with pride. He's becoming a wonderful young man, and I love him more and more every day.

“Is everything okay?” he asks, and I figure I've been staring at him for a little too long as concern crosses his features. Of course, he's intuitive like his father, always sensing the undercurrents of emotion.

“Better than okay,” I say, keeping my sadness to myself, because it's mine to carry as I smooth a lock of hair from his brow. It's getting long; he'll want it cut soon. I make a mental note to set an appointment. “We're all together now. That's perfect.”

He grins, the expression softening his features and giving me a hint of the boy he once was. It'll have to be enough, along with the pride I feel at who he's growing into. A warm-hearted, helpful young man with a talent for solving puzzles and understanding people. All because we raised him with love every step of the way.

Gone is the endless energy we remember, replaced by someone with a mind that's faster than his feet ever were.

“You're right, that sounds perfect,” he says, and there's love and laughter in his voice, a sound that makes home feel more complete. Things are changing, but all the changes are good. As long as we all focus on the positive and remember how truly lucky we are, it's not hard to be happy.

“I know I'm right,” I tease, and he chuckles.

For a moment, we're both still, basking in the moment. Our home holds us close, promising love, safety, of a happiness so deep I couldn't begin to describe it even if I

wanted to.

This is what it means to have everything.

All the money, this home, our cars, our fancy gadgets... none of them would mean a thing without people we love to share them with.

This is what it means to be truly, deeply happy.

“So, what’s dad up to?” Win asks, and we make our way toward the bathroom.

“Bathing Kendra. So probably blowing bubbles,” I say with a laugh. He joins me and we catch sight of Lark with a wet, towel-wrapped Kendra in his arms.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, a sparkle of humor in his eyes.

“Nothing,” I say as he puts Kendra down. She rushes to her brother, towel flapping, already dressed in her jammies. Lark lifts his shoulders at me.

“She wanted her towel because her hair is wet,” he says, as if he has to excuse things to me.

And as we watch our children hug, Win lifts his little sister and turns to walk into the living room, but not before asking her to tell him everything he missed while he was gone.

Lark takes my hand and we follow, listening to her bright little voice and his encouragement. There’s so much love in this house, it’s hard to imagine what might have happened if fate didn’t intervene. Because too much has happened for me to not believe in fate at this point.

Of course, Lark still doesn't, but he's allowed to be wrong.

THE END

Clifton

I sit on the cold metal bench, my backside feeling almost completely numb with a chill that runs up my back and down my legs. My gaze focuses on the bars that separate me from freedom, the shiny silver gleam taking me back to some foggy childhood memory I'd rather not recall.

A time when my mother would slide shining cookie sheets into the stainless oven. I could almost smell the warm deliciousness of her amazing chocolate chip cookies.

Refusing to let those memories take over, I glance around my cell to ground myself in the present, not that I want to really be here at the moment.

I've been here for hours waiting for my lawyer to show up... waiting for my dad to show up. They're one and the same.

In my mind's eye, I can already see the crinkles of his face and the disappointment in his eyes. I swear at some point when I wasn't looking, he aged... like that avocado that I always think is ready, but turns out to be well past its prime, because the darn thing ripened when I wasn't looking.

The scent of bleach permeates the cell. Thankfully, I'm in here alone with the steel bunk beds and narrow window I couldn't fit a hand turned sideways in - if it were open. But it's not the kind that opens. Thankfully, the narrow, glass-covered gap still lets light filter through, and I try to imagine how I would survive in a place like this long term.

I hate to sound dramatic, but I don't think I'd last very long. Maybe not for the reason people think, though. As much as I hate the thought of losing my freedom, I like spending time alone. No, the real issue for me would be the loss of privacy.

The ambient sounds of muffled voices and the occasional clank of keys isn't my favorite type of music, but I could get used to that, even. All I needed was a good book to pass the time.

I wondered what the odds were of getting a book if I asked.

But the guards are already pissed at me, and I don't want to rock the boat more than I already have. Stretching my fingers and feeling the tender, broken skin across my knuckles ache, I glance down at the raw, red flesh.

