



ONE WEEK

*Hot tempers.
Long nights.
One very tight...deadline.*

Flirting

ELISABETH
STAAB

ONE WEEK FLING

OFFICE FLING, BOOK ONE

ELISABETH STAAB

OceanofPDF.com

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Cover Design by Babski Creative Studios

Editing by Tere Michaels and Kelli Collins

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One Week Fling/ Elisabeth Staab. – 2nd ed.

Originally published in 2014 as One Week

ISBN 978-1-7336054-0-3

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CONTENTS

[About One Week Fling](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About Elisabeth Staab:](#)

[Also by Elisabeth Staab:](#)

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The one who got away is about to be the one who saves his ass...

Michael Hale's company is in jeopardy. His father, the former CEO, has died, and clients are threatening to leave. Come to find out, the consultant hired to bail him out of the whole mess is the woman he never should have kissed. And the woman he never stopped wanting to kiss again.

Elise Jackson swore she wouldn't come near Michael Hale again. He sucker punched her professionally, and he broke her heart. Still, a job's a job, and they can both be adults. Can't they?

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ONE

The most important business lesson Michael Hale learned from his father was that success required failure. Fall off the horse? Get right back on that son of a bitch. And when you find yourself careening wildly on an out-of-control beast, hang the fuck on and take control.

Okay, let's get this done. Quick and painless, like ripping off a bandage. An angry, high-maintenance bandage.

Michael leaned forward in a backbreaking deli chair and pulled an envelope from his breast pocket. "These are for you." He slid it across the table, meeting his soon-to-be ex-wife's stare.

Becca widened her watery blue eyes. "What's this?"

"You know what it is. We've lived separately for over a year now. It's time to finalize the divorce. Have your attorney go over it first, if you like."

"I thought..." Becca's bobbed black hair swung around her chin as she frantically looked around the tiny sandwich shop. As if someone overhearing their conversation actually held some meaning. "You're not going to even consider moving back?"

Jesus. Perhaps it was sleep deprivation making him stupid, but he'd honestly thought she'd be on board. Their marriage had been based on little more than convenience and bullshit, after all. Now, of all times, he sure as

fuck didn't need Becca tugging on his sleeves. He needed this to be over. One less thing hanging over his head.

Michael braced his elbows on the little square table between them. He looked her right in the eyes, wondering if her threatening tears held any sincerity. "I told you when I moved out that I wouldn't come back. I meant it then, I mean it now."

She placed a pale, polished hand over his. "Michael. You're mourning your father. I'm sure taking over for him at HaleStorm has been trying. I don't think now is really the time to make such a huge decision."

His phone buzzed with the incoming email he'd been waiting for. *She* had arrived. "It's past time." He stood, nearly knocking back his chair. "I have to go. I have another fire to put out."

When Becca said nothing more, Michael flipped his empty water bottle into a nearby recycling bin and then headed for the door.

"Michael? Are you referring to me as a problem to handle?"

The touch of her hand on his shoulder barely registered as the cold wind outside blissfully numbed his body. Leaving his coat in his office had given him an excuse to hurry back across the parking lot to work.

"I really do think this is a mistake." She tugged on his suit jacket, gripping his arm in an apparent effort to make him turn back around.

"The mistake," he said as gently as possible, "was having gotten married. You know I loved your father like an uncle, but it was not enough of a reason to chain ourselves together for the rest of our lives. It's time to put an end to the charade." He spared a glance at her now, trying to soften the next part while making his point clear. "I know it wasn't easy being married to me—the missed weekends and the long hours—and I'm sorry. Now you're free to find someone who can give you more of their time. Someone you don't have to work so hard to forgive."

He stepped away, but she held firm. "It's your company now. You can set your own hours."

“Not if I want to save everything my father worked so hard to achieve.” He disengaged her fingers from his arm. “Becca. Stop. Please. Or I’ll push back, and you won’t like the result.”

Michael walked away then, leaving her standing in front of the Tysons Corner Deli with her yogurt parfait and her stunned disbelief. Already, he could breathe more freely.

He dialed his contracts manager as he crossed the office complex back to the HaleStorm Engineering building. “Tom. Saw your email. I wanna talk to you about this Elise Jackson you hired to work the validation project.”

“Some sort of problem?”

Not unless you call a scorned blast from my past and a seven-figure contract circling the drain a problem. “Could be. Do me a favor and meet me in my office in five.”

Michael ended the call and went back to staring at the email, as if the words would magically change. He closed his eyes and drew a hard breath, remembering the betrayal in Elise’s eyes when he last saw her face.

Five years. Surely Elise would be professional enough not to let their past affect the present.

She had to be. In the wake of his father’s death, HaleStorm Engineering had been burned, betrayed, and hung out to dry. Their recovery depended on her.

Michael set his shoulders and pushed through the cold. Hell of a way to start a Monday morning.

EVERY HOLLOW *CLICK-CLICK-CLICK* OF ELISE JACKSON’S BASIC BLACK pumps on the frozen sidewalk sounded a warning: “Go.” *Click*. “Back.” *Click*. “Big.” *Click*. “Mistake.” *Click-click*.

You swore you'd never speak to Michael Hale again. What the hell are you doing here?

Elise bit down on her tongue and pulled the warm wool of her coat tighter, trying to block both the sharp November wind. Hell, maybe she was getting spun up over nothing. For all she knew, Michael no longer worked for his father. She'd probably get in and out without ever having to see him.

Stopping short in front of the shiny monolith that made up HaleStorm Engineering, she pulled out her phone to check the time and see if she had any urgent emails. One from her mother raised some concerns, but she didn't have time to call when she was reporting to start a new contract.

She sent a message to her mom that she'd touch base later, before checking the day's forecast, even though the outlook was clearly "colder than almighty hell" with a chance of "who can I blow for an extra pair of mittens?"

She was officially stalling now, but event after five years the idea of walking back into that building put a tight grip on her lungs and an embarrassing dampness in her palms.

Still, she straightened her spine and put one foot forward. One more *click* of her new Aigners toward reaching for the massive push bar on the gleaming double doors, and then a squealing sound came from behind her.

"Oooh, my goodness! Elise, is that you, young lady?"

Elise paused, forcing her shoulders down to a neutral position. She turned slowly to face the same sweet old HR director she remembered from her HaleStorm internship five years before. Yowzers, she was still here?

"Mrs. Macol, hi."

Wrinkled fingers came up to pinch her cheeks. "Good grief, honey, it's Penny." The lady tugged a stray curly hair Elise's knit hat hadn't tamed. "I saw you all the way from the parking garage. So hard to miss, as tall as you are. And that hair of yours. My vision isn't what it used to be, but I'd know that red anyplace."

Elise's face heated. "Good to see you again, Penny. It's great to be back." She made a point of squinting into the morning sun a little, so her eyes would appear to crinkle with sincerity as she smiled through the lie.

Anxiety-induced sweat prickled on the back of her neck and the wool from her coat itched. Why had she agreed to take this project again? If she broke out in some ugly panic rash, she'd be toast.

It wasn't as if she'd had a plausible reason to decline HaleStorm as a client—Elise's job was to go where PermaSolv sent her. "The CEO's son hurt my feelings" sure wasn't gonna fly as an excuse. Anyway, she'd liked Mr. Hale Senior. Might be nice to see him again.

Her conviction had certainly been stronger before she'd found herself in front of her former employer's windowed front doors with Penny plucking at her cheek. "Come on, sweetie," Penny said. "Let's get you in out of this cold. See if we can get you squared away with security."

Elise smiled again, taking in a steadying breath. She could do this. She could. Nothing she hadn't done a thousand times. She would march in there with her best emotional armor on, kick this project's ass, and leave with nobody the wiser. "Great. Thanks. I'm excited to get started." *And by excited, I mean I'm sweating like it's hot tub weather.*

The HaleStorm lobby looked larger and more opulent than Elise remembered. All granite and chrome, with carved benches and a fancy coffee bar off to one side. They'd decorated for Christmas already, and along one wall stood an assortment of shiny trees all tinsel-ed-up with packages underneath. Perhaps they sat waiting for this year's holiday reception. Mr. Hale loved to put on big parties.

"Oh." She stopped mid-stride following Penny to the security desk. The double-click of her heels on the granite tile made a sudden "oh shit" sound before they abruptly brought her to a halt before the company directory.

A maintenance man was in the process of swapping nameplates next to the CEO title.

On the floor lay a plate with the name “Stewart Michael Hale.” The stocky guy with bushy hair slid the name “Michael S. Hale” into place, groaning slightly as he retrieved the old strip of shiny metal from the floor and locked the case.

Michael S. Hale.

Michael.

Elise blinked.

Shit. Michael took over as CEO?

“Can I help you, ma’am?”

Elise shivered and tried to blame it on the fact that she’d just come in from the cold. That couldn’t be right, could it? Mr. Hale’d had a VP. And Michael had been so young. It seemed unlikely for him to be in charge of the entire firm. Then again, he’d always been intelligent and driven.

If Michael really was in charge now, well then, Elise wasn’t sure if she was screwed or if she’d gotten lucky. She took a breath and decided to go with lucky, willing the knots to unwind in her stomach.

Yes, she’d go with lucky. Michael would be too busy to even see her if he now ran the entire company. She glanced over to Penny at the security desk and then back at the maintenance man. “Has Mr. Hale Senior retired, then?”

The man shook his head, making his way past her toward the bank of elevators behind the security desk. “Passed away a couple weeks ago.”

Oh. No.

Elise’s heart squeezed. Whatever issues she may have with Michael, his father had seemed like a true gentleman. Not that she’d known him well, but he’d come across as warm and concerned about everybody. The kind of confident guy with a firm handshake who would drive his own employees to the mechanic on Friday afternoon so they could get home for the weekend. He’d done it once for her.

She made her way over to Penny. “I didn’t know about Mr. Hale. He’ll be missed.”

You wouldn’t have known he’d died if you hadn’t come back. Still. She’d heard the tales of how he’d built this company from the ground up with his closest friend. He’d made the speech at all the company gatherings.

Penny shook her head. “I tell you, it’s like there’s a dark cloud hanging over this place since he passed.” They reached the security desk and she slid over a form. “Fill this out, would you, sweetie? Then if you can hang on while they get you into the computer and give you a temporary security badge, I’m going to run to my desk and drop my things. I’ll be back shortly to get you squared away.” A firm, quick squeeze of her hands around Elise’s. “So glad to have you back with us.”

Elise smiled again as Penny turned to go but didn’t reply. She couldn’t, all of her words had been stolen by the figure coming into the lobby.

Michael.

No, Mr. Hale. HaleStorm CEO. She ought to get used to calling him Mr. Hale.

Everything from her lips down went numb and tingly when she laid eyes on the man she’d spent the last five years convincing herself she hated more than hate itself. He looked tall, defined, and handsomely stoic in a charcoal suit and silvery tie. She’d never seen him so formal. Or so disheveled, with his overgrown stubble and hair tousled from the wind. She couldn’t believe he stood in front of her now. The lines and shadows on his face spoke volumes.

“Elise.”

Her lips parted. What should she say? Do? The movie-style slap she’d fantasized over all this time no longer seemed appropriate. “Michael.”

Good reply, Elise. Smooth.

He cleared his throat. “I’m told you’re here to assist with the security validation issue.” He held out a hand. “Thank you.”

Okay. Formal. She could do formal. “I’m thrilled to help.” *Barely through the door and I’m lying through my teeth right and left. This is probably going to be awkward as hell, but that’s fine.*

He kept his fingers wrapped firmly around hers. She bit the inside of her cheek to keep her mouth closed. The scent of the same Gucci cologne he’d always worn filled her nostrils, and with it came the extreme urge to yank her hand back before she risked leaning in. But he was the CEO, he was grieving, and it seemed only polite to—

“Michael.”

They dropped hands. Elise turned to see a pale-skinned and dark-haired figure weaving toward them through the lobby traffic in stilettos. With her bobbed hair and expensive Burberry coat, she reminded Elise of those pricey Italian dogs that paraded around at shows. A massive ring flashed on her finger as she reached toward Michael, and Elise stepped away.

“I believe you accidentally grabbed my keys when you left breakfast in such a hurry.”

Ah, yes. The wife. Elise remembered seeing an announcement in the *Post* about a year after she’d left the company. Rebecca something? They’d had a big, snazzy shindig at The Mandarin. Must have been some wedding.

Involuntarily, a shiver zoomed up Elise’s back.

Before the woman could grab Michael’s—Mr. Hale’s—hand, he stuffed them into his pockets with a jerk of his chin. “Give us a moment, would you?”

The wife’s pale skin went practically ghostly and she took a step back. Spinning on one narrow heel, she did the worst job ever of pretending interest in the tarted-up trees by the door.

“Look,” Michael said to Elise. “I have a meeting.” He checked his watch and then nodded toward Penny’s retreating figure. “And I’m sure you need to go take care of paperwork. Do me a favor though and see me before you go to lunch.”

He leaned in and his warm breath touched a spot in Elise's memory she didn't like. Not with the man's wife standing nearby. Particularly not considering she'd mentally relegated him to the "asshole" file years ago.

"I'm considering this project a top priority."

She nodded, wanting to look anywhere except his eyes, but finding her gaze trapped. "Absolutely. Of course." Water. She needed water. A cough drop. What was up with all the dry air in this building?

Before she could think it overmuch, he'd turned to head for the door. Hands still in his pockets, his wife gripping his arm in a display of ownership as she *clickety-clacked* alongside.

Well, hell. *I'm considering this project a top priority.* Lord have mercy. So much for staying off his radar. The sooner she got this thing resolved, the faster she could get herself gone.

She turned to retrieve her security badge and to follow Penny's path toward human resources. Damned if day one of her new contract job wasn't off to a kick-ass start.

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TWO

Michael slapped the resume on his desk. “You’re sure about this, Tom?”

Tom Courtland straightened from a lean against the bookcases that lined what used to be Michael’s father’s office. “How many times do you need to ask?” He swigged a diet soda and shrugged. “PermaSolv assured me she’s one of their best. I interviewed her over the phone myself. Either she’s got the chops, or she spins one hell of a story.”

“I keep asking because we have to be right. We only have three weeks to turn those validation results around or we lose a million-dollar contract,” Michael said. He pressed his knuckles into the epicenter of his throbbing temple, knowing his friend and contract manager didn’t deserve this kind of interrogation. Tom had swooped in only weeks ago to take this job at Michael’s desperate behest, and the man was a fucking saint for saving his ass.

Besides. Elise had always been smart and capable. This was Michael’s own issues creating doubts.

“Correction,” Elise said from the doorway.

Michael’s head snapped up.

Nudging the door closed with one shiny black high heel, she strode in with a crisp efficiency she sure as fuck hadn’t possessed five years ago as a

college intern. Head high, she held out a file, then dropped it in front of him as she sat in the chair across from him. One hand brushed a cascade of red curls off her shoulder.

Huh. She'd always pulled her hair back before.

He looked carefully from Elise to Tom and back again, trying to hide his surprise at the way she'd simply marched herself through the doorway. At her boldness and confidence clashing with his memory of a friendly but innocent twenty-one-year-old intern from Ohio.

She'd worn long skirts or long pants back then. No makeup. Now? Pencil skirt. High heels. Hair down. And the barest hint of berry-colored stain gave life to her lips and cheeks.

She appeared so professional, so put together. *So different.*

Michael cleared his throat. "I believe I said to see me at lunchtime."

She tapped a neatly trimmed, unpolished fingernail on the folder. "You have one week to submit new security documents to DOJ. One."

Michael raised his eyebrows. "You're fucking kidding." He slid open the folder and scanned its contents: email messages addressed to the security officer he'd canned shortly before his father's death. Never answered.

The final message delivered an ultimatum: produce up-to-date proof that HaleStorm had the security measures in place to safely handle the intended project data, or the entire endeavor would be killed.

"I convinced one of the desktop support guys to give me access to your former security officer's email." Elise sat back in her chair. "This system will be holding classified data once it goes live, am I right?"

"You are." Frustration and regret dragged his words across the floor.

"Okay." Elise crossed and uncrossed her legs. "So, if HaleStorm gets rejected for this project's security clearance, you're on shaky ground. You risk losing not only a seven-figure contract but any other clients who hear

the good word that your software security isn't up to their stringent standards." She narrowed her gray eyes right at Michael.

Tom stood straighter. "Jesus Christ."

"Calm down, Tom."

Tom, a couple of decades older than Elise, wouldn't take kindly to her getting pushy. And Michael couldn't tell if she was making things personal because of lingering hurts or just laying out facts with a lot of attitude. Michael himself didn't much like someone younger—someone he used to mentor, for fuck's sake—taking him to school.

This was the shit hand they'd been dealt though, so they might as well play it. He turned to Tom. "Look, we already know this is bad. Let's just figure out how to deal with the situation." A muscle twitched in Michael's jaw.

To Elise, he said, "Our software and hardware all exceed standards. The agency sent an independent third-party investigator to watch us do every fucking thing except piss. All of our processes got scribbled onto that lady's clipboard. More flying colors than a pride parade."

Elise flattened a hand. "If that were the case, I wouldn't be here. If the investigator gave you a pass, why did you fail on the validation?"

"When it came time to hand over our in-house documentation, it turned out everything had been out of date for years. Some sections had been left blank and never filled in. The individual responsible had been too busy giving himself liver damage and the clap," Tom chimed in.

Her turn to do a double take. "You've been operating this entire time without any security documentation in place?"

Michael leaned forward and interlaced his fingers. "My father trusted people he shouldn't have. Are you someone I can trust, Elise? Because I intend to see this fixed. I need to." Given the way they'd left things all those years ago, he had his doubts. After that kiss, she'd stormed away and hadn't

spoken to him again. The risks, the potential “Hell hath no fury,” made him uneasy.

They stared. Elise’s gaze narrowed again faintly. Across the room Tom shifted, probably uncomfortable with the vibe in the room and not sure why.

Elise licked her lips and Michael blinked, clearing his throat. He took the blame for any lingering discord between them. Still, he needed to know she could put aside her issues and actually handle the task at which his now-fired security chief had failed.

In one goddamn week.

He raised his eyebrows. She hadn’t answered.

Elise lifted a shoulder. “This isn’t a case of simply revising some out-of-date manuals. Things have evolved too much since your original documentation was created. Even if I could do that, your client has sent over a specialized questionnaire. Most everything’s gonna have to be redone from scratch.”

“Of course.” That muscle in Michael’s jaw went ahead and piped up again. He took a slow breath and pressed his fingers together. “Are you telling me you’re not up to the challenge?”

Elise grinned then, those berry lips curling so delightfully, Michael was sure the fake plant on his desk turned toward her for attention. “I can get it done. Even better, when I’m finished, you can use what I’ve put together as a template to hand over to other clients. If you think about it, maybe DOJ has done you a favor. You’ll finally have everything done correctly.”

Would he, now? That’d be a nice fucking change of pace.

“Maybe you’re right.” He smiled slightly at Elise. An urge to say things he shouldn’t burned in his center. Maybe when this week ended, he’d have the opportunity to sit down with her and put to rest a few issues that lay unresolved between them. “At any rate, you’re here. And we certainly appreciate your help.”

Surprise flashed in Elise's eyes, and Michael admitted a secret thrill to himself that he'd thrown her off guard. A flush of color crept up her chest, her neck, and added to the gentle stain on her cheeks.

"Absolutely." She slapped her palms on the desk as she stood. "Now, I'd better get to work."

He opened his mouth to respond just as Tom made a noise off to the side. "I'm nervous about the fact that they've shortened our timeline. You think they're setting us up for failure?"

"Your former security guy wasn't responding, so they moved up the deadline to pressure you into giving them what they want. Maybe also to make you sweat." She shrugged. "So, you're sweating. Mission accomplished. The good news is we're going into the holidays. Thanksgiving is this Thursday. The chances are excellent most of your client's team will be out of the office all week. It gives us extra time to pull the paperwork together without anybody calling to cause trouble on their end."

Jesus, were the holidays really bearing down on them? Michael had been so busy dealing with his father's passing. Getting his shit together at work. Staying focused on anything proved difficult.

Without meaning to, Michael found himself tracking the curve of Elise's legs as she walked toward the door. Had they always been so long?

When he glanced up, he met with her direct stare. Busted.

The blush on her cheeks deepened.

Michael's heart pounded. He cleared his throat again. "Do you have everything you need?"

"If you could spare an employee who went through the validation process with that third-party consultant, that would be great. The more expediently I capture your procedures, the better."

Tom spoke up from the back. "Wait a minute. The entire point of bringing in a consultant is to save time and avoid alerting our employees

that the company is at risk. The last thing we need is a morale issue on top of everything. The fewer employees we loop in, the better.”

Michael gripped the arm of his chair. He'd been the one to put the screws to Tom about Elise's qualifications, which no doubt was pushing Tom to be extra tough on Elise. All the same, Michael had to hold himself back from coming to her defense. As much as he might want to, he couldn't go soft on her with his company at stake. Shit, he wished he'd known in advance whom Tom had hired.

Elise sat again. Calmly, she turned toward Tom while Michael took a slow breath. “Understood,” she said. “However. Thanks to the negligence of your previous employee, I'm starting with information that is more out of date than my mom at a boy band concert. I'm good, but I am not psychic. Either I need to pretend I'm another one of those security investigators and have your people walk me through all your processes a second time, or you give me a single person to pull aside and bleed for information.” She grinned, folding her hands in her lap. “My way is less disruptive.”

Goddamn, with her legs crossed and her spine and neck all spiraled upward that way, she looked so assured and graceful. Hard to remember the shy college student who'd discussed workflow with Michael over hibachi and diet sodas.

His pulse rushed, remembering all those late work nights with Elise. Another throat clear, followed by a swig from the water bottle on his desk and a fervent hope he still had a good poker face. This week, he'd need one. “She's right,” Michael admitted.

And damned if she didn't look shocked again that he'd just backed her up. Well, he'd call that one a point in his favor.

Tom looked like he might argue, but Michael slashed his hand through the air. “No. Listen. If you don't want to pull someone, then do the walk-through with her yourself. Work something out.” He turned back to Elise. “Anything more?”

Her eyes crinkled with humor. “I could use some highlighters.”

He smiled. “I assume you remember how to find the supply closet. If you don’t find the color you need, have Penny order them for you.”

Michael saw a slight curve to her lips. He remembered her quirky habit of hoarding purple office supplies. Highlighters, binder clips. She’d even had a violet stapler. “Please.” She stood. “I’ll have this project put to bed before any new highlighters have time arrive.”

“I hope you’re right.” The words left his mouth and immediately socked him in the chest. If she could rescue this project, she’d be a miracle worker. She’d be his savior.

She’d be out of his life again.

BY THE TIME EVENING ROLLED AROUND, ELISE’S CONTACT LENSES HAD become one with her eyeballs. Her back and neck ached from staring at her laptop. Marathon work sessions were par for the course in her line of work, but she never quite got used to them.

She leaned back in her chair at the small conference room table they’d given her for workspace, squeezing her eyes shut to clear her blurred vision. Twisting first to one side and then the other elicited a tension-relieving series of pops and cracks that cascaded down her spine.

“Ouch.”

She opened her eyes at the sound of Michael’s—Mr. Hale’s—low voice, and turned the other way to find him closer behind her than was comfortable.

Shivers danced across her skin. He’d lost the tie. Unbuttoned his top two buttons. Hair even more mussed than earlier when he’d just come in from the windy outdoors.

One hand held the jacket he'd removed and slung over his shoulder. The other, a large brown paper bag. "I brought dinner."

"Wow. Thanks. You didn't have to go to the trouble. I would have stopped on my way home." Deliberately, she placed her pen in front of her on the table.

He raised his eyebrows. "Which would be when?" He waved a hand at the papers spread across the small conference room table. "Looked to me like you'd settled in for the evening." He kicked the door shut behind him then took a seat in the swivel chair immediately next to her. "Besides. I'm here to help. And I'm starving."

She breathed a quiet laugh. "You're..."

When she'd asked for someone to help her out with the documentation, she'd figured they'd give her some low-on-the-ladder code monkey. Maybe one of those fresh-faced guys from desktop support who were still busy practicing their goatee-growing skills and learning how to crack the software in their smart phones.