That jackass better not have given me any diseases. I wonder if I could sue him - even though I'd been the one to pummel him - if I were to come down with Hepatitis or something. That wasn't my area of knowledge because I wasn't that kind of lawyer.

Though to be perfectly honest, I wasn't any kind of lawyer. Not anymore. I gave up on that route around the same time my father gave up on me carrying on his legacy. I wasn't cut out for the work, much less the stress and strain of having my own firm.

But my father ran things very well and I had no doubt that when he was ready to pass the torch, he'd find somebody worthwhile. Someone like her .

I hear the click of her heels on the concrete floor before I ever see her face. The second I hear that clack, clack, clack , my heart sinks in my chest and I know I'm in deeper than ever before.

Emma Langly.

I lift my chin, feeling every muscle in my body flex in fury. Of course, my father wouldn't show up. I could never count on him to be around when I needed him. Not when I was a child. Not now. Not even when mom died.

Emma's expression is all business, so she stops in front of my cell. But she hesitates, no doubt to upset me further, or let the fact that she's here - not my father - sink in. Joke's on her, I know my dad checked out on me a long time ago and it was only a matter of time before he passed me off entirely.

Her satin blouse matches the blue of her eyes and tucks loosely into her severe black pencil skirt. Her black heels are nothing if not professional and lend a sense of credibility to her five-foot two frame. With her buttery blonde hair pulled back into a tight bun, the severity of her is intensified as she studies me like I'm something she's tracked in on her shoe after a walk in a dog park.

She's a beautiful woman and no doubt knows how to use the fact to her advantage. I stand up and make my way to her, grabbing the bars in both hands as she inclines her head. But she doesn't look up at me, she looks past me at the window in a subtle snub that I'm not even worth noticing. I notice the light smattering of freckles across her nose like raindrops across a puddle on a vibrant spring day.

She's got me thinking in poetry, and I don't even like poetry.

The least poetic part of all of this is that I have no doubt Emma is the one that my father wishes was his child instead of me. She's everything he could possibly want; driven, highly intelligent, smart as a whip, emotionally unavailable, cold, calculating, cruel... I can keep going all day with words to describe her, but she suddenly focuses those incredible eyes on me, and I notice there are flecks of golden around her pupils.

"Another fight." The words aren't a question, they're merely her acknowledging how disappointing I am yet again. I absolutely hate it when she takes that motherly tone

with me - she's two years younger for fuck's sake.

My lip curls into a smirk as I let go of the bars and turn my back on her. "Hey, Emma. Long time no see. Did my dad finally give up on me?" Despite the causal, confident edge to my words, I can hear the bitterness seeping in. Yeah, he'd given up on mom, too. Her diagnosis left him as cold and indifferent to her as I am to Emma.

Her eyelids twitch, narrowing her eyes and she fixes that glare as cold as all the metal in this cell on me. "Do you blame him?" The words are sharp, and I sense there's no right answer. A smart man wouldn't answer that question, and I don't intend to.

"I plead the fifth."

"Now isn't the time for jokes." She sounds angry and I hold back a smile. Lawyers, man, I don't think a sense of humor comes standard, but it should. Given the nature of our work and what we see and deal with - I'm not a lawyer anymore.

"You've been arrested for assault and battery again . You could be facing serious charges, not to mention a lawsuit. What were you thinking?" Again, she takes on that scolding tone like she's a teacher and I'm a poorly behaved student about to face the principal.

"What do you think I was thinking?" I ask, lifting my shoulders. "I saw red and lost it." I don't want to admit the truth; I acted on impulse, and I regret that I let my fists do the talking. I was raised better. My mother taught me to turn the other cheek, to know that only wounded people intentionally inflict pain on others. But in this instance, the lines are a bit more blurry; not black and white like she'd led me to believe when I was a child.

Life is more complicated than she - or anyone else - had let on when I was young.

A sudden sparkle in her eyes warns me I need to tread carefully. “Who did you fight this time and why?” Despite the impatience and annoyance in her voice telling me that she has better things to do than deal with me, I can hear that she is far too interested in my answer.

There’s no way I can tell her the truth.

I can't tell her that I'd come face to face with my childhood rival, the same rival that told me he was glad my mother was dead and that she never loved me anyway. The same rival my recently ex-girlfriend had cheated on me with. The same rival who now thought it was funny to make snide comments about how she finally has a real man with a real job.

Of course, he’d acted like a punk when I said that only a certain kind of guy likes sloppy seconds. He’d squared up and I hit first as my past and present rage at him boiled up.

I glance away from Emma. She doesn't need to know that the rival who tried to outdo me in everything had finally bested me. I hit first, so he’s the victim, no matter how he’s treated me in the past. It doesn't matter that he tormented me relentlessly when I was young, or that he had never been anything but evil, or that he stole my ex-girlfriend, the only woman I've actually loved.

I know, I know. I understand the irony that no one can steal someone from someone else. She wanted to go, and she stepped out. That's on her.

But him luring her away and using her to swing at me - metaphorically - that's on him.

My cold night in lockup left me with one thought - the best revenge is moving on and finding my own happiness.

I'll never let him influence me again. He'll never have the power to make me angry again. I'm over my ex and I'm over all the shit he's put me through since I was a kid.

Of course, there's no way I'll tell Emma any of my thoughts. Instead, I offer a simple cop-out answer.

"Some guy was being a jerk. He had it coming." I say the words with a shrug even as pain lances through my heart.

She rolls her eyes like this is high school and I'm the parent saying something she doesn't like. "That's not a good enough reason, Clifton. You need to learn to control your temper and your fists. You can't go around hitting people whenever you feel like it." That scolding tone is back in her voice. "You're not a kid anymore. You're a grown man and it's time you act like one."

"Are you telling me that or did my dad tell you to say those words?" They sound like something he'd say, and I glance at her to see no hint of amusement in her eyes or expression. She's stone-cold and obviously mad. Good for her. Does she really not think I know better?

Her lips press into a tight line as she glances at an officer over her shoulder with a slight nod. He walks over and opens the door, letting me know this whole time she was playing a power move - keeping me locked up until the last moment.

She hands me some papers and aggressively clicks a pen. "Sign these. They're your release forms." As I lean in closer, her fruity perfume leaves my mouth watering. She smells like watermelon, banana, and kiwi on a warm summer day.

But any hint of softness is dashed when she speaks again. "You're lucky the judge is lenient and agreed to let you off with a stiff warning and fines instead of jail time."

As I scribble my name, she takes the papers, still lecturing me. “But don’t think you’re off the hook, mister. You have to stay out of trouble or I won’t be able to help you. Neither will your dad.” The finality in her voice leads me to believe that she and my father have discussed this at length.

I can barely get him to say two words to me, but he'll tell her anything; what he had for breakfast, how he likes his coffee, all of his passwords and where he keeps his unlocked, handwritten journal.

“Let's go.” I fall into step beside her and she glances up at me. “You have potential, Clifton. Don't waste it.” The hint of compassion and her words leads me to believe she might actually want me to succeed.

Either that or tired of listening to my father talk about having to bail me out.

Most likely the latter.

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Emma

I glance over at Clifton.

He's slumped in the passenger seat of my car, staring out the window with a blank expression on his handsome face. The guy could be a movie star if he wanted. But it seems like all Clifton wants is to cause trouble and get in fights. I can't help but wonder if it's all a ploy to upset his dad, or to get attention.

I can't imagine how tough his life must have been, growing up without a mother and with a father that, while a good guy with his best interests at heart, was emotionally chilly.

But the blank look on Clifton's face tells me he doesn't care about anything, not even the fact that he was just in jail, that I'd bailed him out, that he knows his dad is too mad to show up for him.

In truth, his dad has seemed a bit off lately, and has been leaving work more often on errands he schedules in advance. I have no doubts he's up to something - maybe he's met another woman and that's why he's coming down harder on his son.

"You're staring at me." He sounds grumpy. "Shouldn't you focus on the road so you don't kill us?"