She'd felt bad enough about the idea of getting assigned a guy from senior management, but Michael? No.

He stopped in the middle of pulling Chinese containers from the bag. "Don't sound so shocked. Tom's right. I'd prefer word of this issue not spread through the employees until we have it well in hand. I appreciate your confidence about being able to get it resolved, I simply don't want to call the game until the clock has run out."

"But I thought you said Tom...?" She lost her voice when he handed her a rectangular container. Singapore-style rice noodles. Her favorite. How on earth could he have remembered?

"Tom had a family emergency this afternoon. As the last of my family was recently cremated, I am short of those at the moment."

Elise swallowed hard and focused with unnecessary care on venting the steam from her noodles. His face betrayed no emotions, his focus appeared

to be one-hundred percent invested in emptying their dinner from the bag. Her heart ached for him anyway.

“What about...?” She didn’t remember any names, but she’d met a brother once upon a time, during her internship. No. Two brothers? They’d come to the annual employee barbecue. Not that it was any of her business. “I thought I remembered you had other family.”

“Well,” he said softly. “I lost touch with my mother long before she passed. And my brothers both disowned me when the bastard Hale received control of the company.”

He delivered the news casually, calmly, while fishing in the bag for a packet of dipping sauce.

The giant lump in her throat made swallowing even more difficult. “I’m sorry.” For a moment, his hand lay near hers. In spite of her lingering hurt and anger toward him, a touch of her fingers on the backs of his knuckles struck her as the thing to do. “I liked your father. He was a good guy.”

He looked at her with sharp, dark eyes, like she’d startled him, but didn’t move away. “He certainly tried to be. He made mistakes I suppose, but then again, we all do.” With that, a crease formed in the center of his forehead. He stared at her as if he was trying to figure something out while he licked his lips so...

Slowly.

“I suppose we do, yes.” Dammit. That had come out sounding all soft and breathy, and not at all the way Elise intended. She stopped herself from thunking her head on the table.

“Well. My father always said mistakes are necessary. They’re how we grow and learn.” With a breath, Michael straightened and handed her a pair of chopsticks. The shadows on his face disappeared. As he scanned the documents she’d spread across the table, he said, “So, we’ve got a mistake in front of us. Tell me what you’ve learned.”

Okay. Family discussion closed.

She scooted closer to avoid craning her sore neck and pointed with the yet unused chopsticks. “That first stack of papers is basically a template for what your security officer *should* have sent to your client. That second one is a list of everything you got spanked for missing on the validation. I spent the day going through and color coding them. Red for procedures you were supposedly never following.” She gave him a look of mock sympathy. “No password encryption? Really? Do you also have a wooly mammoth in the staff kitchen to help wash the dishes?”

“Elise.” He scowled.

Perhaps she should have left well enough alone. Her inner imp couldn’t help but try to get a smile out of him, the way she always had when they used to work together. When they were more like friends than coworkers. The way his eyelids hung heavy and his full mouth was set with so much tension, she only wanted to make him relax a little.

“What about chisels and stone tablets for note-taking?”

Michael may have tried to hide it, but the corners of his mouth turned upward. The lines on his face eased. “Check the supply cabinet. You’ll probably find them near those highlighters you asked me about earlier. So to save time, we focus first on the red, yes?” He turned his attention back to the spreadsheet.

“Exactly.” Elise leaned sideways to flip pages. “And you’ll notice some of these are easier to address than others. So we go through the spreadsheet, hit the straightforward ones first, and then we save the complicated ones for later. Sadly, this is one situation where quantity matters more than quality. I may be confident that I can finish this project before the deadline, but I always like to hedge against unexpected speed bumps.”

It was impossible to ignore the lingering spices of his cologne when she stopped for breath. “Uh... Right now, go ahead and skip anything so straightforward a chimp could answer. I got Tom to hook me up with a login to your development system, so I can easily see with my own two

eyes whether or not you actually *do* protect your passwords. No reason to waste the CEO's valuable time on that stuff. How long do I have you for, anyway?"

When he lifted his head to answer her, their mouths were nearly close enough to practice buddy breathing. "As long as it takes."

Suddenly, Elise realized her lips were dry. She wanted to lick them but there was no way in hell, because he was *right there* and nuh-uh, no sir, no way was she going down that road again.

Damned if the possibility didn't make her throb all over, and she kind of hated herself for her body's reaction.

You're supposed to be mad at him, remember? He hurt you. He jeopardized your career.

She didn't want to empathize about his difficult relationship with his family or be grateful to him for bringing her dinner. To remember how much she used to enjoy his company. And yet, the conflict of emotions battled in her chest like a pair of Rock'em Sock'em Robots.

"That's really..." She cleared her throat and backed away from the heat of his body so she could finally lick her lips. She took it a step further and dug around in her purse for lip balm. Placing an object in her lap gave her the flimsy illusion of an added barrier between them. "Thank you. For helping."

"It's my company. At the end of the day, it's my ass on the line." She'd never seen him so serious, his eyes so black.

Elise tried to make light as she smoothed on some cherry lip balm and dropped her purse to the floor. "Then again, if I fail and you complain to my boss or refuse to pay for the project, it's *my* ass."

It was one of those jokes that really wasn't. He didn't answer, but the heavy weight of his gaze lingered, resting on her. She turned and refused to face him, refused to acknowledge the doubt she'd seen written on his face earlier that day.

She'd faced forward to adjust her laptop when his hand landed on her arm. She turned again to find his eyes hard, like she'd never seen them before.

"Michael—Mr. Hale."

"You can fail at this project. I can call PermaSolv to complain. I can have you fired." He leaned closer. "None of those things will save the jobs of thousands of employees or my father's lifetime of hard work. Those are the things that are on the line. So you bet your ass that I will see this through personally."

The place where his hand touched her burned. "I understand," she said.

"I hope so."

Shivers raced up and down her spine. Elise shrugged her shoulder and tried to pretend the vent above the conference room table caused her chills. Funny, she remembered Michael as a confident but quiet presence. Easygoing, he had been the guy who'd managed the office interns probably because he was so great at coming across as everyone's buddy. He'd taken her out to dinner many times, as a thank-you for working late.

He did not come across as friendly and easygoing now. "I understand, Mr. Hale." Very much the opposite. Was this due to his father's death? *That is none of your business, Elise.* "It'll get done."

"I hope you're right."

"I'm always right." She forced a laugh and tried to pull her arm away, intent on eating her food and returning to her work. She needed him to stop looking at her with those dark amber eyes. Somehow they were chipping away at her grudge.

And of course, she hadn't always been right. Five years ago she'd been very, very wrong. Maybe she was still wrong, because she'd sworn she'd never face Michael Hale again unless it was to knee him in his manly bits. Here she sat all the same, her chest tight with something that felt disturbingly like sympathy.

She smiled and held up her chopsticks. “Thank you again for dinner. I can’t believe you remembered my order.”

He leaned back in his chair and sucked hot mustard from his thumb. “I remember everything, Elise.”

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THREE

When the conference room clock showed the hour hand past two in the morning and Elise had done the same maddening catlike stretch in her chair for the umpteenth time, Michael decided they'd had enough. *He'd* had enough. The cells on the spreadsheet in front of him blurred and swam. In a contest between his fingers and eyelids for "most twitchy," no clear winner could be established.

"Let's pick this up in the morning," he said.

She groaned and rolled her neck around. "I think I'll stay," she murmured. "But you go. I'm sure this transition and losing your father has taken its toll." She gave a small, tired smile, and for the first time since she'd walked back through the front doors, it seemed like she might actually think he was an okay guy. "You look like you could use the rest."

"Mm-hmm." He put his hand on the lid of her laptop and pushed it closed.

"Hey." She reached for her computer.

He stopped her by putting his hands over hers. He noted that she wore no ring, and at that moment, the absence of his own affirmed the rightness of handing that envelope of divorce papers to Becca. He'd removed the ring before moving into his own place, and now he was even more comfortable

with his decision. “You can’t do your best work for me if you’re hungry and exhausted. I’ve seen too many employees try to run on fumes and fail.”

Her fingers drummed on the table. “I’ll be fine. I still have a little energy left, and if I get hungry, I think I spotted some leftover bagels in the break room.”

For the first time in weeks, he laughed. “It’s Monday. At least it was when you first got here. Bagel day was Friday. You’d do better to use those things to hammer nails. Or to throw them at my office manager for not having already chucked them in the trash.”

She sighed and pulled one hand away to rub her eyes. She didn’t seem to notice, and Michael didn’t mention, that their other two hands remained touching on the warm lid of her closed computer.

“Okay, here’s the thing: First, better I front-load the work and get done early than the other way around. Better safe than sorry. Also...”

She pulled her hand off the laptop to sweep her wavy red hair from her face, and Michael’s skin turned cold from the loss.

“There’s no point in my leaving, as late as it is now. I’ll only have to come back crazy early and my apartment is a good half-hour drive from here. My roommate is a go-go dancer, he’ll be getting home around the same time I do, and probably not alone. I guarantee you, I won’t get any rest anyway.”

“Hmm.” Michael pressed his lips together. “What did you plan to do about a change of clothes if you stayed?”

“I have an overnight bag in my car,” she said absently as she reopened her laptop.

He put his hand on hers and closed the damned machine again. “Can you hang the hell on for a second?”

“Do you act this way with all your employees?” She stared hard. “Why do you care if I sleep?”

“I don’t act this way with my employees because they know to listen the first time. Maybe it’s a contractor thing. I certainly recall you being a much better listener when you were an intern.”

She swiveled her chair to face him fully. A challenge burned in her gray eyes. “Yeah, well. A lot has changed.”

Perhaps exhaustion had removed his professional mask. Although ill-advised, Michael allowed himself to do a full visual sweep. All that twisting in her chair to pop her back had worked loose the top button on her blouse, serving up an enticing hint of cleavage. Those long, toned, stocking-free legs of hers showed a teasing hint of a morning glory vine on the back of one calf.

“Yes,” he said. “I can see how much is different.”

Elise rolled her eyes. “Michael. Don’t.”

He leaned so close he could make out the tiny bursts of blue and green interlaced with the gray in her eyes. “I get the impression you think I’m being too familiar, yet you insist on calling me by my first name.”

The caught look was gone as soon as it crossed her face. “Habit. Michael was what I called you back then and that’s how I’ve thought of you all this time.”

“I’d wondered what you thought of me.”

She stood with a glare, gathering her laptop bag and her purse. “Let’s stay focused on your project, Mr. Hale.”

Well, he’d gotten her to quit for the night, anyway. “All right.” He pushed away from the table. “I apologize. Let’s keep this professional.”

She laughed low and husky, under her breath. “That’s an excellent idea. Think it’s something you can manage?”

With her? He’d done a shit job of it five years ago. And in the past year or so since he’d split from Becca, he couldn’t remember anyone else who had sparked his interest.

“Of course.” But he would keep it professional. He had to.

“Great.” She hiked the laptop case on her shoulder. “You’re right. I actually am exhausted. I’ll see you in the morning, Mr. Hale.” She took a deep breath and the angry mask slipped from her face. “For what it’s worth, I *am* sorry about your father.”

“Thank you.”

“Good night.” She nodded and turned to go.

“Wait. What about your roommate?”

She shrugged. “In case of emergency, I have ear plugs.”

Michael shook his head. “I hate for you to drive back to DC. The company still maintains a couple of furnished apartments across the street for visiting clients. I’m staying in one myself right now, but there’s another standing empty. You’re welcome to use the space while you work this week to avoid so much back and forth. You’d get at least an extra hour of sleep.”

Her brows drew together. “You’re staying in a furnished apartment across the street?”

“Becca got the house. We separated over a year ago.”

“Oh, that’s... I’m sorry.”

“Sometimes these things are for the best.” And it really had been. He handed Elise her teetering stack of documentation and then taped a note to the door indicating the conference room was occupied. “I’ve had my office manager block the conference room calendar for you all week, but some people don’t bother to check first.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

He pulled out his key ring then detached one, holding his hand out. “So. The apartment?”

Her head dropped back to her shoulders as she sucked in a harsh breath. “You don’t have to do this. I’ll be fine getting home.”

“I know.”

“It would be nice to have someplace close by to sleep.”

He tried to control his smile. “Yes. It would.”

Triumph drummed inside him when her fingers closed around his and came away with the key.

“MR. HALE I CAN CARRY MY OWN—” ELISE MADE A GRAB FOR HER BAG, but he’d beat her to it.

“Come on. You’ve been in those shoes all day, except for the time I saw you slip them off in the conference room. You don’t want to have to lug everything up by yourself. We can get it all in one trip.” He handed over her purse and slammed the trunk closed.

She caught a grin from the light of one of the lamps that illuminated the trendy little condo complex’s parking lot.

“What’s with the sudden formality? First, I’m Michael, now I’m Mr. Hale?” He pointed up a set of stairs to indicate the direction they should go, and she followed.

She rubbed at a growing sore spot on the back of her neck. “Well.” She paused for a moment to weigh her words, and then decided maybe they should just go ahead and address the big, ugly gorilla standing there between them. “I’m a little confused myself. First you’re acting like you barely know me, questioning my ability to deliver on the job for which you contracted my firm. Then you’re acting a little like you want me to crawl onto your lap and read you my Christmas list.”

When he pointed to a door, she used the key he’d given her to unlock it, opening it just far enough to set down her laptop and handbag.

“I figure, just so there’s no misunderstanding, I’ll go ahead and call you Mr. Hale like everyone else.”

He nodded, gazing for a moment up at the dark sky like he was considering what she’d said. When he swallowed, she couldn’t manage to

ignore the slow bob of his Adam's apple, the way his tongue came out to moisten his full, dark lips.

She still remembered the taste of those lips.

"You're right." He stepped back, leaning against one of the painted apartment doorframes. His face and body shrouded in shadow, his formal winter coat framing his tall body, making him look strong and refined.

All those years ago, he'd hardly seemed much older than her, in spite of the decade between them. He looked so different now. Powerful.

"Not that it serves as an excuse, but it's been one hell of a week. My father's ashes are still in a box in my office."

Oh God, they are?

He took a deep breath then let it out. "I've had to fire a half dozen employees. I sent senior management out the door. Thank fuck Tom came in and helped me pick up the slack."

Someone came jogging up the stairs then, and passed them on their way to the next level. Michael waited for them to move on before he finished. "My father wasn't himself towards the end. People took advantage. Betrayed him, me, the entire company. It had to be done. Doesn't mean I enjoyed being the asshole."

He shrugged his shoulders as if the entire thing rolled off his back, but the light coming from the little torch on the landing showed pain in his eyes.

"It's all so unfamiliar. Then you showed up, and you remind me of a time when I knew myself. When life was better. The way we spent the evening in the conference room together was like going back in time."

A deep ache of sympathy bloomed in Elise's chest. Concern, guilt that she'd been overly harsh toward him, worked its way in alongside. "Michael —"

"You're right though," he said as he slid her overnight bag from his shoulder and handed it over. "I pressed inappropriately. I apologize."

Oh. Well. The ache in her chest intensified, and even though she stubbornly tried to keep a firm grip on the hurt and anger she'd held toward Michael all this time, a measure of it slipped through her fingers. This all had to be so hard on him.

She lifted her hand to offer a comforting touch, but stopped. Doing that very thing had gotten them both in trouble in the past.

Instead, she took the bag from his hands. "I accept your apology, Michael, thank you. I have every confidence we can go forward professionally from here on out." Even as she said the words, her hands brushed his, and the sensation pleased her far more than it had a right to.

He stepped forward. "You want me to come in and show you around?"

"No! No. Thank you. I can find my way." Lord, most definitely not. The clock had not quite struck three. Her legs barely held her up. The only place she wanted to go was the shower and the bed, and at this point, she might skip the shower. Her will was weak, and he'd only recently finished a sob story that included telling her he'd started divorce proceedings.

No. No, she wasn't touching that one.

He nodded. "Well. Good night then."

"Good night."

But he didn't move.

"Is something wrong?" *Aside from the obvious?*

He hesitated. "It's late. I thought I'd wait to see you in safely."

"Oh." She managed a smile. "Thank you." She stepped inside then shut the door. Curiosity grabbed her and spun her around, pinning her eye against the peephole.

He let himself into the apartment diagonal to hers and shut the door.

"Oh, crap," she muttered to herself.

Great. Neighbors. No way in hell that could be awkward.

FOUR

Early Tuesday morning started with Elise grabbing two giant mochas on the way in to work, a little chocolate and whipped-cream-covered comfort to help ease the craptasticness of schlepping through the Tysons Corner tundra in frigid pre-dawn hours.

Her phone rang on the way out of the parking garage while she was juggling a purse, a laptop, and two steamy cups. Michael calling. She managed to dig her phone out on the last ring. “Good morning.”

“I’ll get back to you about the ‘good’ part once I’ve had some fresh-roasted happy juice,” he said. “Which is why I called. I’m at the deli by the building right now, thought I’d see if you wanted anything.”

“Oh. Actually, I stopped at Starbucks already.” She leaned down so the security badge she’d clipped to her coat could be read by the sensor, and then shoved the door with her hip. “I, uh, got you a peppermint mocha.”

“Hell, that’s way better than plain old dark roast. I don’t suppose you got an extra shot of peppermint?”

Elise yawned as she headed through the silent lobby to get on the elevator. The winter darkness was just fading outside, and most of the employees wouldn’t be in for at least an hour or two. She should have slept longer, but the hush of an empty building helped her think.

“I *may* have gotten an extra shot of peppermint.”

You like it that way. I remembered.

Michael chuckled through the phone. “Well, I suppose it’s only fair.”

“Oh?”

“I *may* have gotten you a chocolate chip muffin.”

The mere mention made her stomach grumble. “Oh. Well. I don’t like chocolate chip muffins.”

“No?”

“No. I love them.” Elise had set down her belongings while waiting for the elevator. She paused mid-breath when she realized she’d wrapped one long strand of hair around and around her index finger. The sound of the lobby door had her yanking her hand behind her back.

Her gaze darted around the seemingly cavernous space that stood between her position at the elevators and the building’s front door. The Christmas trees, unlit now, glared back with dark, silent judgment. *He hurt you. Professionally, not just personally. Remember?*

The trees had a point. After their close encounter the evening before, she’d resolved to be professional, and damned if she wasn’t standing here in the lobby twirling her hair like some kind of teenager.

“Well, if it’s love, then I guess it’s a good thing I got a four-pack,” Michael said as he swung open the giant entryway doors. His footsteps echoed solidly in the otherwise-empty lobby.

Wrapping both hands around her mocha, she chugged fast, ignoring the burn and hoping the caffeine would help zap the fog out of her brain. At the very least, the inside of her mouth would be too scorched to do any damage. “That’s...thank you.”

Dammit, his smile still seemed a little lazy and sleepy, his hair ruffled from the chilly breeze outside. Tough to feel all bitchy and righteous when he stood in front of her holding out a bag of muffins with that tired half-grin. Tough not to think about the fact that he’d only recently woken up. In fact...

“Your shirt isn’t buttoned quite right.” She pointed to his chest.

He shook his head and hooked the bag with the muffins over his wrist while he undid his shirt halfway to fix the misalignment, exposing his toned olive chest. “Didn’t get a lot of sleep last night,” he mumbled as he refastened his shirt.

“I hear you.” *Coffee. I need so much more coffee.* Elise took another *glug-glug* of her mocha, and handed over Michael’s from a small table by the elevator.

Wouldn’t it figure, he lifted the lid and took a swipe of the whipped cream with his tongue.

This is not, not, not happening.

“Delicious. I needed this, thank you.” Michael took another lick of the good stuff from the top of his drink. “Shall we?”

Elise blinked and nearly snarfed her swallow. “Oh. Yeah.” *Cough, cough. Not-so-ladylike throat clear.* “Yes, we shall.” She didn’t argue when he offered to help gather her things.

He punched the elevator button. “You know, if I haven’t said it already, I do appreciate you being here to help.”

She blamed the fact that she hadn’t eaten breakfast on the jitters in her stomach. “It’s my job.”

“Of course,” he said. He leaned his head back against the wall of the elevator, letting his eyelids drift closed. “All the same, your efforts are appreciated. This has been...a lot.”

She tried to tell herself not to stare, but she let her gaze linger anyway. It slid over the shadows under his eyes, his strong nose. Those broad cheekbones. “You know, you didn’t have to come in so early. I can save the parts I need your help with for whatever time you usually arrive.”

With a rub of his eyes and another slurp of his coffee, he said, “For now, this is the time I arrive.”

As they stepped off the elevator, something pinged in Elise's center. "I'm sure Tom could help me—"

"Tom has other issues to handle."

"Right. Well. It's nice to have you here." *It's nice to have you here? Oh, Elise.* She downed her mocha so fast, she thought she might shoot peppermint and chocolate from her nose. At the rate she was going, she'd have the full stadium-sized cup drained by the time they reached the conference room.

He smiled though, and she nearly tripped over herself. God, she couldn't think clearly at this hour. Not the way this sleepy, handsome, muffin-delivering version of Michael reminded her of the guy she'd fallen for that summer she'd interned at HaleStorm. He'd been so nice, so friendly. The way he was being now.

She needed to remember how he'd pushed her away. The way he'd screwed her over. God willing, by the time the caffeine had kicked in, she'd have her brain back online.

He went to hold the door open for her when they got to the conference room. Feeling the need to put herself back in the driver's seat, she rushed ahead to get it first.

He brushed past her as he stepped through, and grinned again. Shit, she didn't have her mental defenses in place yet, and even in the early morning he looked like he owned the world. "Thanks again for the muffins," she managed.

"Least I could do," he said.

Unsure how to respond, she ignored the heat that rose to her face and focused on getting on with their day. And boy, was it ever shaping up to be a long one.

BY THE TIME THEY'D FINISHED BOTH THEIR COFFEES AND ELISE HAD started her second muffin, they'd actually settled into a pretty good rhythm together. With Elise's trusty spreadsheets laid out on the conference room table between them, things flowed easily. Professionally. Safely.

"Okay, this is some of the more involved stuff for you to keep in mind for later. They want you to show proper management of your firewall, for example." She glanced at Michael. "That's sort of subjective. I presume they just want proof that it's being regularly maintained. Maybe if we could take a screen capture of the settings..."

He handed over a sheet of paper. "A screenshot of our firewall's rule set, taken the day they came to root around in all of our business." Another sheet of paper. "Another more recent screenshot to show the adjustments made since." He smiled. "Next?"

The soft, dark fur of his arm brushed her skin as he pulled away. Elise took the stomach flutters as a sign she'd had enough muffins. "Next. Next..." She tapped her lip and scanned her sheet for the next blank space. "Server configuration?"

With exaggerated flourish, another stack of paper appeared in front of her.

"O-kay." She narrowed her eyes at him. "External building security specs?"

More paper. "Booyah."

"Mr. Hale, I don't think the company president is allowed to say 'booyah'."

Big grin. "Sure I can. You thought that documentation was going to be a pain to produce, and here I had it all printed off and ready to go for you first thing this morning. So, I repeat. Booyah."

She bit her lips together to keep from smiling. "You'll also need to provide an up-to-date security clearance for all employees supporting this project once it goes live."

Three more stacks of paper found their way into her hands.

Elise couldn't keep her mouth closed.

Michael chuckled. "I studied your checklist as soon as you gave it to me," he said. "Sent out a few requests."

"Thank you." The way he'd gone above and beyond to help warmed her. Sure, this was his company and ultimately whatever helped her, helped him. He still hadn't needed to go out of his way like that.

"Of course." His grin widened. "Now. It seems like we're moving along really well. Tell me what's next."

His phone buzzed.

"Do you need to get that?"

He shook his head as he tapped a reply. "Sales issue. Hopefully they can handle it without me. So. Next?"

She returned his smile and indicated all the papers he'd given her. "Actually, I don't suppose you have a paperclip? I'd like to corral all these dead trees you just handed me before my piles get out of order."

He held one up. A purple one. "Yes. Heaven forbid we disturb your neatly organized piles."

"Where—" Her phone buzzed. Awfully early to be hearing from her mother. Worry danced on the back of her neck. "I'm sorry. It's my mom. Do you mind if I step into the hall and let her know I'll call her later?"

"By all means."

When Elise returned, she placed her phone on the table in front of her next to a small mound of purple paper clips. She paused, her pulse quickening as she picked one up. "Where did these come from?"

"Turned out I had an assorted box of colored ones in my desk drawer. Long conference call yesterday about computer-based training." He shrugged. "The things you do when you're bored."

She laughed, even as her gut tightened around those things he'd done that she hadn't forgiven. Holding on got harder with every passing hour,

with every chocolate chip muffin and every purple paper clip. “I hate to even imagine.”

“Yeah, you think that’s bad? We’ve got satellite offices on the West Coast and the project manager over there is what you might call a slow talker.” He mock winced as he crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. His foot tapped against hers, hitting Elise with a startled jolt. “One of these days I’m going to stretch out on the floor and go right to sleep.”

“You would not.”

“I might.”

They both smiled and, for a moment, that weird thing happened where their gazes met and something kind of clicked in the silence between them.

Before Elise could think about it too hard, a knock sounded at the door.

Craig George, HaleStorm’s sales manager, stuck his head in the door. “Oh, hey there, Michael.” He gave a fast nod to Elise. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’ve got a presentation for CKE Global in a couple of hours. They want a discount on the bid that I can’t authorize without your go-ahead.”

Michael held up his BlackBerry. “I sent you a reply. Told you to hold firm on twenty percent. We take a bigger cut, we’ll lose money on the project.”

Craig made a pained face. “I’d really like to meet these guys halfway. As a customer, they could be great for referrals.”

“No.” Michael shook his head. “I saw the specs when they put a call out for bids. It’s a risky project.”

Elise could see from the look on his face that Mr. Sales Guy didn’t want to budge and resisted the urge to open her mouth. This was so none of her business, and Michael clearly had the situation under control.

Still, new sales wouldn’t matter if they couldn’t shore up HaleStorm’s shaky foundation. This guy needed a lesson in priorities.

“They’re saying they’ve already got another contractor offering a lower bid. I need to walk in there ready to play ball.”

Michael stood and braced his knuckles on the conference room table. “Let me take a look at your proposal.”

Elise tried not to notice the way Michael’s forehead creased so deeply. The day—the week—had hardly begun, and he already looked exhausted. A pang of jealousy came back to punch at her sympathy, and she found herself wishing he’d been as concerned about *her* career five years ago as he was about all the people under him now.

Craig stepped back, holding the door for Michael. “Thanks, man. ’Preciate it.”

Michael shook his head. To Elise, he said, “Hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here,” she said.

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FIVE

Michael didn't make it back to Elise until late Tuesday afternoon, striding into the conference room after being pulled away for the umpteenth time. He ignored the grateful smile Elise gave the tech guy who had come in to set up a printer.

"Sorry," he said with unnecessary volume. "Scheduling miscommunication this time."

While Steve from desktop support jumped a little at the sharpness in Michael's tone, Elise only smiled slightly and refocused on her spreadsheet. "You're an important man with important responsibilities," she murmured. "Completely understandable."

Michael frowned as he sat. "Thank you." *I think.*

Steve seemed to hover nearby with indecision. "Is there anything else either of you need?" The young man looked from Michael to Elise, where his gaze lingered.

For right or for wrong, Michael did not approve of the way the young tech-support guy seemed to inhale Elise with his eyes. "Steve, there's an excess of crumpled paper by the printer in the developers' area, which usually means a jam. Check that out if you would, please."

"Absolutely, Mr. Hale." The young man nearly backed over a chair in his escape for the door.

“Thank you for your help, Steve,” Elise added. She brushed her shiny red hair from her shoulder and flashed the kid a blinding smile. “You’ve been just awesome.”

Oh, Jesus, you’d think she’d stripped down to her underwear and handed the kid a suitcase full of money the way his baby face lit up. “No sweat, Elise.” With that, the young man bounded out of the room like an excited bunny who’d gotten his paws on the world’s juiciest carrot.

Michael got up to close the door behind him, leaning his back against the cool wood surface. “‘You’ve been just awesome’? Are you serious?”

She leaned over and poked the eraser of her pencil against his arm. “The way you stormed in here barking and blustering, I figured I oughta throw the poor guy a bone. Didn’t your mother ever teach you that you catch more flies with honey than by being an asshole?”

He repressed a sneer as he straightened his tie and dropped into the chair next to hers. “My mother didn’t teach me a whole hell of a lot, thank you. And I didn’t mean to bark.”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s new here and you run the company. You might as well be God.”

Michael took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Okay. I was an asshole.”

“Yes.” Her focus remained on her task, but a hint of humor played across her face. “You’ve clearly had a tough day since I saw you last. I’m terribly sorry.”

He looked at his watch. Dammit, they’d gotten so near to close of business. “The day is shot and I’ve been in this room not even an hour. The interruptions are driving me batshit.”

Silence while she clicked some things on her spreadsheet. “You hired PermaSolv, and by extension me, to untangle this mess. Your assistance already has truly been invaluable. However, while you’ve been putting out

fires all day, I've been here working. Because that is my job. Running HaleStorm is *your* job."

But when I'm alone with you in this room, I can relax and ignore the rest of the bullshit. I remember how great it always was to talk to you.

"You're right," he said. He pretended to pay attention to the papers she'd stacked in front of his seat "I'd like to remind you, however, that you asked for an assistant. Again, nobody has a higher stake in this than I do. This is already Thanksgiving week. If we don't get these documents to the client next week, the rest of these people may not have jobs after the New Year. I hope you can understand my blustering." He turned to find himself staring right into the softness of her gray eyes.

Her lips, the color of warm cocoa today, parted in a smile. For only a moment the pressure of her fingers squeezing his forearm made his pulse jump. "Yes, I can understand." Her thumb made circles on his wrist, and heat pooled in Michael's body where it really shouldn't. "Relax," she said with a smile. "I've been making good progress."

A knock came at the door. Tom Courtland stuck his head in the room. "Hey, Michael, I'm sorry to interr—"

"No." Michael stood. He'd gotten jack shit done that day between putting out fires. He needed more time with this project.

He *wanted* more time with Elise. He shouldn't, but fuck shouldn't. He did. "I've been interrupted all damned day. Can it wait?"

Tom seemed to consider the question. "I think it can."

"Thank you." He motioned to Elise. "I promised Elise I'd show her the security measures we've installed over at the external data center before dinnertime." He nodded to Tom. "Call me if there's anything urgent."

Tom seemed to hesitate before he nodded back. "Sure thing."

He hadn't promised to take Elise anywhere, but to her credit, she didn't ask any questions. She checked her phone, made a quiet "oh" as if she

hadn't realized the time, grabbed her laptop and her purse, and followed him out.

Not a word was said by either of them as he charged through the developers' area, down the elevator crowded with guys from the sales team, and out to the parking garage.

When they made it to his car and as they were driving out of the parking garage, she finally said, "Nice Jag."

"Thanks. Got it as a birthday present to myself after Becca and I decided to separate."

"Two celebrations in one?"

He laughed. "I figured it was either start fucking around or get a new car."

"Well," she said. "Cars last longer."

He hit the gas at a green light. "Exactly."

She tapped her fingers on the window. "So where are we really going? Maybe I have my wires crossed, but I don't recall us discussing the data center."

"Dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Dinner."

"Are you bullshitting me?"

He spared her a fast glance. "I never bullshit about money, sex, or food."

"Ten minutes ago, we had a conversation about your validation deadline. And you want to take a dinner break?"

"It's too early in the week to be as tired as we both are, and we'll probably be burning the candle at both ends until that damned documentation gets presented on Tuesday. For some reason of cosmic planetary alignment or who the fuck knows what, nobody in that building can so much as tie their shoes today without my help. I need a fucking drink

and an artery-clogging appetizer. I need thirty minutes to fucking breathe. You said yourself we're making good progress?"

She seemed to hesitate. "So far. It's still early."

Michael held up a hand. "Okay. I know it's early, and don't think for one second that taking a sanity break means I'm not serious as pneumonia about this fucking deadline. But I'm ready to go off, and you keep rubbing your eyes. I've seen guys break systems because of stupid mistakes they made when they were running on nothing but fumes and energy drinks."

And Jesus, he and Elise had been getting along when his sales lead came in and pulled him away that morning. Michael hadn't had anything good and easy in his life in months. He needed to sit across from her at a restaurant table, the way they used to when she was a starving student—and he'd stupidly tried to pretend they could be buddies—and have a conversation with her that wasn't rife with tension and unspoken regrets.

He stopped at another red and turned to look at her dead-on, disturbingly pleased to find her mouth open in shock.

Elise crossed her arms and leaned back in the seat with a quiet huff. "I hadn't thought of it quite that way." She nodded and slapped his arm as the light turned green. "Okay. Dinner. You're buying."

He smiled and hit the gas. "Absolutely."

CLANCY'S PUB SAT IN THE BACK CORNER OF A CHARMING SHOPPING CENTER about a mile down the road from HaleStorm Engineering's office park. As much as Elise wanted to remain stiff and businesslike in Michael's presence, it got harder every minute. The pub's warm atmosphere and the "small" Guinness she'd ordered were really getting to her.

Or perhaps working side by side with the man after so many years reminded her of the reasons she'd liked him so much. Either way, she had a

fuzzy glow that extended beyond a mild buzz.

Maybe Michael Hale wasn't such a bastard after all.

"No, you're right. I am a bastard."

She sucked in a breath.

"Didn't realize that was your out-loud voice?" He grinned from across the table and tapped his fingers playfully on her forearm.

Elise's nerve endings danced in response, even though she silently scolded them not to.

They'd snagged seats next to a big stone fireplace, and after being outside in the forty-degree weather, the fire had her never wanting to return to that conference room again. And forget the way the golden glow played up his scruffy stubble. Mother of suckers, his looks could have convinced Mother Teresa to sin. If only things between them were different.

"I..." What was there to say? She shrugged and flipped the paper napkin ring she'd been fiddling with onto the table. "Sorry. Sometimes I have no quality control between my brain and my mouth."

He propped his head on his hand, looking worn out for the barest of moments before he sat up straight again. He opened his mouth like he might speak but then the waitress came, putting dinner plates the size of Texas in front of each of them.

"There you go, guys, let me know if I can get you anything else." The waitress, a perky blonde with a ponytail, gave Michael a friendly grin. Michael grinned back, and Elise realized her reaction exceeded the limits of acceptability when she squeezed her Guinness too tightly and nearly dropped the glass.

Jeez. It wasn't any of Elise's concern who Michael flirted with. But still.

"Actually," Elise said to the waitress. "I can tell you already I'm going to need a to-go box. Please."

"Sure." Perky Waitress turned to Michael. "Anything for you?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

After the waitress left, Michael said, “Everything okay? You seem tense.”

Fabulous. She forced a smile. “I’m great.”

“Good.” He pointed to her plate with his fork. “You’re going to love this. Best Shepherd’s Pie you’ll ever have.”

Elise laughed. “Okay, that’ll be an easy contest. I’ve never had Shepherd’s Pie before. I’m not even sure how you talked me into ordering it, because I’m still feeling sketchy.”

“No, it’s delicious. Swear.” He took a bite of his onion ring. “Gotta at least taste.”

“If it’s such a culinary masterpiece, why didn’t *you* order the damn pie?”

He pointed at his burger, which was roughly the size of a newborn cow. “I was in a sandwich mood. Sometimes you want something you can sink your fingers into. Here.” He grabbed his fork and stuck it into her food without preamble, then held it out for her to take a bite.

“Okay, good grief.” She closed her lips around the forkful of meat and veggies with savory sauce. Lo and behold, it tasted great. “Mmm.” She chewed and licked her lips. “All right. You were right. It’s good.”

“Good?”

“Very good.”

“Delicious?”

“Very good.”

He smiled and leaned back as he took a sip of his beer, his arm rubbing hers in the process. It happened a time or two when they’d first arrived, and since then she’d tried to keep her movements to a minimum.

Except that, somewhere along the way, she’d stopped trying. Now and then their legs shifted and brushed as well. Every slide of his suit pants along her calves made her heart bounce and her stomach flip.

“So.” Elise leaned forward, placing her forearms on the edge of the table so they were again out of the danger zone. She took another small, fortifying sip of her own beer, to have something to do with her hands. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Not to pry, but you’ve mentioned your mother more in the last couple of days than I ever heard you bring her up before. You said you lost touch before she died. I wondered why.”

He straightened in his chair and pulled his leg away, and her body went all chilly. “That sounds like the very definition of prying.”

Elise tried not to choke on another swallow of Guinness. Embarrassment engulfed her body in flames. “Curiosity, then.” She closed her eyes and took a breath, trying to regain some of her common sense. “You and I had all these great late-night talks while we were working on that database implementation, but you always danced around discussing your family. And it seemed like something that bothered you.”

His face hardened. “Airing my family’s dirty laundry to an employee wouldn’t have been a wise move.”

But kissing me was okay?

She opened her mouth and snapped it closed just as fast. No way in hell was she bringing up that mess. She’d dug her own grave, there. And it wasn’t as if she went around showing off the skeletons in her family’s ramshackle closet.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” She wiggled her fingers at her head. “I mentioned the brain-mouth filter thing.”

He’d always seemed strangely haunted when conversations skated the line of discussing his mother, and she’d remembered today, wondering what caused him so much pain. She couldn’t help wanting to know.

You damn well better. His personal life is not your concern.

Elise jumped when Michael captured her hand in his. “You did say something about a lack of quality control.” He shook his head. “I’d lived with Dad since I was a kid. I hardly knew my mother because she wasn’t really stable enough to care for me. That’s all.”

His low-spoken words touched her deep in her core. “You don’t have to explain,” she said. “Really. I have my own family baggage and mental health issues. I apolog—”

She lost her breath when he threaded his fingers through hers, setting off little tingles in her fingertips. “You know, I’ve been feeling like I’m the one who owes you an apology. For being so harsh with you at that end-of-summer barbecue when you kissed me. I overreacted. I’ve never forgotten the look on your face.”

A fresh burst of heat rushed to Elise’s cheeks. She definitely wasn’t drunk enough for a conversation about the kiss. She pulled her hand away with a jerk.

The pain, the embarrassment, everything came hurtling home. The memories lodged themselves in the center of her chest.

“Okay, first of all? It takes two to play tonsil hockey. I know it’s been a while, but I distinctly recall your tongue in my mouth. And second? If you think that’s the reason I’m still angry, then you’ve got it all wrong.”

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SIX

After dinner, the walk from the restaurant to the car weighed heavy with tense silence, punctuated only by the clatter of Elise's high-heeled shoes on the parking lot pavement.

Michael dropped the bag with their leftover food on the backseat floor of his car and slammed the door shut. He rounded the back to confront Elise, who stood impatiently by his trunk with her arms crossed. No way in hell was he actually going to entertain her ridiculous request to let her walk back alone. Especially not at this time of night.

“Are you crazy?”

So much for a sanity break.

The corner of her mouth lifted in a wicked smile. Standing there by his car, half in shadow and half in the light of a parking lot lamp, Elise appeared infuriating and sinful and delicious enough to consume as a dessert chaser to the meal they'd hardly touched. “I don't think so, but it's hard to say for sure. Maybe my memory's just fuzzy. Lemme tell you what I recall from that kiss five years ago. Your lips were firm, you tasted like beer and mesquite sauce, and you made my fucking toes curl.”

“Jesus.” His body throbbed.

“*But.*” She charged forward, jabbing two fingers in his chest. “As magical as your tongue was, you're a smart man. You can't possibly think

I'm holding on to a kiss. Not after all that time."

Why the fuck not? *He* still held on. Not only the kiss. All those nights working late with Elise during her internship had been a monumental rookie mistake, and he'd gotten too close. If she hadn't been so young that afternoon she'd been bold enough to kiss him, if she hadn't been his employee, he would have wanted more.

Part of him still wanted more.

He'd never forgotten the look on her face when he'd put his hands on her shoulders and eased her off of him. Her look of surprise that changed to disappointment, and then anger before she walked away. The betrayal in her eyes that sank a knife deep into his gut every time he called up the memory.

Frustration made him want to grab her again now, grip her shoulders and dig in hard with his fingers. "If it wasn't about the kiss, then educate me."

She tipped her head and licked her lips. Goddamn. He should remind her that their time together sure as fuck had been worth something. "The letter."

That fucking reference letter.

Shit.

He looked away, watching two cars play out their road rage at the end of the strip of stores. While the vehicles gunned their engines and threatened to ram each other, Michael steeled himself against the dread gathering inside. He had hoped she'd never find out about the reference letter. In hindsight, that hope had been reckless.

"I made the best decision I could at the time." He turned back to face her, hating the clear assumption of betrayal in her eyes. "Scarborough told you?"

Her hand lifted, and he half-wondered if she wasn't gearing up to land a big smack on him. "If you didn't think I had what it took to do that job, why didn't you tell me to my face?"

“You know that wasn’t the case.”

She gestured with both hands. “Do I? I trusted your opinion of my work. I would have taken it a hell of a lot better coming from *you*, rather than getting a phone call from a potential boss saying they were turning me down because my former employer had declined their request for a reference.”

“Trust me, you didn’t want that job.” His chest tightened. “Scarborough was not a good employer—”

“It was project management experience, right out of college. I needed the money, and I needed the title for my resume. I could have dealt with a crappy job for a little while to get that kind of leg up.”

He grabbed her wrists and pulled her close under the bright parking light. “Listen to me. You did *not*. Want. That. Job. The things I’ve heard about Scarborough? Suspicion of embezzlement. Sexual harassment complaints. You think maybe there’s a reason that company recently went under? Rumor has it a female manager filed a complaint against him for trying to force his way into her hotel room while they were on a business trip together. It only stayed out of the papers because he paid her enough money to send her kids and grandkids to Ivy League schools. I *refused* to write that letter because I wanted to protect you.”

Elise stepped back, wrenching out of his grasp with a shake of her head.

“You don’t believe me.”

“I wish you had told me.” She tipped her head, eyes wide. “I questioned everything I’d done while working for you. Had it been x, y, or z slipup? The weekends I couldn’t work overtime because my mother was ill? Because of something I’d said? Or was it because of that time I was stupid enough to kiss you?”

He pressed into her personal space and tucked a strand of her wild curls behind her ear. Her body seemed tense and ready to bolt, but she stayed still, letting him touch her, which calmed him inside and out.

“I would never have jeopardized your future employment simply because you let me know you were attracted to me.”

He pressed against her then, making it clear exactly how well he remembered that kiss. “That feeling was very mutual.” Caught in the heat of the moment, he let his hands slide up her arms and over her shoulders. “If I’d been free to act on it then, I would have.”

Her breath hitched loud enough for him to hear. “You still could have said something.”

Michael held on tight when she tried to push away. “I couldn’t tell you I wanted you. You were too young, too innocent, and you worked for me. I couldn’t tell you about Scarborough because I didn’t know you’d applied until after you left HaleStorm. You hadn’t given me your personal number, which, frankly, was probably for the best. Still, by the time I knew the situation, it was too late.”

“I see.” Elise looked down, and Michael wished to God he could see her face. Read what she was feeling.

Regret burned in his veins. “I hope you do. I hope you know how sorry I am for any hurt or confusion I caused.” He got bold and slid one hand upward, tangling his fingers in her curls. “I’m human, Elise. Sometimes I make bad decisions. But I’m trying now to make so many things right.”

She swept her gaze up and down. “I’m not so sure *this* is the right decision either. I do still work for you.” She swallowed and licked her lips. “Technically, anyway.”

Michael’s chest pounded. His arms around Elise now, tonight in the freezing fucking cold, felt a million times more perfect than they had on that sunny August afternoon at the end of the company cookout. Want sizzled through his body.

When he slid his hand down to her hip to prove exactly how right an idea he thought the two of them could be, the sounds of tire squeals and screamed obscenities came from too near for comfort.

“Stupid assholes,” Michael ground out. “I saw them earlier. Figured they’d be leaving.”

Elise shivered, moving out of his grasp. “We should leave, anyway. Like you said, it would be good for us both to get extra rest. I’ll come in early tomorrow morning to make up the time. Right now, we’re on schedule. Can you just take me back to my loaner apartment so I can take a hot shower?”

Given that he’d been the one to instigate this tense discussion, agreeing to her request now was the least he could do. “Sure. You’re right. We could both use the rest.” Only looking at her now, he didn’t want to rest anymore.

He wanted so many things, like to take her back to that apartment and show her exactly how much interest in her he *still* had. How he’d pushed her away after that company picnic not because he hadn’t wanted her, but because he’d wanted her with a frightening intensity.

Five years ago, the dynamic between them had made a relationship verboten. Now, the future of his company was riding on her. He couldn’t fuck that up with complication.

He *shouldn’t*.

Michael tossed his keys and caught them again as Elise opened the door to get into the car. “Right,” he said. “Let’s both go get some rest.” He took in those long, gorgeous legs of hers as she slipped into the passenger side of his car.

She pointedly resisted his gaze.

For now, he’d agree to her requests and allow her to think he was letting the subject drop. But this was not over.

ONCE INSIDE HER TEMPORARY APARTMENT, ELISE PRESSED HER BACK against the door in the dark and gulped the stale air. She shivered from cold

and unspent adrenaline. Unspent words.

She'd insisted Michael bring her back because she didn't want to irrevocably shatter the measure of peace they'd both found working together this past couple of days, but at this point, peace might no longer be an option. He'd remained silent on the drive back from dinner.

Of course, now that she stood in the hush of the apartment he'd been kind enough to loan her for the duration of her time at HaleStorm, she realized how far things had gotten out of hand. They still had the better part of a week left, and they needed to get along. However misguided, Michael's attempt to protect her deserved a thank you that she hadn't yet given.

With a quick roll of her tight shoulders, she stepped back out into the chill and made the few quick paces across the landing to knock on his door.

Her heart's frantic clamor stopped cold when her fist unexpectedly fell against air. "Michael."

He'd removed his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt, which hung open to expose a toned chest and a smattering of dark hair. The hair trailed down over a set of abs that rippled more deliciously than abs had a right to ripple when she was so freaking emotional, and there was a little loop pulled in his belt, like maybe he'd started to unbuckle it before he heard her coming.

Oh, hell.

He pointed to the fridge. "You came for your leftovers?"

Her heart found its proper pace again, if not a little thuddier than before. "I didn't come about the leftovers. I came to say..."

Thank you. I'm sorry. I haven't stopped thinking about you, either.

Inexplicably, she ran her gaze over his body again and embarrassment burned through her. Coming over had seemed like a much better plan from across the hall.

She'd been trying to convince herself back in that parking lot—hell, since she'd walked in the door of HaleStorm Engineering—that she did not want him anymore. That kissing him had been a stupid impulse.

But it hadn't been an impulse.

No, she'd taken a calculated risk that day. An impulsive kiss would have made her the naïve, innocent little intern he seemed to have pegged her for, wouldn't it?

Abruptly, she pointed to the tattoo she'd gotten with her co-worker from the Tasty Delight on her eighteenth birthday. "I got this the day I was legal. I also used to be pierced here, here," she pointed to an eyebrow and her nose, "and you don't get to know where else." She crossed her arms over her chest and smiled slightly at the widening of his eyes.

He frowned. "I'm not sure..."

"You called me innocent back there in that parking lot. I dressed conservatively that summer because I was supposed to. You thought I was some kid who had just fallen off the turnip truck?"

She stepped forward. From the rise and fall of his chest, his breath had deepened, and she struggled to keep her focus on his eyes. Still a little beer-buzzed, she put herself up in his face and laid it all on the line.

"You tried to protect me because you'd heard rumors about Scarborough? What about the rumors I'd heard about *you*?"

His jaw hardened.

"What, you thought I wouldn't have heard you were a major player? Every woman at HaleStorm with a pulse and proper vision had your name written on their vibrators."

This time she ignored the warning from her shoes when she clicked forward. "I didn't let those rumors stop me, either. I'd tried damn hard to get your attention all summer."

He didn't move except to blink. "The trouble with rumors is they're half true at best, if not total lies." Then he did move, pressing into her space.

She hardened her gaze and met his stare, but there in the dim light of his apartment, his eyes had turned the color of chocolate syrup, or dark whiskey, and she needed to stop thinking about things she wouldn't mind

him licking off her. Holy cow, those lashes could make any supermodel cry with envy.