"Self-driving car," I say, gesturing at the display and taking my hands off the wheel.

He glances my direction and arches an eyebrow. "Haven't those been getting some

bad press lately?”

“The odds are in our favor.” I hate when people cherry pick data to suit their argument rather than actually digging into an issue and learning the truth.

I'm a little taken aback to see him wearing a black hoodie and jeans. His dark hair is somehow still neat, and his brilliant green eyes refuse to meet mine. He looks like a man who just doesn't care anymore. His split lip has bruised around his mouth and I wonder what to do.

“Do you want to go get that checked out?” I ask, gesturing to his face.

He brushes the spot with his thumb and shakes his head. “I’m fine.”

I lift a shoulder. Fine. I’m not going to try and force him to be seen.

With a sigh, I focus on the road, trying to ignore the tension in the air. Even though I'm not physically driving, it's hard to break the habit of paying attention to the road.

“Did my dad buy you this car?” There’s no way to ignore the bitterness in his voice.

Not only do I not like what he's asking, I worry about what he might be insinuating. “If you're asking if your father and I have an inappropriate relationship, no. I find it quite concerning that you think a woman can't buy her own car.” With those two statements I sum up my worst concerns.

The hum of the engine isn’t enough to ease the loud silence between us as the seconds stretch out with no response from him. I want to look at him, but I don't dare. Instead, I find myself holding my breath and waiting for whatever words he has next.

“It’s interesting that that’s where your mind went,” he says.

I hazard a glance at him, unable to help myself. “I’ve heard the whispers in the office. I’m also smart enough to know that plenty of people don’t believe a woman can’t get to my position without some other factor at play. I promise you, I’m a self-made woman, and I am where I am thanks to my hard work and skill.” I don’t intend to sound as heated as I do, but I’m sick and tired of the same old misconceptions about me.

“If I have learned anything, it’s the ones that loudly proclaim something are usually the ones that are lying.” He says the words with a hint of humor in his voice, and I wonder if he would really think it tactful to be joking about something so disgusting and serious.

I want to fire back with some comment about how at least his father has someone in his life that doesn’t let him down, but instead of letting that anger take over, I inhale a deep breath and slowly let it escape while going through my internal calming process.

I can stop, take a deep breath, and relax. My emotions don’t control me. I am in control.

“I don’t understand you. You have everything. Money, fame, intelligence, looks, great schooling. You could be an incredible lawyer or anything you want to be.” I glance over again, watching the city fly by out the window behind him.

An almost charming grin crosses his lips. “You think I’m good looking.” The words aren’t a question, and I sigh because he’s only taking one piece of what I said out of context to stroke his ego.

“I think it looks like you don’t have any goals or ambitions, any respect for yourself or others. You’re a spoiled brat.” If the only thing he wants to get out of what I’m saying is that he has good looks, that’s pretty sad.

“What do you know about my goals, ambitions, and respect, or lack thereof? I’m

guessing my father told you something?" Bitterness has seeped back into his voice.

He might be good looking, but I don't like the man child at all.

And this is one of those moments where I hate my job, even though I'm proud of myself. Becoming a lawyer didn't come easy, and making it as his father's right-hand woman was even harder. I earned his dad's trust, and he can't even earn a word from the man.

Still, I know that I can't take this conversation any further. I'm his lawyer and I have to deal with him. That means bailing him out of trouble, defending him in court, and trying to make him see reason without pushing him over the edge. I hate that I have to pretend I care about him and that I'm on his side, when more often than not, I strongly disagree with him.

"Your father doesn't really talk about you other than to check in and see what kind of trouble you're in now or what he needs to do for you." I don't intend the words to be cruel, just matter of fact. I meant it when I asked what else he expects from his dad. He's been disappointing and has shown no will or want to change. He makes his father's life harder and creates shockwaves of trouble everywhere he goes. He's a child in a man's body, and that would take a toll on anyone.

He lets out a slight hissing noise, and I wonder what his father is going to say to him this time. So far he's tried everything. Yelling at him, scolding him, threatening him. He's also tried to reason with him, plead with him, beg him to do better.