“Okay,” she said. “So, what’s your truth?”

His fingers danced up and down her spine, setting off shivers all over the place. He bent toward her, his stubble scraping her cheek. “The truth is, you were probably right when you said this was a bad idea.”

She *had* said that, hadn’t she? His palm skimmed her waist and she damned herself for being sensible. “That probably is true.”

“And.” The heat of his hands and his breath licked along her neck and shoulders. Maybe she should have worn her coat over. “You have no idea what’s fact and what’s fiction about me.”

What Elise *did* know was the way he touched her now might well fry her brain. She needed to back away while she still had some semblance of her dignity. She managed one step. “Maybe I don’t. My point is, neither do you.”

Other than a slight raise of his eyebrows, he didn’t reply.

Fine. Well, about that whole leaving with her dignity intact plan...

Another step backwards. “Whatever. Thank you for trying to protect me. It was a misguided, unnecessary effort, but thank you for being concerned.” Finally, with a clench of fists and a huff of breath, she turned on her throbbing heel and stormed for the door.

His fingers came around her wrist as she grabbed the doorknob. “Feeling smug now that you’ve gotten the final word?”

“Well, I’m certainly feeling *something*.” Hot breath on her cheek, bare chest against her arm, and a really impressive erection against her backside for starters.

And damned if her bones weren’t turning to liquid right underneath his fingers, because what the hell was she thinking? He was a client, after all. Not even the best mathematical minds in the world could calculate the infinite number of ways this could be trouble.

Michael laughed, low and rough. If sounds had fingers, this one would have practically shoved her underwear to the floor. “I forgot about that wicked sense of humor you trot out at inappropriate times.”

He bent slightly, running his hands up the outsides of her thighs. His fingers met the hem of her skirt and kept going, lifting to reveal the edge of another tattoo. His thumb traced the morning glory vine and the butterfly in flight right above that led to the middle of her upper thigh. “I almost forgot about this, too. You told me once about this tattoo. In person is much better.”

Elise’s body shuddered. Her kneecaps decided to take a vacation.

“Interesting choice of symbols,” he said.

She managed to swallow. “Thanks.”

“Tell me about them.”

She shrugged even as blood rushed between her ears. She’d told him many things that summer, but not this. The meaning of her tattoos covered a hidden vulnerability she didn’t like to admit. “The butterfly is a Monarch. The morning glory is a beautiful but stubborn plant. They’re symbols of perseverance.”

“That’s lovely,” he murmured. “Very inspiring. Any others?”

“Nothing.”

“You said you have piercings.”

“Had.” Her ankle rolled slightly, and she straightened fast, but the slip had been noticed. He tightened his grip on her sides. Heat flooded her body.

“You seem uncomfortable. Take off your shoes, would you?”

Her heart made a steady bass beat, a mix of want and frustration swirling through her body like a tornado. She wanted to hate him for rejecting her. Because yes, in spite of her protests, the way he’d pushed her off him all those years ago did still sting. And because no matter what he’d said about trying to protect her, she wasn’t sure his excuse could be trusted.

She wasn’t sure she could trust herself.

Oh, God, all of this was still a really terrible idea.

She turned her head and met dark eyes and full lips, his mussed hair falling into his face. His hand came up to her cheek. “Please,” he whispered.

She found herself curling one hand around his neck for support as she toed-off first one shoe, then the other.

“Thank you.” He grinned, and Elise’s adrenaline shot into her throat. “Now.” He straightened and whispered into her ear. “I’d really like for you to tell me more about those piercings.”

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SEVEN

Perhaps Michael could blame the stress of losing his father, or finally nailing the coffin of his dead marriage shut. Maybe this was exhaustion or good old-fashioned thinking with his dick. Fucked-up company rumor mill aside, he hadn't let himself get carried away like this in forever. Maybe never.

There was no backing away from this one. No patting Elise on the shoulder this time and telling her she was a nice girl, but he wasn't interested. Even if he shut this down now, sent Elise back across the hall and told her everything had been a mistake, the damage had unquestionably been done.

Besides, he'd been dying to see that gorgeous body undressed. At thirty, he'd felt like a jerk for lusting after his twenty-one-year-old intern.

Five years later, when his fingers skimmed the top of her blouse and she arched into his hands? Clearly the current still flowed both ways, and now wanting her didn't look so wrong.

"Most of them were in my ears, you know." She started to turn but her legs wobbled again.

"I'd bet good money they weren't all in your ears." He sank his teeth gently into one of the body parts in question. "How about you put your hands on the door."

“What are you going to do, check me for contraband?” She rolled her eyes but complied. “What makes you think they weren’t all in my ears?”

He smiled slightly, reaching in front of her and slowly undoing her buttons. “When you came in here, you said you wouldn’t tell me where they had all been. You said so to bait me, right? To prove you were more of a bad girl than I thought.”

He pulled her blouse apart, reveling in the smooth satin of her skin and the sheer bra covering her breasts. The delicious way her nipples peaked beneath his hands.

“So. Here’s your chance to prove it to me. Show me the bad girl. We’ve already as good as taken the night off. Let’s *really* take the night off. Only for tonight...let’s pretend we don’t work together anymore.”

“I—”

“Only tonight. Tomorrow morning, we have a company to save.” She hissed when he rolled one of her nipples through the sheer fabric of her bra. That sound set his blood on fire. “Tell me. Were you pierced here?”

She pushed her ass backward, right against his throbbing cock. “Yes.”

He brought his other hand around, squeezing her breasts firmly. Rubbing with his palms as he kissed an exposed piece of shoulder. He tweaked the other nipple between the scissor of his thumb and pointer finger. “Here?”

“Yesss.”

He popped the front clasp on her bra, biting that same shoulder gently as he parted the flimsy fabric. He played for a while, testing to see what she liked best, wringing gasps and moans from her throat. Nipping along her back. Trailing fingers down her arms and taking delight in the goose bumps that popped up in the wake of his touch.

Scraping sounds as Elise tried to dig her fingers into the metal of the door, but there was nothing for her to gain purchase. “Michael, I don’t think —”

“You’re right, we should both stop thinking for now.” His fingers crept downward, to the waist of her skirt, where he encountered a small hoop in her navel. “Aha, so you still have one here.”

“Uh-huh.” She bit her lip.

“But not here?” He brought his hands to her breasts again, this time in a full-on caress, loving the look and feel of the pale, freckled skin held in his fingers.

She shook her head. “I injured my back and had to get an MRI. They made me take all the metal out of my body. I didn’t bother putting most of them back.”

His finger circled her navel. “So why this one?”

Her body trembled in his hands. One shoulder lifted. “I thought it was cute.”

“No.” He blew on the back of her neck, smiling at the scrunch of her shoulder blades. “Not cute. Sexy.”

“Whatever whips your meringue, Mr. Hale.”

“Don’t call me that when we’re getting naked.”

She grinned over her shoulder. “Okay.”

His fingers found her zipper and pulled. He tugged again until the skirt lay in a pool at her feet, and the only thing that stood between him and heaven was her lacy black underwear. His fingers tingled at the prospect of sliding them down her thighs.

“Tell me.” Michael’s teeth grazed the lobe of Elise’s ear. “Were you ever pierced...down here?” His palm skimmed the damp scrap of lace and satin between her thighs.

Elise’s teeth sank into her lip. She trembled in response, and then nodded. “Mm-hmm.”

Michael chuckled. “You were?” The thought made his balls throb harder. He gripped her left hip with his free hand. The other he used to

make slow, easy circles with his middle-two fingers. “I guess you *are* naughtier than I realized.”

Her laugh, breathy and infused with surprise, made him want to fuck her up against the door right then and there. He wanted to, but he wouldn't. He'd waited this long, and they may only have tonight. This, he would savor.

He slid his fingertips along the curve of her hip and hooked his finger under the edge of her barely there lace thong.

Elise lifted her head. “Hey, is that your phone buzzing?”

“Fuck.” He paused to listen.

Spinning, he grabbed his jacket from the back of the sofa and pulled his phone from the pocket. “I'm sorry, it's Tom. He wouldn't call this late if it wasn't important.” He walked to the bathroom to grab his robe for her while he took the call.

“What's going on, Tom?”

“Hey there. Sorry to call so late but that thing I said could keep until morning? It can't. I've got your brother with me. I tried to hold him off when he called earlier, but I just found him waiting outside the offices.”

Michael looked to Elise, red-hair spilling in waves over one shoulder, as she pulled his terry cloth robe around herself. Her lips opened with apparent curiosity.

Michael growled into the phone. “Tell me,” he said.

BACK ACROSS THE HALL, ELISE GOT IN A BLISTERING SHOWER AND BERATED herself for letting things get out of hand the way they had. She'd sworn she was over him. She was going to be professional. He was married—getting a divorce, but still. Did she honestly know she could trust Michael?

God, this was the sort of thing that had led her mother down the road to misery.

She got out and put Michael's robe back on, telling herself she'd only worn it across the hall because doing so had been more expedient than getting dressed. He'd been in such a hurry to leave, and so had she. Whatever his call had been about, he'd left looking like someone she wouldn't want to piss off.

When Elise exited the bathroom and went to the living room to fire up her laptop, she remembered she hadn't called her mother back yet. Talking to her mother always filled her with a mix of fear and dread, but the strange turn of events with Michael had left her jittery and wide awake, so she might as well check in.

The phone rang enough times Elise thought it would go to voicemail, so without fail, she started thinking up all the horrendous things that could be happening at that very moment. Sure, her mother could simply be asleep... or she could be on the other line fighting again with Elise's stepfather. Or worse, Victor could have come to visit.

Worse still, her mother could have finally taken that plunge and ended things. Elise didn't like to believe it possible, but ever since high school when her mother's therapist mentioned having concerns, Elise lived with fear. What if one day her mother simply gave up?

"Hello?"

Elise squeezed the phone harder than she should've and let out a relieved sigh. "Mom?"

"Hey. Sorry. I fell asleep in front of the television again."

Sleeping. See? She was sleeping. Why do you always go worst-case scenario?

Because she's given me reason to worry before.

"Sorry to call so late, Mom. Busy project."

"Yeah, I figured. Called your apartment. Jeff seemed worried."

“Jeff knows where to find me if there’s an emergency. What’s going on, Mom? You sound upset.”

“I think Victor wants a divorce.”

Elise looked up to the ceiling. She pulled the phone away from her face before breathing something that was a cross between a frustrated growl and a whoop of triumph.

She’d never liked Victor, and her mother was struggling with her mental health far worse than usual since that man had arrived on the scene. Her mom would be better off, but in the short term, this would cost her —and Elise. Not to mention how much it sucked that Elise had been right.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” she said when she put the phone back against her face.

Sniffles and sobs came through the line. “I don’t know what happened. I thought he understood the distance was hard.”

“Well, sometimes we think we understand things, but we really don’t. I’m sure he tried, but maybe this is for the best.” *Or maybe he’s just a dick. I tried to tell you marrying a guy you met on the Internet was a bad idea.*

Elise’s mom and stepfather lived two thousand miles away from each other. Victor had understandably refused to move, to stay near his young children, and Elise’s mother had difficulty finding new employment where he was.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do now. I helped him financially, I was working on moving to be with him, but it was hard to find a job. I thought he understood.”

Anger welled inside Elise. There had been a showdown with Victor. She’d made it clear that her mother needed more support, and he hadn’t stepped up.

Her fists clenched and released. She wanted to fly to Seattle and wring the man’s neck. Maybe her mother’s a little as well, for being so impulsive. Who married a man who lived across the country?

“Mom.” Elise’s hand trembled. She sat on the couch and gripped the phone even tighter in an effort to maintain control. Her feet shuffled on the soft cream carpet at her feet, too nervous to be still. “It’s going to be fine. I’ve had bad breakups too. You’ll move on. Maybe you’ll meet someone who isn’t in the middle of a divorce this time.”

Elise winced at her own words. Victor had been still living with another woman when he’d started seeing her mom. It wasn’t the same as her and Michael, but it was close enough to make her squirm.

“But you’re young,” her mother said. “I’m old. I have...” Sniffle. Cough. Sneeze. “I have a shitty job I hate, and now my husband doesn’t want me.”

Wake up, Mom. He used you.

“Listen, Mom, I know it doesn’t feel like it right this minute, but it really will get better. These things always do.”

There was a knock at the door. She rose from the couch to answer.

Michael stood on the other side in a long wool coat, looking like some sort of sexy grim reaper. Dark, morose, angry, hair glittery and damp from what must have been newly fallen snow. The light on the landing threatened to give up the ghost and its ominous flicker only added to the effect.

Elise held up a finger and stood back to let him in, turning away to avoid his searching look while she tried to wrap things up with her mom. “It will all work out,” she said.

“He promised,” her mother sobbed.

“I know. I’m sorry. I wish I could change things, I really do. But you’ve got to hang in there, okay?”

Sniffles. Sniffles were an improvement. If her mother was crying, Elise had a measure of comfort things were being processed. Signs of shutting down made her far more nervous.

“I just don’t know,” her mother said through hiccups.

“You’ll figure it out. I swear.” But she couldn’t promise anything. Elise clung so tightly to spreadsheets and data because data was something she could guarantee. Her reassurance to her mother was empty, and just saying it made her throat close.

“I guess.”

“There’s always hope, Mom.”

“Listen to me going on.” Sniff. “Work’s okay?”

Elise glanced at Michael, who stood with hands in his pockets and a wry expression on his face.

Yeah. Work. About that...

“Work is busy, but it’s fine. Thanks for asking.”

“You sound tired. Maybe you’re taking on too much?”

“I’m not. I swear, Mom. You know, I’d actually better go. We’re in a time crunch. I have...a late meeting.” Very late. From across the room, Michael gave her a knowing smile. “I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure, honey.”

“Love you.”

“You too, baby.”

Elise hung up and turned to Michael, who raised his eyebrows. “Everything okay?”

“Family issue,” she said. “Long story.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “You’re still wearing my robe.”

She shrugged. “I needed a shower. It was there. Everything okay with you? You ran out of here like there was a fire.”

His forehead developed a deep furrow down the center. “Family issue. Long story.”

“Ah.”

They met in the middle of the living room. Michael reached out to cup the back of her neck, fingers threading and curling to capture damp strands of hair.

“You’re shaking,” he said. His lips brushed against hers as he spoke.
“And I know I shouldn’t, but I feel like I need you right now.”

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EIGHT

He waited for her to turn him away. Slap him. After all, she'd been the one to backpedal when he got called away. Now? She wasn't saying anything.

Her eyelids lowered and a lock of hair fell across her eyes. Michael took her face in her hands and kissed her.

Slow this time. An easy meeting of tongues, hers tasting of minty toothpaste, his probably tasting of—

“You've been drinking.”

“Yeah.” So, his still tasted like Lagavulin. “I had a drink with my brother. When it went badly, I had another.”

Her eyes opened wide again. “How did you get back?”

“Tom drove.”

Elise nodded, but didn't answer. Her top teeth sank into her plump lower lip and Michael's heart rate sped up to a gallop.

He slid one hand along her shoulder, pushing the robe she wore—his robe—aside. “Is this okay?”

Her expression turned to one of confusion. “You weren't so tentative earlier when you had me grab the door of your apartment and asked me to catalogue my body modifications.”

“I'm sorry.” He tried for a smile. “I did ask politely.”

The other shoulder of the robe slipped. Elise reached down and tugged the sash, and the anticipation of seeing all that pale, freckled skin got Michael hard again.

A small smile made the corners of her eyes crinkle. “I should be sorry. I’m not,” she said. Her eyes darkened. “But you’re right. We probably shouldn’t do this.”

Michael’s body shuddered. “Give me one night, Elise. One night that isn’t about missing my father and all the futures I’m responsible for. You said we’re good with the schedule, and I would fucking kill for one night to pretend things between us are different. But if you ask me to, I’ll leave.”

Even as he promised her he’d go, his fingers tightened in her damp hair. He leaned closer, catching the fresh smell of soap, and his lungs burned. He wanted to inhale every bit of her.

She shook her head as the robe dropped to the floor. “I can’t ask you to leave.”

Michael’s mouth went dry, and he wished he had another drink to throw back. His lips came down on hers. With one hand, he hurried to unbutton his shirt. His belt hit the floor a few seconds later with a *clunk* and his shoes and pants quickly followed.

Hands roamed. Michael’s fingers pressed against the side of Elise’s face. He couldn’t bring himself to let go. He drew her tongue into his mouth over and over again, walking them both toward the bedroom door.

“You’re fucking delicious,” he murmured.

“You’re...” Elise shook her head. Her inhalation rattled like breathing was a struggle. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

He kissed her again, hoping to silence her doubts. Hoping to drown out his own as they moved together toward the bed. “I can’t believe we didn’t do it before.”

Her lips parted in apparent confusion. “What?”

“I should have looked for you.” He wrapped his arms around her and groaned aloud at the warmth and softness of her skin against his. The rough texture of her nipples against his chest, the dampness of her hair on his shoulder. “Just touching you makes me crazy. My God, Elise. I should have known. Fuck, I did know, and I ignored it. I’m so goddamned stupid.”

“You’re not stupid.”

“I *am* stupid.”

Michael gripped her hips—fucking luscious, curvy hips—and ran his hands up that amazing hourglass dip in her waist and over her shoulders, reveling in the magic of Elise’s hands giving him the same treatment.

“I’m stupid because I thought I could push you away all those years ago, and I’d forget and find someone else who turned me on as much as your hand bumping my knee under a cubicle desk. Christ, I tried to tell myself it was all innocent, but I lived for every second.”

“Oh my God.” Elise’s eyes flew wide, her cheeks flushed in the low light of her bedroom. “I had no idea.”

“You must have, if you gathered up the nerve to kiss me.” He bent her back, one hand braced between her shoulders, the other gripping her ass, trailing kisses along her jaw. Their only-for-tonight agreement be damned, already he didn’t want to let her go.

“I hoped.” She gripped his shoulders, smiling. “If I’m being honest, all that accidentally bumping your knee wasn’t so much an accident.”

Michael stood them up straight, grinding his pelvis against hers. “I wish I’d kept tabs. Made sure you were okay. Jesus, I want you so fucking much.”

He growled and pulled her onto the bed, loving the softness of her body against his. The glide of her nipples against his palm, the slide of her belly...the brush of those soft hairs between her thighs. He slid his hand over her abdomen and between her legs with a groan.

“Point of no return time,” she whispered. “Are we sure about this?”

He bent down to capture one nipple in his mouth. She gasped as it hardened and peaked against his tongue. Meanwhile, Michael circled his finger against the approximate location he figured she'd probably had that piercing once upon a time.

More gasping. Moaning. A definite series of shivers and wiggles and the incoherent demand for more. A breathy, open-mouth pant there in the dim light with her head thrown back as he slipped one and then two fingers inside of her.

"I'm not sure about anything, Elise. I just know that everything around me is collapsing, and you feel *right*. You feel good. I need to feel good for one night." He bent his head to her chest and trailed kisses to her stomach, praying silently that neither of them came to their senses.

"Yes," she breathed. "Please, Michael."

"Yes? Please?"

"Please, I want you."

"Want?"

"I need you."

"I need you, too."

LATER, ELISE MIGHT REGRET WHAT SHE AND MICHAEL WERE DOING. BUT right then, his stubble scraped along her shoulder to nuzzle her jaw and his skillful fingers played her like a flute and she could hardly even remember why this was an awful ide—

"Oh, God." His teeth grazed her nipple. Gently, but enough to make her arch off the bed.

He slipped on a condom and pushed inside steadily, pulling a hard, all-over tremor from her body.

Michael moaned when he was all the way inside of her, and she turned her head to the side to hide her grin. A thousand tiny tingles danced on her skin.

Finally, after the hurt of him pushing her away, he wanted her.

He wanted her.

Oh, hell yes.

He sped up, pumping his hips and groaning unintelligible things that sounded no less delicious. After all, this was Michael. *Michael*. She couldn't believe it, after all this time.

Elise wrapped her legs around his waist and held on as his muscles undulated beneath her calves. Tonight, they would let themselves enjoy. Tomorrow, back to being temporary co-workers. Easier.

Safer.

Her breath hitched as he shifted position, pushing deeper as he rose onto his knees. He pulled her to him, hands at her back.

“Michael...” Such an intimate position. Deep. Stimulating. Their gazes met when he leaned forward to push all the way inside again. “Oh. God.”

Other words danced on her tongue. Things she would not say under penalty of death or denied orgasm, like how she also wished she hadn't walked away that day, how she wished he'd told her how he really felt. But what did any of it matter?

His breathing deepened, his eyes went darker than dark. “Jesus, Elise, you're gorgeous. I forgot how beautiful. You have no idea...how many times...I've thought of touching you this way. No idea how much I missed you.”

His words nearly melted her into the bed. She kissed him, because anything else she might say would only cause trouble.

This is for tonight. Only tonight.

He growled suddenly and grabbed her ass with both hands, pulling her onto him hard. It took him so deep ,Elise saw fireworks and a whole

damned parade behind her eyes when she came.

His powerful hips kept pumping. One hand pulled a fistful of her hair back. He leaned forward and kissed her like the world might end, down her throat and over her chest before kicking his own head back with a deep bellow.

Elise wasn't sure she'd seen anything like it. As he yelled, his fingers dug into her hips like he absolutely had to keep her close. People in neighboring states must have heard that scream. Wow.

She had pulled that passion out of him. *She had.*

When his cries ceased, chest heaving, his head rested on her shoulder. For a moment or maybe a hundred, neither of them said a word. Her hand smoothed down his back as they breathed together, trying to hold on to the magic of that moment.

As they came down from their high, Elise tried not to think of the unfinished parts of her spreadsheet and failed miserably. Now that they'd been intimate, it was going to be that much more important Elise come through for him on this project. She'd have to work twice as hard to be sure they stayed professional from here on out. To make sure he took her work on the project seriously.

He grasped her chin and brought her head around until they had managed eye contact. "Uh-uh. Don't."

"What?"

"Whatever you're thinking."

"You don't know what I'm thinking."

"I can hazard a few guesses." He eased her down onto her back. "Come on. We said tonight would be a break from the stress. I know you showered, but now I need one, and I've gotten you sticky and sweaty. Want to come?"

He was showering here? "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"A shower. Good, clean fun, Elise. Don't make me do the walk of shame across the hall like this."

He held out a hand.

“You go ahead,” she said.

He shook his head. One hand tugged at her disheveled curls. “I want to wash your hair and rub your shoulders.”

She blinked. “What?” Nobody had ever said something like that to her. Ever.

He grinned. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I just had amazing sex. You still look like you need to relax.”

Her face heated and she hurried to bury the evidence in her palms. “Fine. I’ll come with you. Better make good on that offer to wash my hair.”

She threw out the ultimatum as a defense and scurried past him to turn on the shower, surprised at his response from behind her on the bed.

“Yes, ma’am.”

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NINE

The thing that made the morning after weird to Elise was the fact that it wasn't actually all that uncomfortable.

Michael had stayed. She hadn't been sure if he wouldn't or would, but in the end, there had been no discussion. They'd showered, and she'd stayed in the bathroom to dry her hair and brush her teeth again.

Stalling? Maybe. But her hair tangled easily if she didn't at least towel dry and comb, and dental health carried a great deal of importance.

So, she'd been stalling.

He'd done exactly what he'd promised in the shower. He'd honest-to-freaking-Pete washed her hair, massaging her scalp until she'd been tempted to promise him the world. He'd even rubbed her shoulders, her calves...other things.

The entire affair wound up far more intimate than the quick wham-bam she'd anticipated, and with the steam still clearing from their shower, she hadn't known what to say or do. She'd worked hard to build this layer of confidence around herself and last night she'd been too vulnerable in front of him.

By the time she'd given herself a pep talk about pulling on her big girl stockings and getting in there to talk to the man, Michael had been passed

out in the middle of her loaner bed, snoring softly. She'd crawled in next to him and that had been the end.

They'd driven in together because why not, right? They were coming from the same place and going to the same place. Michael's idea. She'd suggested separate vehicles might be worthwhile in case he wanted to leave early, or he had plans to go someplace for Thanksgiving.

He didn't.

Elise tried not to think hard about the fact that tomorrow the office would be a shiny chrome and marble mausoleum, save for the two of them and their spreadsheets. God willing, they could be adults and focus on work.

Michael had been urgently needed elsewhere again for much of the morning. Too many people with too many software-related life-or-death emergencies right before the holiday.

For the most part, Elise appreciated the peace and quiet, but finally she went searching in the early afternoon. She didn't find him in his office, but did find his contract guy, Tom, talking to Michael's ex.

Almost ex-wife? Dear Lord.

"Come on in." Tom motioned Elise forward when she paused by the door to Michael's office.

He and the petite brunette clasped hands, speaking quietly to each other for a few seconds more. Then Michael's impeccably dressed ex headed for the door. As she breezed from the office, she flashed Elise a smile as blinding as the rock on her finger.

Tom strode over with a hand out. His usually neat salt-and-pepper hair was out of place, like something had him upset enough to run his hands through it. "I'm sorry. What can I do for you? Have a seat."

"Uh..." She scanned Michael's large office as she lowered herself into the chair. What was Michael's ex doing in here with one of his employees when he wasn't in here himself? None of her proverbial beeswax, but it sure

seemed odd. “I was looking for Michael. I had some questions about the RFID-handling protocols for the project.”

He frowned at the carpet. “Hmm. Telecommuting wasn’t authorized for that project, so those procedures shouldn’t matter.”

“Oh.” She jumped up again. Too fast, probably. “Well, okay then. Anything that doesn’t apply to the project makes my life easier. Thanks!”

Sure, maybe Michael’s contracts guy felt comfortable being in here because he’d known Michael for however long. And probably Michael’s ex did because, well, she probably had rights to lots of things Elise didn’t really have.

Okay, that thought *really* spurred Elise to leave.

“Anything else I can do for you, please let me know.”

Huh. Tom seemed much more accommodating today. Monday, when she’d arrived, she’d gotten kind of a cold vibe that she hadn’t appreciated, and she had gone so far as to wonder if he was one of the shady employees to whom Michael had referred.

“Thank you.” She backed toward the door as briskly as she could without being rude.

“Anytime. We all appreciate the hard work you’re doing.” He followed up with a handsome, megawatt smile. Hyde and Jekyll, much?

He walked with her out toward the conference room where she’d been stationed, only to run into Penny from HR, escorting her roommate Jeff. Dressed as a hunky firefighter.

“Elise,” said Penny. “This young man showed up looking for you. “He indicated that it was a matter of some urgency.”

Oh jeez. She cleared her throat. “Thank you, Penny. I’ll take it from here.” She fought not to laugh at Jeffrey, in his fake gear with a temporary security badge clipped to his uniform.

She realized Tom still hovered next to her, eyeing Jeff with something like consternation.

Great. Fabulous. She'd probably managed to wipe out any goodwill she had achieved with Tom.

"Oh. Uh. Tom, this is my roommate, Jeffrey, Jeff this is Tom..." Crap she couldn't remember his last name. "Who works for Michael." She turned to Jeff. "And what are you doing here? You didn't call ahead or anything?" The last part she muttered under her breath with Tom still hovering weirdly nearby for some unknown reason.

"Oh." Jeffrey slapped his chest and grinned at Tom. "I'm not a real firefighter. "No worries, your building is secure." Light danced in Jeff's blue eyes, and he actually had the nerve to stand there and give Tom the old, "Hey, how's it going?" up-and-down sweep. Right there in front of her.

"Okay, you know what?" She grabbed Jeffrey's arm. "We should go grab a cup of coffee." She turned to Tom. "If Michael comes by, please let him know I'll be back shortly. And thanks again for your help."

"Suuure," Tom said with a scowl. Slowly, he turned and headed back toward the executive offices, but he glanced back once more as he made his exit. Still frowning.

Elise had the strange inkling she'd just failed a quiz.

"So, who's the salt-and-pepper fox?"

She turned Jeff. "Seriously? What the hell are you doing here?"

They stepped on the elevator to head down to the lobby.

"I had a bachelorette party right up the road last night. I thought I'd swing by since you haven't been home in days. What's going on? Are you coming to Fredericksburg with me for Thanksgiving dinner?"

She sagged against the shiny brushed-metal wall inside the elevator car. "I can't. There's a time crunch on this project."

He picked at something on her sleeve. "There's always a time crunch. That company you work for takes advantage, you know. They'll keep overbooking you until you put your foot down."

She huffed a breath. "This one's different."

“And how’s that?”

They stepped off the elevator into the lobby, ambling around the Christmas display. “It’s just different. I made a promise.”

He started to open his mouth again, but she held up her hand to stop him. “Don’t, okay? Please.”

“Okay. But what about your birthday? Are we going to be able to do anything to celebrate?”

Of course, that was the moment Michael appeared next to them. “Whose birthday are we discussing?”

Crap. “It’s not a big deal. I don’t like to celebrate,” she said.

“But we’ll have this validation to finish as well. Two things to celebrate.” His finger traced the outer edge of her hand. “We should do something special.” The gesture, subtle but intimate, gave her a shiver.

After a moment of heart palpitations, Elise gave a clearly curious Jeff the single-finger “hang on a second” gesture, and motioned for Michael to step over so they could talk without her roommate butting in.

“Listen, now’s not really the time to get into it, but last night you said what happened between us would be a one-time thing. I agree that’s probably best. So things aren’t confused.”

His eyes darkened. “Right. If that’s what you think is best.”

“I do.”

Did she? Her lips formed the words, and a big part of her brain meant them. She *was* confused. Putting distance between them to protect her heart seemed like the right thing to do. Certainly, it was the professional thing to do.

Still, when he touched her the way he just had and looked at her the way he was looking at her now, all she wanted to do was get closer.

“OHMYGOD, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH. MARRY ME.” ELISE GROANED AND reached two grasping, greedy hands toward Jeffrey and the giant whipped-cream-covered coffee beverage he carried, mimicking the universal symbol for “gimme.”

“You are nuts,” he said. He removed his heavy yellow fireman coat and sat across from her.

“Me?” She waved a hand in his direction. “Look at you. I can’t believe they let you into the HaleStorm building dressed in bunker gear.”

He grinned. “They thought I was an actual fireman. I make a very convincing public servant.”

She gave a dry laugh. “Oh, I’m sure you do. What are you doing here, anyway? I mean it’s nice of you to stop by and all, but if you danced at a party last night, why aren’t you home sleeping?”

His eyes rolled as he shook his head.

“Oh.” She sipped her mocha. “Wait, but you said the party was all girls.”

Jeff stage whispered, “The bride-to-be had a handsome older brother who stopped in to drop off a case of champagne shortly before I left.”

“Aha.” She grinned and waggled her eyebrows.

“Unfortunately, I didn’t wake up before his wife got in this morning.”

“Ooh.”

“Yeah, she works the midnight shift.”

Elise winced. “He’s sleeping around while she’s working all night?”

“As a patrol cop.”

“Oh, shit.” She shook her head. “Unbelievable.”

“I know how to pick ’em, right?” He slumped forward. “I guess the only good news is she was angrier at him than me. Dude was a repeat offender. A hot, hot, smokin’-hot repeat offender.”

Elise placed her hand over her friend’s. “I’m so sorry. That must’ve sucked.”

“I should have known better. I don’t know how I get myself into these situations.” He rested his chin lightly on the lid of his cup. “You know, I’m feeling like I need to take a step back from everything. Reevaluate my life. My career.”

She felt a pang of sympathy on her roommate’s behalf. “But you love dancing.”

“I don’t love being lonely though.” He put his other hand over hers, so their hands now lay in a stack. “And don’t get me wrong, you’re great. But you’re gone a lot, and except for that one time when we got drunk and almost did something we both would have regretted until the end of time —”

“Ick, don’t remind me.” That one “oops” moment had long since passed, and she and Jeff were like siblings.

“You can’t provide what I’m looking for in a relationship.” He sat back and took a sip of his coffee. “Fact is, nobody wants to date a stripper. Some of them say they’re cool with it, but they’re not. Guys wanna get wild and crazy with a stripper. Not get serious. There’s too much weirdness and jealousy and guys lying about being married, so then their wives come home and threaten to arrest you for prostitution.”

“Holy shit, you’re kidding.” Elise slapped a hand over her mouth. Gaping at Jeff wouldn’t make him feel any better.

He gave her “the look.”

“You’re not kidding. I’m so sorry.” Elise didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I think I still have that college fund my parents set aside. I haven’t checked. Maybe I should.”

Jeff had brains for miles. Truly, Elise wasn’t sure she knew anybody smarter. Michael, maybe. The way he seemed to disregard his own intelligence made her crazy.

But in a way, she understood. He'd been bullied a lot in high school, and his parents, though they meant well, did nothing. They'd told him they'd pay for college if he wanted a "real" career, and he hadn't.

"Let me know if I can do anything to help," she told Jeff.

"Thanks, honey. I don't want to have to go home and grovel to those assholes."

"Believe me, I can understand." Put Elise on any therapist's couch and as soon as her parents came up, the dollar signs would flash brightly enough to be seen from space. She certainly didn't begrudge Jeff his family baggage.

Jeff stared morosely at his coffee for a moment, then he straightened in his chair. "Okay, change of subject." His face brightened. "What's up with you and Kenneth Cole?"

"What?"

He gave her a look. "Don't make me beat it out of you. The one who looked so very interested in the fact that your birthday is this weekend."

"He was only being nice. He's not interested. It's nothing."

"Then how come you're blushing?" He suddenly sucked in a dramatic breath and pointed at her as if she'd gotten caught with her skirt tucked into her underwear. "That's the guy! The one who kissed you and you got all hung up on him and then he screwed you out of a job and you said you hoped you wouldn't have to run into him if you came back to work here! *That* guy."

"Shh." She looked around, careful that nobody she recognized from HaleStorm was in the small coffee shop.

"Come on." He quickly packed up their stuff and took her hand in his. They walked out into the shopping center, all lit up elegantly with lights around all the stores, and wreaths hanging from each of the light posts. They huddled closer to each other when they left the warmth of the coffee shop. "Look around."

She gave him a curious stare.

“Tomorrow is Thanksgiving, which of course means that everything is decked out for Christmas.” He poked her in the ribs. “You’re supposed to laugh.”

She managed a smile. “Sorry. Stressed.”

“You’re always stressed.”

She managed a smile. “I know.”

He shrugged back into his coat. “My point is, this is a beautiful time of year. It’s all about joy and remembering what we’re grateful for. I know you’ve got some big important project or whatever, but...” He placed their cups on a nearby table and faced her, taking both hands in his. “Life isn’t all about how hard you work, babe.”

Her breath puffed into the air and for a moment, unexpected tears burned her eyes. The echo of old voices—her mother’s, her exes, all the kids in school who’d called her stupid—fought to be heard inside of her head. “I know,” she affirmed. *But it’s the only thing I know I can count on.*

He leaned forward, placing a chaste kiss on her forehead. “No, you don’t,” he said. “And that’s the problem.”

She thought back to the night before, when she’d allowed Michael to shampoo her hair. She’d relaxed into his arms and let the suds wash over her body, and for a few minutes, she truly had let the rest of her fears go. “I’m working on it,” she said finally.

Jeff nudged Elise’s shoulder. “He’s hot, by the way. He was also looking at you like he’d appreciate having *you* to unwrap this holiday season.”

An unexpected chuckle burst out of her. “Well, you’ve got the first part right, anyway.”

Cue a dramatic eye roll from Jeff. “You didn’t look so unhappy to see him, either. Have we forgiven him his egregious transgressions, then?”

Elise inhaled deeply, her body heating in spite of the cold November air. She looked up into Jeff’s concerned face. “I guess. Yes? I still feel a little

confused, but he explained things. Part of me is nervous about trusting but I have to tell you, everything I felt five years ago came back a hundred times stronger the day I walked back into that building. I didn't know what to do except go with it."

And hope to hell it didn't bite her in the ass.

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TEN

Tom threw a file on Michael's desk. "What is it about holidays that always bring insanity out of the woodwork?"

Michael raised his eyebrows. "Grocery stores are already stocking eggnog?"

Tom pointed to the file. "For some strange reason, Microstrive made a bid for our CRI project out of nowhere."

"Interesting." Michael curled his fingers around his pen, breathing slowly to absorb the news.

Tom sat across from the desk. "You don't sound concerned."

"Oh, damn right I'm concerned. I'm wondering what would possess them to suddenly try to snake a project we've been doing requirements gathering on for months. Did another RFP go out?"

"No requests for proposals have been sent that I can find, unless they were sent privately." Tom stood again, pacing the length of the office. "This seems off. We're not in production yet. We're not over budget. No complaints have been lodged. The project has been moving along fine."

Michael slid the file over and opened it up, reading the proposal from his primary competitor. Microstrive was still a young company, started up the year Michael graduated from Tech. The owner struck him as arrogant, cocky, and willing to do anything to win. Even...

“This is a lowball offer.”

Tom stopped mid-pace. “I noticed. Way too low. We’ve taken a loss to win a bid before, but that amount is ridiculous.”

Michael tapped the page. “They want us to match this?”

Tom shook his head. “They haven’t asked.”

“So where did you get this?”

“They wanted us to know they’re dropping the contract.”

For a cheaper offer that conveniently came unsolicited from nowhere. “Dammit.” Michael’s eyelids grew heavy with the weight of the news and his own exhaustion.

Fuck, he needed a good night’s rest. Those few amazing hours wrapped up in a warm bed next to Elise had been the first decent stretch of sleep he’d had since his father’s health took a turn. The mere memory relaxed his shoulders. Still, showing his body what he’d been missing only made him crave more.

More of Elise. More everything.

“You doing okay?” Tom tipped his head to the side.

Michael straightened, tapping his fingers on the edge of his desk. “Well. I have a client threatening to cancel a contract in a few short days over missing security documents and another that just pulled the plug over a lower competing offer. Almost a million in next year’s revenue between the two. You tell me.”

Tom whistled quietly.

“Okay. Do me a favor, please.” Michael rubbed at a throb in his right temple. “Check the contract for this deal, see if there’s a way to work this out before they bail. My father used to put thirty days’ notice in there or something. Also, find out who’s in charge of sales over there, I need to set up a meeting. If you have to, go one level higher.”

Tom pointed a finger. “You need to get a secretary.”

Michael shook his head. He'd had to fire his father's secretary. "This is a call better made by senior management. Anyway, I'm leery of hiring a new secretary. I know I have to eventually, but it's like worrying about a hangnail when we're dodging bullets. Frankly, given the number of people who were screwing Dad over I don't know how this place stayed afloat."

"Unfortunately, corruption happens high up in companies sometimes. Absolute power and all that jazz."

Michael shook his head, looking at the bid again. He flicked his finger at the paper in front of him. "Hmm. I wonder if it's a loss-leader."

Tom stepped forward. "I'm sorry?"

"Like when the grocery store marks one product down to almost nothing and puts it on the front of the sale flier so you'll come in and buy a ton of other shit."

Tom smiled slightly. "Michael Hale, bargain shopper?"

"Quiet, you." He squinted, willing his brain to cough up more puzzle pieces. "Do me a favor and see if you can find any other projects for the same agency Microstrive might have bid on. Maybe they're trying to roll this one into the deal."

Tom rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. "Will do. Oh." He turned back. "Elise came looking for you earlier. I think I answered her questions, but I'm letting you know to be certain. Also, Becca came in pretending to be concerned about your mental state."

"Shit." Michael clunked his head on the back of his chair. "What did Becca say?"

"You might not be making good decisions now, blah, blah. I gave her a friendly ear and sent her away. Told her to sign the papers and move on."

"Great." Mike shook his head. "God willing, she listened this time. Thanks for your help, man."

"Anytime."

Michael was halfway to the conference room to find Elise when he remembered she'd been on her way to have coffee with her friend when he last saw her. He pressed down the burst of irritation and disquiet that reared its ugly head. She probably wouldn't be back yet, but her confident presence would be appreciated right now.

Instead of tracking down Elise, he pulled out his phone to determine himself who he could meet with at Microstrive. He would not lie down and let someone steal his company's hard-earned work.

ON ELISE'S WALK BACK FROM HAVING COFFEE, SNOW BEGAN TO FALL IN those fat flakes that loved to get all up in her hair. She ducked into HaleStorm's lobby bathroom to get herself together, renewed by her break with Jeff. Hopeful.

Tomorrow, the building would empty for Thanksgiving. As far as she knew, Michael had no plans to leave town, which could prove tricky. A little distance might have saved them both from things being uncomfortable. They'd agreed to leave their one night together as only that, and the trouble was Elise, had found herself revisiting the experience over and over throughout the day. Harder to forget Michael's hands on her in the light of day than she'd convinced herself it would be the night before. Hard not to look at him and remember all the heat between them.

She hoped nobody noticed.

On the upside, she'd completed more than half the work, and now a long holiday weekend lie ahead. She'd hunker down in peace with or without Michael here to help, hand over everything he needed to present to the client, and be out the door.

Walking away might sting a little, but she'd do it with her dignity still intact. This time.

Elise was about to exit the bathroom stall when the outer door creaked, and the crack of stilettos marched across the floor. “Supposedly he was in meetings. I’m still his wife, you’d think he’d have the time to step out to speak to me, you know? Take a break, you’re in charge of the company for fuck’s sake.” Something like a sniff and a rustling of paper towels. “Yeah. I waited around in HR, but they suggested I try back later.”

Elise stopped with her hand on the door latch. Was that...? She moved to peer through the door.

It was. Michael’s ex. Damn. Damn, damn, damn. She put her hand over her mouth. What the hell should she do? Leave? Eavesdrop? Okay, she should leave.

The sink turned on. “Yeah, he gave me the papers. I haven’t signed.” A pause. Heavy breathing. “I don’t know. I’ll come up with something.”

Holy shit! What did that mean?

Elise flushed the toilet for the sake of a sporting warning, waited a few seconds and opened the door. She walked out and washed her hands, pretending no notice of the Burberry-clad snake-lady standing at the sink next to her.

Elise couldn’t be sure, but that bit of conversation sounded awfully mercenary. Did Michael have any idea that this woman was scheming behind his back? Was this kind of thing why they were getting divorced? Elise found herself wanting to do some very un-classy things to this lady’s eyes with a rollerball pen.

Snake-lady spoke first. “You were in my husband’s office earlier.”

My husband’s. God. Elise’s neck muscles went painfully rigid. Had she been a cat, her tail would have gone all puffy at those two little words. “I’m working on a contract project for him. I needed some information before I’m gone next week.” Those last four little words felt important to say. *I’m not a threat to you, I’m merely a lowly contractor, and I won’t blab to Michael about what I just heard.*

Would she though? Should she? On one hand, Elise owed it to Michael to let him know his soon-to-be ex appeared to have something up her designer sleeve, and intended *not* to be his soon-to-be ex after all.

On the other hand, in light of last night's horizontal events, such warnings coming from Elise could come across as having an ulterior motive—vindictive or needy, maybe—and that was the last way Elise wanted Michael to think of her.

Had she misunderstood something? Maybe Michael wanted to work things out with his ex after all. She didn't think so, but she could have heard what she wanted to.

Elise grabbed for a paper towel, anxious to get away from the current scenario. Burberry Lady dabbed at her eyes and had that painful expression women got when they might burst into tears at any moment.

Okay, time to blow this keg stand. Elise could not be party to comforting the wife of the man she'd wanted since college.

Then the sputtering started. The tears. Oh, hell.

Elise moved quickly to grab a hunk of toilet paper from the stall. "Here."

"Thank you."

She grabbed her purse and tried to escape with a sympathetic smile and a nod, but the not-yet-former Mrs. Hale turned to her with wet eyes. "It's hard being with such a powerful man, you know?"

Elise froze about two-thirds of the way to the door. So close. "I'm sure it must be." Staying *away* from Michael was the hard part.

Sniffles now. "He comes home late. Some nights not at all. All the stress. The yelling and screaming." She blew her nose daintily and folded the tissue. "Oh, I know I could have been better. God knows I made mistakes, but I tried. And he could be so demanding. You know?"

Elise coughed. She sort of had an idea about the demanding part. Just maybe in a naughtier way than Lady Stiletto meant.

She took a lap through her mental history of working for Michael the summer of her internship. He'd been so friendly and warm, which was probably the reason Elise found it hard to stop her growing attraction. She couldn't imagine him yelling and screaming.

"I'm not sure I'd want to stay with a man like that," she muttered. Truly.

The Mrs. Almost Ex looked up, smiling sadly at Elise. "I'm so sorry. TMI, I'm sure."

Yes.

Elise's tried to manage a smile, pulling her bag higher onto her shoulder. "I'm very sorry." That much certainly was true. "Good luck." With that, she pushed through the door and headed for the elevators, chewing on the most uncomfortable conversation she'd ever had.

She rolled the words backwards and forward in her mind, wondering about Burberry Lady's sincerity. Whose story was true? Was this a desperate woman in love who simply wanted to cling to her husband? Or did she have more underhanded motives?

Either way, guilt gnawed at Elise's brain, biting a trail down into her churning stomach.

Without question, Michael's problems with his marriage would exist whether or not Elise had let him into her bed the night before. He'd been clear that they were separated, that divorce proceedings were already well under way, or she never would have. *Never.*

Still, the encounter in the bathroom left doubt, and questions she didn't know how to answer.

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ELEVEN

Finally finished making calls, Michael found Elise manning her usual place in the small conference room on the developers' level. An edge of nerves had crept into her work: her short fingernails clicked on the table and her other hand bounced a pencil eraser on top of a stack of papers. Under her chair, one pointy-heeled shoe slipped on and off her foot.

On and off. Over and over.

Both Michael and his breath stopped to admire the arch of that bare foot. *It was* for the best if they kept things professional.

Was she ignoring him, or had she simply not noticed him yet? Their looming deadline butted heads with a niggling concern that perhaps he should give her some space.

Dammit, they had a scant few business days to save a six-figure project. Not to mention, seeing her now made his blood run faster and hotter. Fuck space. "Everything okay?"

She nodded. "Sure." She shifted in her chair, finally pushing her shoe all the way onto her foot. She pointed to her laptop screen. "Do you have time to answer some policy questions?"

He went to read over her shoulder, and then frowned. "I thought we had manuals for that stuff."

"Out of date. That's why I'm here, remember?"

“Shit.” He straightened. “How did my father keep this place in business?”

She looked up at him, appearing sympathetic. “If you aren’t careful, your clients are going to start asking the same thing.”

“They already have. That’s my problem.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He checked the time on his phone and then pointed to the work in front of her. “As of a short while ago this isn’t our only fire. I’m sorry, I’m afraid I actually have to go.” Three-thirty. If he hurried, he could beat the worst parts of rush hour. “I can help as soon as I get back from this meeting.”

Elise reached up to put her hand on his, and his gut tightened. He wanted her to touch him more. How could he promise to stay professional when he knew what those smooth hands felt like on his skin?

“Is Tom available?” She frowned at him like she knew his thoughts and wanted to punish him for them.

He could only hope.

“He’s handling a contract thing for me.” Michael headed for the door. He shook off the sudden urge to turn around, grab Elise, and bend her backwards while he kissed the shit out of her. Beg her to stay and talk things out with him once this project ended. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Right.” She nodded slowly, then smiled and snapped her fingers. “Okay. I’ll institute Plan C. No worries, I have it covered. God luck with... whatever.”

He nodded and left, a vague sense of discomfort poking around his insides at Elise’s mention of “Plan C.” God only knew what she meant, and he didn’t have time to ask. He’d cross his fingers and find out when he returned.

He hoped.

He’d learned enough thus far to know that Elise was not, in fact, the green college intern he’d known all those years ago. She’d grown and

changed. These past few days and nights of working together, Elise had shown that she could hold her own in every way that mattered. Goddamn, could she ever.

Why did it seem so unbelievable that she'd turned into someone he could lean on?

Because maybe if you acknowledged it, then you'd allow yourself to be happy.

A taller, paler version of himself waited by the ornamental bushes as he exited the building.

“What are you doing here? I thought we said everything we needed to say to each other after you ambushed Tom last night,” he growled.

“You talked,” Dave replied. “I don't recall that we reached any sort of accord.”