I can't help but think that his dad might be done giving him chances, so may cut him off for real this time. Still, the only reason I care is because I worry about his father. Even though I'm his lawyer, Clifton is not my problem outside my duty to defend him.

What his dad decides is just punishment is Clifton's problem, not mine.

As that uncomfortable silence settles in, I reach out and turn on the radio. Some upbeat catchy pop song comes on and I hum along, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel. I don't need to hold on, but I still prefer to. Something about old habits being impossible to break.

And instead of letting the man next to me dominate my thoughts, I steer my thinking toward something positive. I have a new business venture coming up. I ordered a new floral arrangement, and I'm ready to get home for the day because I'm exhausted mentally and physically.

I've put myself under too much pressure and I'm reaching my breaking point. But all that pressure has made me into a diamond. I bought my own home, my own car, I've made my life into one I want to live.

And yes, it aches to think of my ex-fiancé and how he'd tried to break me down and take over my life, but he's not around anymore. I mean, I'm legally obligated to say he's not dead. No, I booted him out of my life.

I've come so far and achieved so much. And I'm proud of myself.

I wonder if Clifton could be turned around with some sense of accomplishment. Maybe it's a lack of power and control in his life that makes him act out. There's always a reason - I've learned that in my line of work. I might not always understand or agree with the reason, but there is a reason for everything people do.

My ex's face nags behind my eyes. Internally, I hear his voice chiding me. Telling me I haven't earned everything I have. That I'm worthless and stupid, and I'll never amount to anything. I think about how, in the breakup, my family chose him. He'd managed to convince everyone - throughout our whole relationship - that I was the abusive and cruel one, and I lost them when I kicked him out of my life.

Yes, it hurts. But if they were so easily turned against me, then clearly they don't love

me like I thought they did.

“Can you stop thinking so loud?”

“Oh, ha ha,” I say with a mock smile and turn up the radio. The song has shifted to something a bit more sad but still upbeat. I know he can’t actually read my thoughts, but I also know he wants to get to me.

I rebuilt myself from the ground up. It’s going to take a lot more than someone like Clifton to change that.

However, I don’t think I’ve learned to trust again. But I’m stronger now. I’m over my ex. I’m happy to live in the moment without dwelling on the past. “Everyone has bad things happen in their lives,” I say, reaching out to turn the radio down.

He turns the volume back up, louder than before in an obvious attempt to drown me out. I turn the radio off, annoyed at his behavior. He sighs and slumps back in his seat, his thumb coming back up to his lip as he stares out the window again. “I had bad things happen, but I don’t let them hold me back or allow me an excuse to behave poorly.”

“Congratulations.” The word sounds genuine, but I don’t doubt he’s still brushing off what I’m saying.

“Your dad wants to talk to you when we get back, so I hope you have something to say.” Might as well give him a head’s up.

“Is it too late for you to take me home instead? Or just stop, I’ll call an Uber.” He reaches for the door handle and I reach over and pull his arm away from the door.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You owe him an explanation after everything he’s done for you.”

“I don’t owe anyone anything,” he says, rubbing both hands on his jeans as if to dry them off. Good, maybe if he’s nervous, his dad can actually get through to him.

He has the power to make his life what he wants it to be, just like everyone else. He just has to put in some effort. He needs to stop acting like a kid and take something seriously for once in his life.

Maybe I’ve got him all wrong.

But I don’t think I do. He needs to grow up and be accountable for his actions and how they hurt others - namely, his father.

“Look, I know you see him with rose-colored glasses, but he’s not your friend. He’s not anyone’s friend.” Clifton glances at me, his green eyes filled with an emotion I can’t place as we pull into the firm’s parking garage. I park the car and kill the engine before turning to face him once more.

“I know he’s not my friend. He’s my boss.” I lift a shoulder as Clifton’s dark, slashing eyebrows creep up his forehead. “And when he’s upset, my life is harder. When he’s happy, everything is smoother. So you directly affect my work life. Do better.”

With those words spit like poison, I open the door and stand up, making my way to the elevator without looking back.