Michael passed his brother and kept walking toward the parking garage. “Of course not. You want to take control of the company our father left to me—not *you*—after turning your back on him while he lay dying. What did you expect?”

“This company is not *your* legacy, it is *ours*. All of ours. Mine and Joshua's as well.” Dave's low growl echoed ominously in the garage, empty of everything but them and the cars.

Michael stopped with a loud scuff of loafer on concrete and spun to face his eldest sibling. “You wanted a stake in this company, you should have stuck around. I needed to replace senior staff when Dad passed. Thank fuck I had college buddies willing and able to come in. But frankly? I could've really used my brothers before then. Except you and Joshua weren't the ones who held his hand when he couldn't see or talk anymore. You weren't the one who watched slowly waste away! So, you'll excuse me if I wasn't in the sharing mood. Nor am I now.”

He thrust his hands into his pockets so he wouldn't do something he'd regret, and turned to walk away with his fury banging against his ribs.

Footsteps echoed behind Michael. Oh, Good. Dave had more to say. Fucking great.

“You stayed loyal to our father because your mommy kicked you to the curb! You didn’t earn your place at the head of this company. You were just the last fucking man standing.”

Michael stopped, facing his car. He closed his eyes against the words, but they bounced off the surrounding slabs of concrete and wormed their way into his ears, into his brain, the thing he’d thought to himself a thousand times. He breathed slowly and deeply, trying to loosen the lock they placed on his heart.

“I’m going to assume it’s grief making you talk out of your ass, because I sure as hell earned my place.” In spite of his self-doubt, he refused to give Dave any satisfaction. His fist tightened around his keys until they dug into his flesh. He focused on the pain until his pulse and breathing slowed. “Goodbye, Dave,” he said.

Slowly and with purposeful intention, he opened his car door, settled in, and drove away.

He didn’t give his brother as much as a backward glance.

MICHAEL HAD MANAGED TO GET A MEETING WITH MICROSTRIVE’S VP AND sales manager, Anya Evans. As he sat with a cup of coffee in Anya’s leather and chrome office, he remembered the poster of the model Christie Brinkley he’d had on his wall all through college. If one were to have taken that blonde supermodel out of her bikini and put her in a tailored suit, he’d have a surprising facsimile of Anya, down to the shiny blonde hair and dimpled smile.

She breezed in with apparent ease on very high heels, closing the door behind her. “Mr. Hale, it’s a pleasure. I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.”

She didn't look all that sorry. Her grin matched Michael's memory of that poster. Perhaps she grinned all the time. Like a dolphin.

He leaned back in her leather sofa and crossed one leg over the other, going for the appearance of I-don't-give-a-shit casual even though they both knew the purpose of his visit. "No sweat. Gave me time to enjoy this amazing cup of coffee."

"I'm glad you like. It's Blue Mountain."

He raised his eyebrows. "Ka-ching."

"Only the best here at Microstrive, Mr. Hale." Her smile showed a perfectly straight set of white teeth.

He opted not to respond to her implied dig. "Generous of you to meet with me on the evening before a holiday break."

"Opportunity doesn't use a calendar." she gave Michael an indulgent grin. "And I wouldn't pass up an opportunity to meet with my most formidable competitor."

Michael made every effort to school his features. "Formidable. I'm honored. Thank you." Such bullshit.

"So." Anya's office held a desk and some bookshelves, and a small sitting area on the other with a sofa, two stuffed chairs, and a small table that could seat about six people. Instead of settling across from Michael in one of the chairs, she chose to perch on the edge of the table, crossing one long leg over the other. Her skirt stopped above the knee, and her snazzy shoes wound up dangling right in front of his face. "What can I do for you?"

Michael dragged his gaze from Anya's shoe, up her body and back to her face. Not his type, but gorgeous.

Her calculating gaze stayed on him, and Michael had the distinct impression that at any moment this could change from a polite cage match to two tigers battling over territory. But Michael had been the one to

encroach, so he would do his best to tread respectfully. “It’s my understanding that you put a bid on one of my CRI projects.”

“Isn’t competitive bidding all part of the process?”

“Not once the project has been awarded and work has begun.”

Anya gave a warm, pleasant smile, but Michael nearly expected canary feathers to pop out of her mouth. “I’m sure there must have been some communication error.”

Michael set his cup of coffee down on the small table beside the sofa. “I might have thought so myself, but my contracts guy did some checking. You pitched that deal yourself, Ms. Evans.”

He gave her an appreciative up and down, not because he wanted to flirt with her—she sure as hell wasn’t as pretty as Elise—but because he knew she expected him to. A woman as beautiful as Anya Evans, as powerful, was used to getting what she wanted. No question, she was also used to attention. Michael wasn’t a drooler, but he’d been around the block enough times to know a little ego stroking always helped.

She tipped her head to the side. “Hmm. Oh. Wait. The CRI project.” She nodded. “I do remember.”

Funny how that happened. “You do.”

She stroked her hand down her golden hair, pulled into a low ponytail, and flipped it over her shoulder. “I assure you it wasn’t our intention to poach. You know how pitch meetings can get so long and tedious. I made small talk.”

“Of course.” Michael folded his hands in his lap. *I’ll bet you did.*

“I asked how the project was going. Their rep expressed concerns.” She shrugged casually and leaned forward. “There are stirrings in the industry about your company’s solvency in the wake of your father’s death. A lot of concerns have been expressed about you, Mr. Hale.”

“I see,” Michael managed through a clenched jaw.

She shrugged. “Maybe they asked if we could roll that project into our existing sales package, maybe something I said implied the possibility. The details are fuzzy.”

Michael doubted her fuzziness very much.

Anya leaned back, easing off the table. “I assure you, nobody was coerced, tricked, or strong-armed. I offered them a better price, which they chose to accept.”

Michael stood. “Oh, I don’t believe that for a second.”

“You’re entitled to believe anything you want,” she said lightly.

He smiled. “Of course.” He held out a hand. “Well, I applaud your success.”

“Thank you.” She shook back with a surprisingly firm grasp.

“One thing, though.” Michael squeezed her fingers the slightest bit harder to be sure he had her attention. “Our contract requires thirty days’ written notice to terminate, which was not provided. In addition, I spoke with CRI’s contract rep on the drive over here...and made him aware of the escalating maintenance fees hidden in yours.”

Anya’s brow furrowed, and Michael smiled wider.

“Yeah. See, based on our long-standing relationship, I got them to let my team take a look at the deal. You may have been offering a cheaper price on the installation, but only so you could take them to the cleaners on ongoing support.”

She lifted her chin. “Clients are notorious for ongoing project scope-creep. It’s only wise to hedge against these things.”

“Which is why HaleStorm factored that into our initial bid and put firm boundaries on the terms. We never tried to pull the wool over anybody’s eyes.” He squeezed her hand again and let go. “It was a nice try, Ms. Evans, but don’t fuck with me or my company again.

“And thanks for the coffee.” He put his hands in his pockets and walked out the door.

TWELVE

Elise had a particular hate for her wireless mouse. The little doohickey she had to plug into her laptop to make it work got lost all the time, falling down inside her bag and landing in God only knew where. The airport's baggage claim? The place where she'd lost all her left socks? Narnia?

She muttered and swore and dug around in her laptop bag. It wasn't like she used the bugger, but it belonged to her company, so she got nervous when she couldn't find the elusive little bastard.

"Now *that* is an interesting sight."

She stood in a hurry, clunking her head on the conference room table. She hoped Michael didn't notice, but she turned in time to see him wince.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you."

She rubbed a hand over her throbbing head, dizzy from her abrupt spin. "You come in here making that kind of statement and you don't expect me to be distracted?"

He leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. He'd removed his jacket and his navy tie lay askew around his neck. God help her, he looked delicious. Like it or not, he made her heart race. "Well, *I* sure as hell was distracted," he said. "It's only fair."

She gave him the sternest look she could manage. “Maybe you’re tired. Try a cup of coffee.”

Oh Lord. The dark look that came over his face nearly destroyed her all on its own.

He stepped forward and pulled the door shut, all sorts of wicked, carnal thoughts playing out across his face. She could see it in the way his pupils went wide, the way his tongue swept across his lips. Her heart sped up and her mouth went dry as all the things she’d promised herself about staying away from him evaporated from her brain.

He shook his head. “Had some at a meeting a short while ago. I’m all good.”

He sure as hell is.

Oh my God, stop it!

If Elise had an actual angel and devil on her shoulders, by now they’d be whacking each other with stacks of spreadsheets and her lost computer parts.

It was late. Most everybody had left early for the holiday. Still, they couldn’t—shouldn’t—be doing this. Not here. Not at all. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“What isn’t a good idea?”

“I know what you’re thinking. We agreed it was only one time.” Her stomach burned even as the words came out of her mouth. She thought of the encounter she’d had in the bathroom earlier that day. “What about your wife?”

“Ex-wife. *Ex.*”

“Not yet.”

“A matter of time.” He came forward and slid a hand around her waist.

“What if... What if she doesn’t want to sign the papers?” She hesitated to touch back, instead keeping one hand poised right above the heat of his shoulder.

“Then lawyers get involved and it gets ugly. I don’t want it to, and trust me—that marriage was over before it began. We haven’t even lived together for more than a year.”

Elise exhaled a sigh of relief. She let her hand drop to his arm. “I wouldn’t want to get in the middle of anything. I can’t.”

He reached a hand out to touch her hair. “I wouldn’t do this with you if I wasn’t certain. You can’t possibly think I would.”

She nodded, too overcome by the commanding grip of his other hand on her hip to think of much else. How could she have thought otherwise of him? All those years of carrying around that old hurt. Old habits that no longer served her.

His face hovered close to hers. “I had a big win earlier this afternoon.” His breath tickled her neck as he bent to her ear. “Through it all, I couldn’t stop thinking of how much I wanted to celebrate with you. How much I wanted to be with you. Inside you.”

God. *God.*

“Michael...” Her knees might have buckled if he hadn’t slipped his arms around her waist, the thickness of his erection pressing right between her legs.

His hands slid everywhere, around to her ass, up her side, cupping her breasts. He pinched her nipples gently, then harder, sending shockwaves of pleasure straight to her core. It was like his hands completely short-circuited the part of her that wanted to stay insulated from his potential to hurt her again.

She kept trying to pull back, figure out her feelings. But when he touched her, all she managed to feel was the electricity of his skin on hers.

“I want you,” he said. “I want you so badly that getting inside of you is all I’ve been able to think about since the last time. Wanted you five years ago. Want you now.” He spun her around, placing her hands on the edge of the conference room table. “Please,” he murmured in her ear. “Please.”

She nodded, not trusting her own voice. Hell, if she moved or spoke, the moment could be shattered. One of them would come to their senses. Her knees would collapse. The building would catch fire. God knew *she* might.

Cold worry shot through her. She needed to let him know she had a condom in her purse—

But thank goodness he had one. He got as far as unbuckling his pants and pushing up her skirt, when...

“No underwear?”

She struggled for breath. “I’m a little low on clean clothes.”

He slid his fingers inside her. “If I had known you’d been walking around all day in this gorgeous skirt with your long-as-hell legs and no...” he pumped his fingers in and out, “underwear... Would have fucking killed me.”

She moaned at the heat, the strength of his hand. “You’re killing me now.”

He pulled back long enough to suit up and nudged her legs wide. When he pushed inside, she nearly passed out from the ache and the pleasure.

One of his hands cupped her breast and the other went lower, one finger circling her clit. He’d barely started making love to her and already she was on the verge of orgasm.

“Oh, God...” She couldn’t do much more than steady herself on the table for fear of disturbing the documents she’d stacked so neatly. “Someone could hear us.”

“Nobody’s here. Only us.”

“Only us,” she whispered back. Lord, she hoped so.

He thrust deep and slow, undulating over her. Her nerves fired with a million sensations: his buttons and tie against her back, his lips and breath on her neck. The cool wood of the table under her stomach and fingers, and his hand on her breast. His fingertips and cock working her in concert and

the gathering storm in her core, bringing her closer and closer to an epic nuclear meltdown.

“You feel so good,” he whispered in her ear. “You have no idea. Like coming home.”

Oh hell, he couldn't say things like that to her. It made her want things she couldn't have.

MICHAEL WASN'T EVEN SURE WHAT WAS TUMBLING OUT OF HIS MOUTH. AS he pushed inside Elise, his eyes rolled back in his head and all sorts of curses and promises fell from his lips. Things he couldn't and shouldn't want to give her. Things he'd wanted to give her since he'd first lain eyes on her all those years ago. Good things. Honorable things. Dirty fucking filthy things.

Her blouse had come open, praise be to the gods of amazing office sex. He slid his fingers into her mouth and then inside her bra, slipping that nipple between his fingers, letting it harden, rolling it around.

He thrust slow and steady, in time to her moans, or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, as they both picked up speed, he decided he wanted to draw this thing out, just...a...little...

“What...?” She gasped and whimpered when he pulled out and stayed poised, not quite inside her. She pushed back, and he gripped her ass, massaging and walking his fingers around toward her hips. He pressed that sensitive clit of hers again with his index finger, moving in tiny circles.

“Oh, come on, what are you doing?”

He smiled. “Savoring.”

She turned her head to the side to give him a nasty glare—then bit her lip and lifted up onto her toes when he stroked faster.

“Damn you!”

He pulled her hips back to meet him. “Well, you didn’t seem to like the idea of my savoring,” he whispered.

“I want you to get back inside me and finish.” This said with a fierce stare and gritted teeth, like maybe they were facing off over an intense negotiation and not making love.

His fingers stopped. “Oh. You do?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Are you being serious with this? Because listen, you can’t always be the one in con—”

He groaned and dug his fingers into her hips, his dick poised and hungry to push back inside her. “God, you’re fucking gorgeous, the way your chest and face are all flushed. I love to see your body blush as deep red as your hair.”

“Michael...”

“Yes *what?*”

Her breath came deep and heavy, and when she gave him the long, hard stare, he knew he’d won. He thought he even picked up a tremor in her body when he started to ease in. “Yes, please,” she ground out.

Fuck yeah. He thrust forward like his life depended on giving her an orgasm. Steady. Fast. Hard.

His pace increased, matching his strokes with the force she used to push her ass back against him. Buttons popped when he pulled her shirt the rest of the way open. His hands slid over her stomach, and then back to where the magic happened, because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and he wanted to make her feel amazing.

“Come for me, Elise.” His three fingers strummed her faster, guided by her moans and her high-pitched whines. He kissed her neck and her back, he put his bite marks all over her shoulders.

When she cried out and her slick walls clamped down around him, he groaned out his release as well. She wrung it out of him, reaching back to grip his hip and keeping him close until the very end. Michael honestly thought he might explode.

They breathed together for a minute or two, until finally he pulled out and they both set about getting themselves straightened up. Her blouse wouldn't fasten entirely, but they were alone in the building and the offices were closed for the night.

She jumped when a knock came at the door. "You said we were alone!"

Okay, they were alone except for security.

He turned to open it, shielding her with his body. The night guard stood outside. "Everything okay, Mr. Hale? I thought I heard shouting."

He cleared his throat. "Just great, thank you. Celebrating a victory. Sorry to make you worry."

"Not a problem. Just doing my job."

When he turned back, Elise was checking messages on her phone. "Everything okay?" He picked up one of her shoes and handed it over.

"Everything's fine," she said. But the look on her face suggested otherwise.

"You're certain?"

"Sure. Just an ex who can't take the hint. I've been ignoring the calls." She seemed flustered, and whether that was from their victory lap on the table or the message she'd gotten, he couldn't know.

He shrugged. "None of my business who you used to date."

At that, her shoulders relaxed, and her wide smile returned. "Let's talk about something different. So, your meeting went well?"

"Exceptionally."

"I guess that explains why you came in here in such a frisky mood."

He laughed. Inside though, he got quiet. He'd wanted her not because he'd come in the room and seen her bent under a table, but because he'd

spent the whole drive back high from wiping that smug look off Anya Evans's face.

The night before, he'd nearly lost his shit after sitting in a pub with his brother, and he'd wanted her then, too. He'd wanted to return to her warmth, her certainty.

Leaning on her this way could not become a habit.

He gave a vague gesture with his chin. "How about your afternoon?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Not bad." But another frown crossed her face. Did he know her well enough to know for certain she was holding something back? He thought he did. "Tell you what though," she said with a yawn. "No offense, but I hate these mission-critical projects. I come in while it's still dark and when I leave it's still dark. I don't know when I last saw the sunrise or the sunset." She propped her chin on a fist. "It can be hell on a girl's good nature."

"Maybe you and I should have dinner somewhere tomorrow," he said. "Neither of us have other plans for Thanksgiving, right? We could see the sunset."

She blinked. "You don't mean like a date, do you?"

Careful, Michael. Here be dragons. "Look, where are we on the Justice documentation?"

She pointed to her stack of spreadsheets, now slightly off-center due to their lovemaking. "I've actually made really good progress. Tom was able to help a little while you were gone, after all. For the policy stuff I went to your software team, pretended I was a new employee, played dumb until they got tired of answering all my questions." She grinned. "Worked great."

"Plan C?"

"Plan C."

The steady ache Michael had been carrying in his shoulders eased slightly. "You're good at problem-solving. I do appreciate all your hard work."

“It’s my job.” She fixed her steady stare on his while still trying to do up her shirt. “Which is why we shouldn’t be going out on something that feels like a date. It only confuses things further. We shouldn’t have done what we just did, either, but spilt milk and whatnot.” She made a frustrated face and gave up on the button.

Michael stepped forward. Carefully, he slipped the barely hanging-on button into its hole. “We’ll both be here all day tomorrow glued to our damned computers. God willing this project will successfully be in the bag soon. Might as well celebrate together, right?” He took a half step back, hands in his pockets now. “Come on. Just dinner. Like we used to do all the time when you worked under me.”

He smiled slightly at the extremely Freudian slip, and she blushed. Again. Fucking adorable.

“Just dinner?”

“I swear.”

“Okay.”

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THIRTEEN

He found a nice Chinese restaurant in Tysons Corner to share an early Thanksgiving meal. They arrived just as the sun dipped low in the sky, and Michael couldn't resist the urge to grab Elise around the waist before they entered and turn her toward the horizon. "There's your sunset," he whispered in her ear.

Her sigh and body language indicated contentment and relaxation. Something he hadn't quite seen from her all week. "It's gorgeous. Thank you." She smiled up at him. "You're being unbelievably sweet. I'll be sure to enjoy all of this while it lasts."

She'd worn a long coat with fuzzy trim that tickled his throat. He used that as his excuse for the number of times he swallowed. "While it lasts."

She turned toward him with one hand on either side of her face. "I'm so sorry, that came out all wrong. It's only that...I mean, we both agreed this wasn't going to go anywhere. I want to just enjoy this for what it is. Don't men hate it when women have unrealistic expectations?"

Michael frowned, thinking back to the things he'd said the night before while they'd made love. Yes, they'd been in the heat of passion. But when he'd gone home alone and lay awake in bed, he'd replayed them all again. When he'd held those words up to test them for truth, they'd passed.

He'd wanted her the day of that first kiss they'd shared five years ago. No. Long before. Did he even know when it had started?

Was it the night she'd stayed in the office with him until four in the morning to help troubleshoot a support ticket, or the night after when they'd celebrated with foosball in the break room and she'd shocked him by swearing enough to make a sailor blush? Perhaps it had been the day he'd heard her arguing with her mother during her lunch break, and the idea that he'd found a kindred spirit touched something undefined deep inside him.

Now? Her kisses still set him on fire, making love to her even more so.

He shook his head. "Soon this project will be over, and my divorce will be final." He gripped her chilly hand. "I've been thinking I'd like us to keep seeing each other."

She seemed thoughtful as she hugged her arms against her body, pulling her coat around her tighter. "You know, it's shaping up to be a really gorgeous evening. I heard on the radio this morning that it might even snow."

He looked out over the top of her head, waiting. Whatever reason she had for refusing to answer, Michael refused equally to cave to fear simply because she held out on him. "Sky's nice and clear," he said instead. "Perhaps we can go in there, have a nice dinner, and there will be a sky full of stars when we come back outside."

She nodded, seeming relieved that he didn't push the issue.

They got seated inside and managed to order drinks without any further discussion of their non-relationship. Michael decided perhaps he'd taken things too far, too fast. He'd been relaxed for the first time in days—weeks. Months?

He'd gotten swept away. If she wasn't comfortable moving things forward, he could wait. As he'd said, the project for which he'd hired her would soon be resolved, and so would his non-marriage.

He'd be free to pursue her.

If it took a million dinners, a million rounds of foosball. He'd do whatever it took for her to admit this was more than just fucking on the conference room table. This time, he wasn't letting her go without a fight. He'd been too young and stupid before. He wasn't so young anymore. God willing, he'd also gotten smarter.

While Elise excused herself to go to the restroom and Michael got up to hit the buffet, he noticed she had left her phone face down on the table. He grabbed it to slip into his pocket, but not before noticing a multitude of missed calls and text messages.

He presumed family members, calling to wish a Happy Thanksgiving. But...

He looked around before sticking the phone inside his jacket. Elise had mentioned an ex who'd been calling. She kept asking about Michael's divorce. Was it possible her real hesitation over getting more serious had something to do with *her* having a relationship that wasn't yet resolved?

He wound up returning to the table with a couple of scattered pieces of fruit on his plate and nothing more. His appetite had gotten up and wandered away, too uncomfortable to be near his muddled thoughts.

"Hey, have you seen my phone?" Elise's voice came from over his shoulder. "I meant to take it when I got up so I could check on my mom, but I can't seem to find it."

He pulled it out and handed it over. "I didn't want to leave it on the table while I was away." He studied her while she scrolled through the phone. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, my mom called. She's just been having kind of a rough time." She gave him an apologetic look. "Do you mind if I step out and call her real quick?"

"Sure. I hope everything's okay."

"I hope so, too," Elise said finally. "But she called three times. That's not good." She flipped the phone for a split second, showing a cascade of

missed calls. Most of them from “Mom.”

So perhaps he’d worried over nothing. “Sure. Should I grab you some food?”

“To be honest I’m not really hungry.”

Michael tried to hide his worry. “Why don’t I wrap up everything here and meet you outside?”

He smiled in return. But as he stood, he glanced at the phone once more when she stopped to dial, and one name slapped him in the face...

There were also missed calls on that phone from an Anya Evans.

Anya Evans? As in, the vice president of Microstrive?

The business world could be a small one, but Michael found himself wondering why Elise was getting calls from his primary competitor.

On a holiday, no less.

MICHAEL WAS SILENT ON THE DRIVE BACK. THAT ALONE HAD WORRY churning in Elise’s stomach. When he turned toward The Oakmont apartments and not toward the HaleStorm building, the dread crept upward into her chest.

“I thought we were going to head back to the office after dinner,” she said. “It’s still early. We could still get some more work hours in.”

Michael’s fingers tapped on the steering wheel. “You’ve been working like a crazy person on that documentation all week. Both of us have.”

Not counting the time they’d been making other use of the conference room table. Heat suffused her body. “I don’t want to take any chances with your deadline.”

“You said it was coming along well?”

“It is.” She mentally reviewed the spreadsheet she’d spent all day going over. And over. And over. “I still need to see your data center, and I need

some information about data encryption. I wasn't able to find specifics anywhere in your existing documentation files. Other than that, I think we're almost there." She nudged his leg playfully. "Thanks to the fact that I'm a crazy person. You're welcome."

She laughed ever so slightly, but it fizzled out when all she got was a flat semi-smile in return.

He blew out a breath. "Should be no trouble. Tomorrow's Friday. My VP will be back in the office. He oversees the software team. I'll email him the request later on so he gets it first thing."

"Great. Thank you." The vibe inside the car still had a not-so-good feel when he stopped outside their apartment building—*his* apartment building. "Is something wrong?"

He stayed focused on the nothing that was happening in the darkness outside the car. "Why would you be getting phone calls from Anya Evans?"

A chill slithered through Elise's body. "I don't see how that's any of your business."

"You getting phone calls from one of my major competitors is my business."

A spike of pain drove its way into Elise's skull. Oh, she didn't want to have this conversation. Not at all. She should have known it would come up eventually.

"It isn't business related."

She ran her gaze over his profile, his clean-shaven jaw clamped so tight he could press diamonds, and the angry working of his throat. She hated that the rush in her blood came from equal parts anger and want.

"You know, you're handsome when you're pissed-off. But whatever you might be thinking right now, I don't deserve your suspicion. I haven't spoken to Anya in months, and I can't do anything about missed phone calls. I'm going to go upstairs now."

She had barely made it out of the car and around to the sidewalk before he jumped out and caught her arm.

“So why the fuck is she calling you?”

The wind had picked up. Snow fell over them. Elise flexed and released her cold fingers, wishing she’d remembered to bring gloves. “We kind of dated, okay? An eternity ago. She got overbearing, so I broke it off.” Elise gave Michael a pointed glare. “I don’t do overbearing.”

He rubbed his gloved hand over his forehead. “You’re fucking kidding me.” He paced in a small square. “You had a relationship the vice president of my biggest local competitor?”

More pacing. He stopped, started, and stopped again, all while Elise fought the urge to grab him so he would look her in the damn eye.

Elise sighed. “You and I weren’t even speaking at the time. I’m not even sure why she’s calling. We haven’t talked in ages.”

The pacing stopped. Michael fixed her with an uneasy stare. “You really haven’t talked to her?”

“No!” But Michael’s grimace made Elise’s stomach sink. “You don’t look like you believe me.”

“I met with her yesterday. Right before you and I...” He waved his hand.

Really? Awkward.

He took a step toward her. “She knows about the validation issues, and she’s trying to steal clients. Now, come to find out, you and she...” He gestured back and forth but his mouth snapped shut. A mask of anger twisted his face.

“Michael.” Elise’s throat caught. “You can’t seriously think— I hope you know I would *never* betray your confidence that way. Not any client’s, but especially not yours.”

“Somehow she knew.”

“I didn’t tell her.” Now Elise was the one gritting her teeth, hands clenched inside the pocket of her wool coat. “If you think I would do anything even remotely like that, then we have a serious problem. And if you have a problem with me as your contractor, then you sure as hell have a problem with me as,” now *she* waved her hands back and forth between them, “whatever the hell we are to each other. Or were.”

She turned to go up the stairs toward her temporary living space.

“We are not done here,” Michael called after her. “If she didn’t find out from you—”

Elise turned on the stairs. “You are focusing on the wrong detail. It wasn’t me. There’s no ‘if’. I don’t know how she found out. It doesn’t *matter* how she found out. I told you from day one that you were in hot water over that failed validation, and the only thing you could do was fix it as fast as possible. Which I’ve been trying to do for you.”

She drew a deep, stinging breath of icy air. “Correction. I think, under the circumstances, it’s best I send you what I’ve done so far and let you handle the rest yourself. If you want to send a complaint to PermaSolv that I didn’t finish the work, go right ahead. I don’t want there to be any more concerns about trust, and I sure as hell don’t want you worrying about what might happen if I get a look at your encryption information.”

He frowned. “We don’t have to show the actual algorithms.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t have to trust me for me to finish the project.” The idea made her insides burn.

Elise closed her eyes and clunked her head on the cold brick behind her. It worried her, Anya getting her mitts on those projects. But it couldn’t be connected to Elise. Could it? She hadn’t spoken to Anya in forever. And she refused to take the heat for something she hadn’t done.

He stepped closer, his eyes dark and hard. “I hired you to do a job. It needs to get done. As we’ve seen, I don’t have the fucking time to handle it myself.”

“Look. You feel like you really need me to finish out the project, I’ll finish out the damn project. I didn’t figure you’d want me to, the way you’re spouting about me leaking secrets to your competitor. But whatever. Either way, I’m not doing it here. I’ve got enough of the framework filled in at this point. I’ll do the rest from home. Your VP can send me the data center info. I can send you the spreadsheets to look over before I email them to your client. Good?”

“You’re forgetting the final presentation on Tuesday.”

“That meeting is for the client to get a warm-fuzzy from *you*. You don’t need me there.”

With that, Elise took one last look at Michael, furious and beautiful in the dim light on the landing. Then, she turned to go inside and pack her things.

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FOURTEEN

Michael paced his office. Again and again, he punched his fist against his open palm while Tom laid out the bad news part of their impromptu “good news, bad news” meeting.

“I’m sorry to have to bring you all this information the day after Thanksgiving.”

Michael shook his head. “It’s not as if I had plans. Certainly nothing more important than this.” He looked at Tom. “I’m sorry this is cutting into your time with your family.”

Tom leaned against the bookcases. “It’s a welcome distraction.”

“Things are worse at home?”

Tom pressed his lips together.

“I’m sorry,” Michael said.

Tom nodded. He came closer and handed over a printout. “This is a list of every client that’s threatened to go elsewhere, and the dollar value of those projects.”

The tiny hairs on the back of Michael’s neck stood at attention. When he looked at the paper, he nearly lost his breakfast. “This is fucking insane.” He pegged his contract manager, his friend and confidant, with a hard glare. “Tell me this is a mistake.”

“I wish I could. I’m sorry.”

Acid shot into his throat. “Something’s fucked-up. There’s no way this can all be based on one small rumor about our company’s security fitness. Some of these projects are going back years. Some of them don’t even require a clearance.”

“I’ll do what I can to stall,” Tom said.

Michael resumed pacing. “You said there was good news. What do you have?”

“I know you asked me not to, but I did some checking on Elise’s background and her history with Anya. Turns out they met at a conference at the Omni two years ago, were seen together publicly off and on for a few months, and then nothing following a semi-public argument outside of a Microstrive employee party last year.”

“That doesn’t mean they couldn’t have kept in contact.”

Tom quirked his eyebrow. “With all due respect, Elise doesn’t seem the type for spying and theft. Anya Evans? Maybe, and I shudder to think how Elise got tangled in her web. But I also checked with Elise’s boss at PermaSolv. She’s been there for four years. Good employee record. If she were going to use her contract job to scout customers for Anya, wouldn’t it have made sense to keep their relationship hidden?

“Maybe she didn’t think it through, or maybe Anya didn’t put her up to it until after they split.”

“Or maybe you’re grasping at straws. You think I haven’t noticed the weird whatever it is going on with you two? Now, far be it from me to pry, but I think you need to pull your head out of your ass and start looking for other answers.” Tom whacked him on the arm with a folder. “I’ll be honest, she made me nervous at first, but I don’t think Elise caused this problem, and we still need a fix.”

Michael clasped his hands behind his head. “You’re right.”

Tom nodded. “You hired me to be right.”

“Sure wasn’t because of the time I had to bail you out of jail for streaking across campus.”

“I did pay you back.”

“Not that you needed to. I ate all your food for two years while we were roommates. It all comes out in the wash.” Michael propped his elbows on the desk and managed to smile.

As they spoke, Michael’s desk phone lit up with an incoming call from a client at the Treasury Board. As he met eyes with Tom across the desk, the canned ringing sounded in his ears. This could not be good.

He punched the speaker button. “Barry. Hi.”

“Hale. Good to talk to you. How’s the wife? Ran into her at a benefit downtown not too long ago. Lovely woman. Going skiing again this Christmas?” Barry Infenel, contract rep, chattered in the nonstop way people did when they were uncomfortable.

Really not good.

Tom sneered at the phone.

Michael shook his head. “What can I do for you, Barry?”

A puff of air echoed over the line. “Our maintenance contract rolls over at the first of the year. We’ve been evaluating things, and we feel like we need more upgrades because the system isn’t meeting our needs. But the money you guys would charge us to upgrade is more than we can handle. I think we’re going to go another way.”

Tom clenched his fists and opened his mouth to say something, but Michael held up both his hands. “A new system would be a big undertaking. Now, I respect your decision,” he said to the phone. “We want our clients to have the right solution. Let me just offer you this—next week, I’d like to personally get in a room with you and the project manager we’ve assigned to you, see if we can’t offer you a cost-effective resolution that makes everyone happy.”

Silence. From chattering to speechless. Progress?

“An hour of your time, Barry. If I can’t convince you, we go our separate ways.”

“All right. I’ll set up a meeting.”

“Great. Thank you.” Michael punched the speaker button again and looked at Tom. “Well, one down, half a billion dollars to go.”

“Christ,” Tom muttered.

“Okay. *You* are going to take a look at the rest of these contracts. Find a way to stall. I’m going to talk to the project managers and see if I can’t work out what else is going on. While Elise is submitting the validation paperwork on Monday, I’m going to get all our guys in a room and find out who might have had unhappy clients, who was over budget, the whole shebang.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Michael nodded absently while he looked out the window, watching the snowfall. “I suppose it does.”

“You think it’s not enough.”

“I think Anya Evans is a driven woman working in a male-dominated field, and she’s probably willing to do whatever she thinks is necessary get ahead. I can respect that, but I won’t stand for it happening on my front lawn. It’s possible that my going in there two days ago to tell her we’d caught her stealing a client made her decide to pull out the big guns.”

Michael tried to kick away the jealousy that burned deep down over her past with Elise. He stopped and sat in his chair, a new possibility forming in his mind. “Or maybe it’s personal.” Then he shook his head. “Nah. Strike that.”

Could it be?

“Hmm.” Tom leaned his head to the side. “Elise’s been getting calls from Anya.” Tom dropped into the chair opposite Michael’s desk. “You think somehow she got wind of whatever’s going on between the two of you, and this is jealousy?”

“There’s nothing going on though,” Michael grumbled. “Not that she could have found out.”

Tom raised his eyebrows.

“Okay, maybe. Still, we’ve hardly been out in public, so I’m not sure how Anya would be aware.” The uncertainty of what was or was not between them twisted in his stomach. “I’ll talk to Elise and apologize for being a dick.”

“If she forgives you, see if she can give us anything helpful on Anya before we start hemorrhaging clients,” Tom said.

Michael stood. “We’re already hemorrhaging. The question is whether we can stop it before we bleed to death.”

ELISE STEPPED THROUGH THE CINCINNATI AIRPORT GATES, EXHAUSTION weighing her down. Though the call from her mother had worried her enough to get on a plane, she’d worked furiously on Michel’s project during the flight. She was, at least, relieved to find her mother waiting.

“You didn’t have to come.” Myra Jackson made eye contact there in the terminal, and although it had taken a costly last-minute ticket, Elise now had something resembling peace of mind. Her mother didn’t look quite as shaky as she’d sounded over the phone.

If Elise could spend even a single night at her mom’s place, maybe she could convince herself the pain in her chest was all about worry over her mother.

She hoisted her laptop bag onto her shoulder. “Mom. If you had been listening to yourself on the phone last night, you’d understand why I jumped on a plane.

Her mother’s face showed embarrassment, or possibly apology. “I’m trying.”

Elise grabbed her small roller bag and headed for the exit door. She did her best to give her mom a smile. “I know.” Without further comment or eye contact, she headed out to the parking lot, taking steady strides so her mother could keep pace.

Her mother didn’t offer to help carry anything. Elise didn’t ask. Her mother’s bevy of health problems made it difficult for her to do much. These days, her arthritic knees made physical activity a challenge. The tendonitis gave her trouble typing, which of course made employment a problem. Not having much to do with her day gave Elise’s mother plenty of time to spiral downward further into a depressed mental state Elise didn’t know how to help her come back from.

She glanced back to make sure her mother was close behind. “So, what are your plans for Christmas?”

Myra shrugged. “No word from Victor. I guess I’ll spend it alone.”

So not good. “Why don’t you come stay with me and Jeff? Visit DC? The city is gorgeous with all the lights done up.”

Her mother shrugged. “I need to see about finding other work. The law offices I’ve been doing research for couldn’t see fit to give me a raise this year, and I’m worried they’re going to cut back my hours. It’d be good to consider getting something else lined up.”

“During the holidays?”

“You never know,” Myra said.

They got to the lot and stopped at a rust and tan pickup—Elise’s soon-to-be ex-stepfather’s vehicle. “What the hell, Mom? You’re driving Victor’s piece-of-shit truck? Lemme guess, he’s got your new Toyota?”

“Don’t.” Her mother held up her hands. “I’m not doing this with you. The truck broke its timing belt when he was here visiting last, and he had to get back in a hurry for his daughter’s birthday.”

Oh, Jesus, Mom. Elise would say she couldn’t believe her mother would let herself be taken advantage of like this, but she’d be lying. It had

happened enough times. “So when do you get your car back?”

“I said don’t start,” Myra repeated.

Elise grumbled under her breath and put her things on the floor of the front seat. Lucky thing she had packed light. The truck was a tiny piece-of-shit something or another, not one of those nice trucks with a roomy cab. “How can you even drive this thing? Doesn’t he know a stick shift is hard on your hand?”

“It’s not like I drive much anyway.” Her mom opened the door and got in, as if the subject was closed.

Elise braced her hands on the roof of the truck. She wanted so badly to resume the argument that the words threatened to burst out of her throat. As much as keeping silent killed her, she had to remember the phone call that had made her pack up her laptop and get on the plane to begin with. The one during which her mother had sounded so despondent, Elise had been afraid *not* to come home to Ohio. Upsetting her mother more wasn’t the answer.

What *was* the answer? Elise constantly clawed and scraped to get her mother to look toward the future. If she could get her to talk about an upcoming visit, plans...something...anything that infused hope into her mother’s voice, infused hope into Elise, too.

So did just seeing her mother alive.

They pulled out of the parking area and down the airport access road. Her mother looked over when they stopped at a light. “You brought your computer when you’re only staying the weekend?”

“I’m actually not sure how long I can stay. I have work to finish. I’m right in the middle of a contract. That reminds me...” Elise pulled out her phone and turned it on. “I should call and check in. I left in a hurry because I was worried about you, but it would be good to tell them where I am.”

She hated to think how Michael was going to respond.

“Can’t it wait? You just got here.”

“We’re on a deadline. They might wonder.” Certainly a plausible enough excuse.

At least it was until Michael answered the phone with a sharp, “There you are.”

“Hi, I’m just calling to check in.” But her chest pounded. She was out of town with a presentation hanging over her, and as a consultant, that looked extremely unprofessional.

As someone who’d just had a fight with her lover, knowing he was still angry made her eyes sting with tears she couldn’t shed in front of her mom. She didn’t believe she’d done anything wrong, but the hurt lodged its jagged edge in her throat all the same.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that, because I’ve been trying to reach you. I was about to give up and call the authorities.”

Elise glanced at her mother. How much could she hear? She tried to discreetly turn the volume down on the phone. “Why on earth would you do that?”

“You haven’t answered your phone for hours,” he growled. “About five minutes ago, I showed up at your apartment in DC. Your roommate said he didn’t know where to find you, either.”

Elise closed her eyes, nerves flapping around in her stomach. “I meant to leave him a note. I was in a hurry.”

“But you weren’t going to tell me?”

“I’m sorry. I’m telling you now.”

“That’s just great,” Michael growled. “What in God’s name is going on?”

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FIFTEEN

Elise's DC apartment held way too many boxes and mismatched furniture items for two people to possibly live comfortably, let alone for Michael to pace out his frustrations the way he wanted to once he'd hung up the phone.

He wouldn't go ruining her security deposit by punching a wall, though he was damned tempted to hit now and write a check later. So he perched on the edge of a loveseat covered in spangled banana hammocks and police uniforms while his feet tapped out his anger on the ancient carpet.

"All she'll say is that she had to handle something urgent. You don't have any idea where she would have gone like this without notice?" Michael eyeballed her friend Jeff while hopefully projecting the proper mix of empathy and "don't make me beat the information out of you."

Jeff cracked open a bottle of water then set about assembling a box on one of their few open areas of carpet. "I didn't say I don't have a clue where she could be. I said she didn't tell me." He shot a glare at Michael before returning to his work. "If she didn't tell you, either, then it's probably a personal matter, and I shouldn't be giving out her *personal* information." He waved a hand toward the loveseat. "Sorry, I was organizing some costumes to put in storage. Gimme a sec and I can move all that out of your way."

Michael shook his head. “Whatever. Listen, this is critical. First of all, I’m worried about her. About *us*. Second, I think Anya Evans and Microstrive are using illicit tactics to steal my company’s clients. I need to know if she can give me any helpful information about Anya. There’s also the fact that she left in the middle of finishing a project for me without apprising me of the status.”

Jeff’s head swiveled over his shoulder. He lifted one eyebrow. “She took a personal day. That’s what normal people do. She’s not even really your employee, she’s a contractor. And she took her laptop, Captain Tight-Ass, so if she promised she’d get something finished, then she’ll get it done. That’s Elise.”

Michael stood, annoyed by the petty name-calling. At the same time, he believed what Elise’s roommate said. She’d asserted from day one that she would finish the project on time. She’d shown him her progress throughout the week.

That didn’t change the fact that he’d been hit out of left field and he needed her.

I need her.

“I have to see her.”

Jeff turned now, half bent over the box. His eyes widened slightly. “This have something to do with the fact that you two are fucking?”

Michael’s hand curled into a fist. “No.” *Yes.*

Elise’s friend chewed his lower lip and narrowed his eyes, assessing. Michael glared right back, even though he bristled at such a scrutinizing stare. This guy had no right to question him.

Really? Is that true? He’s her friend and he’s trying to protect her. You can appreciate that.

Jeff raised his eyebrows, giving Michael an expectant look.

“Fine. She means a lot to me,” Michael growled. Since he knew fuck-all about Elise’s whereabouts, all he had right now was her buddy to pump for

information. Clearly, the guy knew more than he was telling. “I cared for her when we met five years ago. I cared for her a hell of a lot more than I should have all fucking summer. I care for her now. I tried to tell her, but I feel like I’m getting stonewalled.”

Another stern look from the roommate. “Listen, you seem like maybe you’re an okay guy with legitimate problems, but I hardly know you. And we’ve all got scars, right?”

“Elise...she’s a sweet girl who’s been fucked around a lot and got shit she didn’t deserve. Her mom treats Elise like *she’s* the parent, and Anya took her for granted.” Jeff licked his lips. “If she’s digging in her heels and creating some boundaries with you? I’d say good for her.”

Michael grunted. “I see.” He slid past the coffee table piled high with cooking magazines and real estate brochures, ready to leave. “Well, I’m glad she has you looking out for her then.”

“Thing is,” Jeff continued, “she packed for the airport. Rolling case, toiletries in the little baggie, it’s all gone from her bedroom. I would bet she went to her mom’s.” Jeff drew out the word. “That woman’s capital ‘T’ toxic. Mega depressed. Not that I don’t feel for her, but she has a way of dragging everyone around her into the muck.

“Anya’s kind of a jerk. Focused on her career to the exclusion of everything. But toxic seeps into your pores and it’s hard to wash off. So, something bad had to have happened to make her go. She hates visiting there.” Jeff nodded toward Michael.

Michael pinched the bridge of his nose. “Anya called Elise recently. Anya has been stealing my clients. I did the math.”

Jeff yawned. “Yeah, I was always terrible at math, too. Had to hang out in my handsome calc TA’s office for lots of extra tutoring.” He waggled his eyebrows, then cleared his throat when Michael didn’t laugh at the joke. “Anyway, she hasn’t talked to Anya in months, I can guaran-fucking-tee. Because the two of them fought like cats and cats, and once Elise got out

the door, there was no way she was going back. Not even for her favorite Manolo Blahnik pumps—which, by the way, she *did* leave behind.”

Michael looked around. An open closet door in the foyer revealed at least five pairs of high-heeled shoes hanging in an organizer. Women and their shoes. He shrugged. “O-*kay*.”

Jeff pointed a finger. “Trust me, these were special. Thing is, Elise hasn’t been with anybody at all in a good while. Very gun-shy. Anya’s not someone to piss off. When she has you in her crosshairs, it’s for real.”

Michael nodded. “She’s in it for the win. Getting my clients and making extra money for her company are probably just whipped cream on her bullshit sundae.”

Jeff shrugged. “I’d count on it.”

“Okay. What do I do to get Elise to come back?”

“Call her and apologize a whole fucking lot.” Jeff looked him up and down. “Something I’m guessing a man of your stature isn’t used to doing.”

Michael’s jaw clamped shut. “I can apologize.”

Jeff laughed. “No, I mean you’d better *apologize*. Hard core groveling.” The man did a dramatic muscle flex. “You also need to convince her that marriage of yours is dead in the water, cuz she sounded doubtful, and I don’t blame her for being worried.” He gave Michael the Chewbacca of hairy eyeballs. “It is over?”

Michael held back a sneer. “Marriage of convenience. Our fathers were good friends, wanted to see us happy together. It was over before it goddamn started.”

“Good deal. Well, then you’d better set about telling her why your sun rises and fucking sets in her gorgeous gray eyes, and she needs to believe that shit all the way down to her toes.” The young man checked his watch. “Right about now, her mother is either making her want to slit her own wrists or making her want to commit murder. Dysfunctional families are

like high-powered magnets, so you gotta give her something stronger to pull her away.”

Michael ran his hands over his overheated face. “Fuck me, I’m getting love lessons from a go-go dancer. Anything else I need to know?”

Jeff jabbed his finger again. “Ex. Ex-go-go dancer, thank you. I quit last night, and I’m not going back. Getting too old for that shit. And listen, be good to her. She doesn’t think she deserves it, but she does.”

Michael nodded, letting out a slow breath. “Well, thank you for your help. And congratulations on your career move.”

Jeff snorted a laugh. “Hell yeah. Meet Jeff Summers, Real Estate Agent.” He flashed a dimpled grin.

Michael glanced down at the glittery array of man-thongs still waiting to be packed in boxes. “I can’t picture you selling real-estate. I mean no offense.”

“Well, I need something serious while I work out what I actually want to do with my life, and Aunt Karen has more business than she can handle around the Northern Virginia area. She handles ritzy corporate spaces and those ridiculous McMansion dealies. There are some mega-bank houses on the market. ’S a good opportunity.”

Michael nodded. He and Becca bought the house they’d had together when the market dropped, but “cheap” was a relative term in the area. “Well... Thanks again. And good luck.”

Jeff gave a mock salute. “Back atcha.”

Michael left, wondering what grand gesture it would take to get past Elise’s “high-powered magnet.”

THAT NIGHT, ELISE SET ABOUT FINISHING THE WORK SHE’D POUNDED OUT ON the turbulent plane ride. Trying to read and type while flying always made

her queasy, but she'd done it to ensure she got Michael what he needed in record time. Then, once her mother had fallen asleep in front of the television—because she never slept in her own bed—Elise had gone to work combing through all the documentation she'd managed to download from HaleStorm Engineering's servers in order to finish firming up the necessary files.

She'd turned off her phone after arguing with Michael, not wanting anything to distract her. This would get done, dammit—and she would also be finished with Michael Hale.

At seven-fourteen the following morning, she'd typed up the last of her report for HaleStorm Engineering and sent everything to Michael, along with a note of explanation. Though she'd told her mother she couldn't stay because of work, what she really wanted was to put this project behind her.

If Michael needed her to return on Monday morning to finish anything off, she would. Doing so was in her contract. However, he could submit the documentation without her. Everything would be fine.

The important thing was, she'd met her obligations and make certain for the time being that her mother was okay. She was packing up her laptop for her trip home when a scream jolted Elise from the room.

"Mom?" She ran from her old bedroom with her heart flailing. "What's wrong?"

Her mother stood in the kitchen waving a spatula, still wearing her bathrobe. "Oh, you're up. Thought you were sleeping late."

"I've been up, I was working. I heard a scream."

"A spider. I get jumpy sometimes. Oh..." Her mother pointed to the counter with the spatula. "I turned on your phone, you have a gazillion missed calls." She pulled down a mug. "Ya want coffee?"

The muscles between her shoulders stiffened. Dammit, she hadn't worked out all week, and she needed an outlet for her stress.

Does sex with Michael count?

The thought made her face burn. “Why did you turn on my phone?”

“Yours looks like mine. I wasn’t wearing my glasses.”

Right. Elise slipped the phone in the pocket of her pajamas without looking. “Yes, please. Coffee.” She ran a hand through her hair, examining the ends. She scowled at the frizz before slipping a hair tie from around her wrist and pulling it all back.

“You need to get the ends trimmed,” her mother said. “I can take you to the lady who does mine while you’re here.”

Elise examined her mother’s short, straw-colored perm. “I like the guy who cuts mine back home.”

Her mother looked wounded. “I’m only trying to offer a helpful suggestion.”

Elise closed her eyes. “Thank you. Really. But I can’t stay long anyway.”

Her mother pulled back. “Right. You just came to be sure I wasn’t falling apart.”

“Mom, you sounded terrible on the phone. I was scared half to death.”

Her mother tapped her coffee mug. “Didn’t mean to scare you. Just felt lonely. Victor...he’s going back to his ex-wife.” Her face fell.

So you’ve said. Elise’s body got heavy. It was so hard to know how to feel. She loved her mother, and she hated to see this happen. Still... “Maybe it’s for the best.”

“I thought he loved me. I’m always wrong. Your father, then Len, Randolph, and now Victor. They never stay.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Elise’s head felt light. She never knew what to say. “You know, I’m kind of hungry. Would you be willing to make some of those cinnamon rolls I love?” If nothing else, distraction usually worked.

Her mother swiped her hand across her face, wiping away tears. “I guess we may as well eat. You missed calls from that Michael fellow. Is this for work?”

Elise clunked her head against her mother's daisy-covered wallpaper. "Don't, Mom."

"I hate to see you get hurt the way I have, is all."

Elise sighed. "He's the CEO of the company and I'm working on a critical project. I came over here to check on you when I should be *there*. I imagine he's concerned about the status of his documents. He has a right to call." She poured more coffee and went searching in the fridge for extra milk, before she said something she'd regret.

She pulled her phone out and checked the time on the last call. Only a half hour ago. "Mom, I'm going to use your office to make a call."

"To call this Michael?"

No way on earth was she going to answer that one. Elise turned to leave the room.

"Okay, honey. I'll stay out of it. I'm only trying to help. I'd hate to see you end up like me," her mother called after her.

Elise walked away, reminding herself that her mother meant well in her own way. She wasn't like her mother. She'd worked hard not to be. Still, the comment made her stomach hurt.

I'd hate to see you end up like me.

Elise had no intention of ending up like her mother. No way would she let a romantic relationship ruin her. Not even one with Michael.

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SIXTEEN

Michael passed the hospital on the way to drop some suits at the cleaners, and remembered he needed to take his Santa suit out of storage. Trouble was, his Santa suit remained at one of the last places he wanted to go—his old house. He could get another, but this one was tailored to fit him perfectly.

“Might as well rip off the Band-aid,” he muttered. He’d had no luck getting ahold of Elise again all morning anyway.

His hope that Becca might be visiting her family for the holiday weekend was dashed when he pulled up to find her Mercedes SUV parked in the driveway. He clamped down on the tension already spreading through his body and got out of the car, surprised to find her standing on the porch to greet him.

“Well, this is a nice surprise,” she said as he walked up. She wore a thick, knee-length sweater and bundled it tightly around herself.

Michael’s stride almost broke when he hit the stairs. She sure was acting happy to see him, when only a week ago he’d handed her divorce papers. Was it too much to hope someone new in her life was causing the extra bounce in her step?

“I don’t want to trouble you, but I need my Santa costume. If I can grab it quickly, I’ll be on my way.”

She threw him a warm smile, holding the door open wide. “Come in. If I’d known you were coming, I would have cooked, but I have coffee and croissants. I know how you love those.”

He hesitated. “Becca. I’m only here for—”

“The suit, I know.” She held the door open. “I think it’s so great you do that Santa thing at the hospital every year.” She motioned with her hand. “It’s freezing out here, Mike, come inside.”

Four years of marriage and she hadn’t once praised his desire to give back to the community. He also hadn’t been able to convince her that he didn’t much care for going by Mike.

“Is it still in the hall closet? I can get it myself.”

Her normally styled hair swung as her head wobbled side to side. “Yeah, no. I don’t think so. I’ve been clearing things out. I might have put it in one of the spare bedrooms. Hang on.”

He sat at a stool in the sunny kitchen breakfast nook he’d loved when they’d bought the house, unable to get comfortable. The stool made his ass hurt. He’d never liked the table. He wobbled side to side, lulled by the white noise of the barstool’s *ca-thunk, ca-thunk, ca-thunk*. And the stools weren’t level.

He looked around the kitchen, with its bay windows, charming etched tile, and custom countertops. All chosen by Becca.

This place had never been home.

Michael remembered making love to Elise in the conference room, the frenzied things that had spilled out of his mouth.

He’d told Elise *she* was home.

Fuck, he’d really said it aloud, hadn’t he? The memory made his temperature rise enough he was tempted to remove his coat. He resisted only because he didn’t want Becca to think he was staying a while.

He stood to pace, digging for his phone. He realized with no small amount of irritation that he must have left it in the car, which meant he

couldn't even do something to look busy while he waited. So he walked in circles, skin warm and prickly, too stubborn to eat or pour coffee. For fuck's sake, he wasn't staying.

Something caught his attention when he'd made his eighth or ninth lap around the kitchen. An envelope lay in her bill-paying tray with his attorney's return address. The same one he'd given Becca the week before.

When he picked it up, it didn't appear to have been opened.

"Here we go." Becca breezed into the kitchen with a garment bag draped over her shoulder.

He spotted a business card beneath the envelope for a realtor named Karen Summers. He wasn't sure why the name rang a bell, but he palmed the card anyway. Instinct's alarm bells should never be ignored.

He held up the envelope and showed it to Becca. "Do you have some questions about the divorce paperwork?"

She paused mid-stride. "Umm. No. Why?"

"You haven't signed them. You haven't even opened them."

"I..." She sighed and laid the bag with the suit down over one of the bar stools. She pressed her lips together. "I guess I'd hoped there was still a chance we could work things out. Then you showed up here today..." She lifted her hand then dropped it to the side.

Michael sighed. This had all turned out to be such a mess. "I said no when you asked me last week, and I said no the day I moved out. Frankly, you haven't expressed anything toward me other than displeasure for some time, so I can't fathom why you would want me to stay."

"But problems can be fixed," Becca said. "We've never really tried hard enough, have we?"

"This is ridiculous. You know it is." He strode forward, gathering the suit bag from where she'd placed it on the uneven bar stool. "I'll have my attorney get in touch next week, so I suggest you find a lawyer to communicate with unless you intend to represent yourself."

He leaned toward her then, and treated her to the same grin he'd given Anya before telling her she'd failed to steal his client.

"Another thing, Becca. I'd be careful about dragging this out. What's in that envelope is a quick, simple, no-fault divorce. Heaven forbid I amend things to show you violated our pre-nup."

Her mouth dropped open. "I did no such thing!"

"No?" Michael's grin widened. "Try me and find out." He grabbed a croissant and headed for the door.

"IT'S ABOUT FUCKING TIME."

Elise gripped her phone as she made her way off the plane. She smiled at Michael's low growl, because despite the rudeness of his words, he didn't sound angry the way he had when she'd left for Ohio.

More than anything, she was relieved to be home. *Really* home. Ohio wasn't that anymore.

"If that's your standard phone personality, Mr. Hale, then no wonder you're losing clients."

"You're hilarious."

"Did you get my email?" The sunset created a blinding glare as she crossed the tarmac. "Everything is done except a few bullet points I left for you to fill in yourself. I didn't want you to have to give me any proprietary information." *In case you don't trust me.* "Even without it, you should have more than a high enough percentage completed to pass the validation."

"I did receive the email, thank you. I'd appreciate it, however, if you still came in Monday and Tuesday."

She stumbled mid-stride in her walk down the terminal. "Why?"

"They knew we were bringing in an outside contractor to handle this, and I would like you to be a part of delivery and presentation. It only makes

sense.”

“You don’t need me, you only need to show the customer they’re important. Having the CEO personally attend the meeting will accomplish that.” Elise shivered. Coming off an overnight visit to make sure her mom wasn’t suicidal, seeing Michael might be more than she could handle.

“If I go in there to do my own talking, it makes us look small time. If I go in there with you, it makes me look like I have a solid team, but I’m still man enough to show up to defend my own company.”

“You’re saying you’re good at games?”

“Strategy, Elise.” He’d lowered his voice. “I’ve never played games. Not with you. Not once. Don’t put words in my mouth.”

His tone carried a warning. She wished to hell it didn’t sound so sexy. She wasn’t supposed to want him as much as she did. Not after everything.

After five years, she’d allowed all the things she felt about him to come out into the light, and he had to go and accuse her of betraying him. “I see.”

“Besides, I want you at that meeting. And we have things to discuss. About you and I.”

“Okay. I’ll be in first thing Monday morning, Mr. Hale.”

“Now who’s playing games?”

She almost tripped over one of those moving sidewalk things. “I’m not playing...” She swallowed her protest, and how ridiculously hollow it sounded.

“You spent half the weekend avoiding my calls,” he said.

“Not yours. Everyone’s.”

“Be that as it may.”

Up an escalator, and then another, toward ground transportation—

She stopped short in the middle of baggage claim, stunned to see him leaning against a pillar wearing jeans and a button-down shirt.

He took his phone away from his ear. “I want to talk now,” he said. He pulled a rose from behind his back. “And happy birthday.”

Her legs actually trembled at the sight of him. Not fear. Want. No freaking fair.

“I’m sorry,” she said when he came close. “I didn’t mean to disappear. My mom has all these issues with her health and depression and—”

He kissed her. Firmly enough to stop the frantic flapping of her gums. No tongue at first, he simply let their lips melt against each other’s.

She sighed, relaxing into his touch without thought. Opening for him when his tongue nudged into her mouth.

Just like that, she *nearly* forgot she’d been angry.

“Fuck.” She pushed against his chest. “What are you doing?”

“I said I wanted to talk.”

“That’s not talking.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Who says we can’t do one thing and then the other?”

“We seem to keep getting distracted by that one thing.”

He grinned. “We do, don’t we?” His expression quickly sobered. “I owe you an apology. The things I accused you of were completely fucked-up, they had no basis, and I was wrong. I’m an asshole, and you’re a goddess. I hope you can forgive me.”

She squinted. “Not that I don’t appreciate the apology, but we can’t have a pod person running HaleStorm Engineering. Where’s Michael and what have you done with him?”

He chuckled. “I was a dick, and I wanted to make amends. I’m serious. I had hoped to have more time to talk, but I couldn’t reach you.”

“I’m sorry, my mother, she’s just…” God, that was a whole emotional can of worms she didn’t know how to open. “She’s sort of a mess and it’s hard not to get hooked into her drama.”

“I know. Jeff told me.”

“You talked to Jeff?”

“How do you think I got into your apartment? He was there when I went to try to talk to you on Friday. Nice guy.” He chuckled slightly. “We talked all about real estate and his retirement from the banana-hammock business.”

“Oh, good grief, he quit? I need to go home. You know more about my roommate than I do.”

He took her suitcase and laptop bag as they headed toward the parking garages. “Listen, there’s something else. We didn’t get around to it on the phone, but...I spoke with your employer and extended your contract by a couple of weeks. I’m going to have you reporting your status to Tom instead of me, so there’s a buffer between us, but we have a serious problem with client retention right now.”

She stopped. “What are you saying?”

“Right now, we’ve got between a quarter and a half-billion dollars threatening to walk out the door.”

Elise put her hand to her mouth. “You’re kidding.”

“Who knows if that’s only the tip of the iceberg. Tom’s trying to stop them, I’ve scheduled meetings with as many as I can, but I need you doing what *you* can to review project documents, requirements...”

“So, they’re not all a result of the security issue?”

He shook his head. “That’s what’s odd. They’re all different. Some complained of poor project management. Some were security related. Some had to do with pricing or resource allocation.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Something strange is going on, something I’m not sure you can even fix. But short-term, if I tell clients I have a third-party contractor onsite to address their concerns, that’s something.”

Elise’s chest constricted. This had to be Anya’s doing. It was totally her style.

She couldn’t let that happen. “I’m so sorry, Michael.”

SEVENTEEN

At ten minutes before noon on Monday, Elise submitted the finalized documents to HaleStorm's client. At noon exactly, she walked out of the HaleStorm Engineering building and got in her car, her palms sweating profusely in spite of the winter chill.

She parked in a visitor spot in front of Microstrive a half hour later, trying to ignore her nerves. Talk about places she swore she'd never return to.

She shivered when she got out of the car, grateful the man at security was someone who had always liked her. He let her up with little fuss, and Elise breezed into Anya's office as if she owned the place. Deep inside, she wanted to go home and curl up with a dozen donuts and a *Charmed* marathon.

Anya hung up a call when Elise entered, giving her a decidedly smug smile. "And what can I do for you?"

Elise sat in one of the chairs across from Anya's desk without asking for permission. "I think you know."

"Why don't you enlighten me?"

"Leave HaleStorm alone. I know you're playing dirty." She leaned forward, glaring into Anya's icy blue eyes. "You do *not* want me digging

into those projects, because I will find whatever underhanded shit you pulled to win those bids, and I will make sure all of your clients know.”

Anya smiled slowly and sat back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. “That’s a lovely speech.” She lifted an eyebrow. “You think you know me? Well, I know *you*. And you’re still splashing in the kiddie pool. Coming over here to defend your boyfriend’s honor? That’s very sweet, but it’s also immature.”

Blood thundered in Elise’s head. “He is not my boyfriend.” Hell, they hadn’t even discussed where they stood between their night together and this morning, when they’d been so busy discussing issues related to saving HaleStorm Engineering.

Elise hoped maybe when this all ended, they would still be friends. She wasn’t sure at this point if more was possible.

“And you need to know that you and I are done. One hundred percent finished. You can destroy his company or anyone else’s, and that will never change—”

Anya’s laughter cut her off. “Oh, you see, Elise? This is what I mean about the kiddie pool. This isn’t some petty revenge thing.”

Elise took a slow breath and let go of Anya’s insults. “Then clue me in.”

Anya stood and came around the desk, settling on the edge. “Okay, full disclosure, because I do still care about you for some crazy reason.” She twirled a blonde strand of hair around her finger. “Those projects were all but garnished and served to me on a platter. I did *not* go after them. Your Michael has some very passionate enemies.”

“Michael’s a good person.” Elise nearly gasped when the words flew out of her mouth so readily.

She’d spent the weekend at her mother’s dodging verbal arrows. Doubting. Yet, she’d gotten off the plane and weighed what she knew. His concern for his company. His employees. For heaven’s sake, he’d come in late that morning so he could take a Santa suit to the drycleaners. He liked

to go to hospitals at Christmas and spread a little cheer for those who couldn't be at home.

He *was* a good man.

Just thinking about it made Elise's heart swell.

Anya sat there and smiled. She knew something else she wasn't saying, and whatever it was gave her too much pleasure. Elise refused to give her the satisfaction of begging for details. Doing so would only make her look weak, something that Anya already thought her to be.

She stood and turned to leave.

"Go ahead and look," Anya said to her back. "Even *you* won't find anything I've done to HaleStorm except offer their clients a better deal."

Elise turned at the door. "You did something underhanded. I know you did. When I find out what, you won't be able to get a job selling used cars."

Anya lifted an eyebrow but didn't answer. She seemed more amused than anything else, and as much as that pissed Elise off, it was fine. All the better to surprise Anya when Elise really did kick the woman's ass.

She got outside to her car and dialed Michael's number. "I need to meet you somewhere away from the office. We need to talk."

MICHAEL WAITED FOR ELISE IN HER CORPORATE APARTMENT. SHE STILL HAD a key and, as CEO, he had access to one as well.

It made sense to meet there rather than anywhere else. Elise insisted the matter was something not to be overheard by anyone, and that ruled out any public location—unless they wanted to be *really* shady and sidle up next to one another on a remote park bench.

Elise had a phone up to her ear when she walked in, but she managed to shed her coat, purse, and other accoutrements without missing a beat. "God, seriously, she's being a stickler about your pants?" She paused. "Okay, well,

it's a good point. First impressions do matter." Pause. "So go to the drycleaners." She gave Michael an apologetic just-one-second gesture. "Jeff, I'm sorry but I can't do this right now. I will talk to you all about your laundry problems later. Swear. Love you too."

Michael leaned against the kitchen counter. "Trouble in paradise?"

She pressed a finger against her temple. "I so can't believe he's going through with this. I mean, he's a smart guy, it's not like he can't sell corporate real estate. It just seems like such a stifling job for a free spirit like him."

She shook her head and collapsed on the sofa, looking weary. "It's silly. His aunt Karen wants him to make sure he has a three-piece suit and a crease in the front of his pants and all that nonsense for his first showing. He's never owned a three-piece suit in his life."

Michael chuckled. "Yes, I've had the misfortune of seeing your roommate's wardrobe."

Elise hardly managed a smile. Her head lolled back on the couch and he walked over behind her, brushing aside the hand she was using to knead her shoulder. "Here," he said. "Let me." She didn't argue, so he gripped her soft skin and rolled her tight muscles with his fingers. "Too much pressure?"

"No." She groaned. "What you're doing feels amazing."

He smiled. "Something seems to have changed since you walked off that plane last night."

"I won't lie. I've got lots of doubts. But..." She reached up to place a hand over his. "I feel good when I'm with you."

"Nice to hear. Now." He resumed his shoulder rub. "What possessed you to go charging into Microstrive's offices in the middle of the day?"

"I thought I could help. I wanted to get information from Anya. I thought if it really was some personal vendetta, like you said, I could find out something useful."

"I wish you hadn't gone alone."

She smiled up at him. “I’m fine. She can only do so much in broad daylight. Anyway, she swears she’s not behind your clients jumping ship. She said you have passionate enemies.”

“Hmm.” He stopped rubbing and came around the couch to sit next to Elise, tapping his thumb against his chin. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“I’m not really sure.” She curled her feet underneath her. “I said something about how you were a nice guy, and she smiled at me like she had a big secret. So somewhere along the way, you’ve made some psychotic enemy who’s trying to destroy you.”

Elise calling him a nice guy gave him the fuzzy tingles all over. The corners of his mouth lifted. “So you think I’m nice?”

She reached over and slapped him on the arm. “Stop. We’re trying to be serious.”

“Right.” He nodded, rubbing at his forehead.

“She said we could look through those deals all we wanted, we wouldn’t find anything underhanded.” Elise leaned forward. “Now, I’ve known Anya to do some shady stuff. She covers her tracks well, and every employee who’s ever left Microstrive has signed a nondisclosure agreement, so even when she does work in gray areas, it’s hard to tell. But if she didn’t, then she’s in bed with someone else who is. So who might the someone be?”

Michael shook his head. “One of my brothers has come by to see me a couple of times. He was pretty pissed, but his beef seemed to be the fact that I was the only sibling given ownership of the company in the will.”

“So destroying it wouldn’t make sense.”

Michael scowled. “Not unless he’s decided to do so as revenge.”

Elise pressed her lips together. “Does that make sense to you? Would he really destroy his father’s legacy just so you can’t have it?”

“He kicked over my block tower once when I was six.”

She sighed.

His mind wandered through the past weeks of his life. “I’ve fired several employees. People I caught stealing from the company or just plain not doing their jobs in the wake of my father’s illness. It could have been anyone.”

“Your ex-wife?”

He paused, remembering the unopened divorce agreement he’d found in her kitchen. “That doesn’t make sense, either. She’s resisted the divorce, but I gave her an ultimatum and hopefully that’s enough. Either way, my fortunes are tied to hers. If HaleStorm crumbles, she gets no settlement money. I don’t think she’s stupid.”

“Okay, so maybe the thing to do is make a list of the people you’ve fired. Who had access to the project files? Who would have been in a position to contact clients and stick their nose into things? The guy who fouled up your security validation, for example.”

Michael nodded, distracted slightly by the sight of Elise curled up on the couch. “I love doing this with you, you know?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Trying to figure out who’s screwing you over? I’d personally prefer not to make it a regular occurrence.”

He could only laugh. “Problem-solving. Talking about work. I like bouncing ideas back and forth.” He ran his finger across the bumpy texture of the sofa. “I’ve never been with anybody I felt was truly an equal. You know, someone I could do things with other than dinner and antiquing. Those things are fine but I like that with you, there’s more.”

One side of her mouth quirked. “So you like that I’m a workaholic.”

I like being close to you, too.

He pulled her toward him. “It’s not all you are. You’re fucking beautiful, Elise. But under all the sexy packaging is this amazing brain, and loyal heart, and so many other things I want desperately to keep getting to know more about. I want to spend my evenings with you having delicious

food and talking about what movies we hate, just like we did that summer.” He kissed her, gentle but firm, grateful that she didn’t push away.

“This.” He gestured back and forth between them. “I like doing *this* with you. I’m glad you were here to help pull this project out of the fire.” He took a deep breath, a heavy weight in his chest. “I wish my father had gotten to know you. This way, I mean.”

She smiled. “I do too. And I’m glad I was able to help. I almost wish…”

Music to his ears. He wished, too. “We’ll figure this out.”

She looked worried. “What if we don’t? What about your company?”

He kissed her again. “I have you to help. We will. We’ll fix everything.”

She rolled her eyes. “So no pressure or anything.” She stood. “We should get back. Things to fix, as you said. We have that meeting tomorrow to get ready for.”

Her phone buzzed as they walked out, and she laughed at the incoming text. “God, poor Jeff. ‘OMG, if she tells me next that the Karen Summers brand demands bow ties and starched underpants, I am so done.’”

Karen Summers.

Michael reached into his wallet and pulled out the business card he’d found in Becca’s kitchen.

Karen Summers. Holy shit.

He turned to Elise and kissed her again. Hard. “Meet me back at the office. I think I just figured out a big piece of this whole insanity puzzle. I have to go.”

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EIGHTEEN

Elise floated back into the office. Whatever Michael was doing, wherever he had gone, he'd left convinced he had the answers he needed to save his company. And he hadn't spelled it out in words, but he'd also sure as hell left her with the impression that he wanted them to be together. Maybe they could date. Like normal people.

She'd heard a rumor about someone bringing in mini-cupcakes and decided to swing by the break room, giving the finger to her mother's voice telling her she should hold off because she'd been "looking a bit heavy lately."

She waved at Penny, the kindly HR manager, surprised to see Becca sitting by her desk. Elise kept walking, not wanting to show her curiosity.

"Oh, Elise! Come here a second, will you?" Penny's call stopped Elise short when she had almost rounded the corner.

Damn. What was Michael's ex doing here? After that prior uncomfortable encounter, the last thing Elise wanted to do was have yet another close encounter. What if there was more crying?

It wasn't exactly that Elise felt guilty. Michael swore things had been over with his ex for over a year, and she believed him. She didn't think it was a particularly good idea for her to get all buddied-up with the future ex-Mrs. Hale, either.

“Here you go,” Penny said as Elise approached. She held out a stack of papers, and Elise sat carefully in a chair, as if the force with which her butt hit the padding would affect whether or not the Hermes-clad lady next to her noticed her existence. “I have a few things I need you to sign so they can extend your contract. Mr. Hale said they had need to keep you on a couple more weeks.”

Elise nodded silently and took the forms, glancing from Penny to Becca and back again. *Way to play it smooth, Elise.* “Uh, yes. Sure. Thank you.”

Penny turned to Becca. “Okay, got everything done here?” She flipped through the pages, handing a few things back over. “You’ll want to keep this, it spells out your prenatal benefits.”

Elise almost choked on her tongue. *What in God’s name is she talking about?*

Penny looked up. “Are you all right, honey?”

“Sure.” She smiled at both women. “Just a tickle. Dry winter air.”

Becca reached into her Coach bag and handed over a cough drop. How fucking thoughtful.

“Thank you.” Elise forced a smile. “So...you’re pregnant?” Her voice climbed at least an octave in her attempt to sound cheerful.

Becca beamed. How could anybody beam under fluorescent office lights? “I only found out recently.”

“That’s... Congratulations.” Elise threw up her hands in mock excitement. She had no words.

Who’s the father?

Because it couldn’t be Michael. He’d insisted. Promised. Sworn. He hadn’t been with his wife for over a year. If he hadn’t said that, if he hadn’t been adamant that the relationship was deadlier than disco, Elise would never have so much as kissed him.

Still, even before Becca opened her bright-red smiling mouth, Elise knew. Why else would Becca be here, of all places, asking for benefits

information?

Becca's eyes widened. "Thank you." Her hand went to her stomach. "My husband, will be thrilled, of course. Mr. Hale."

Even having expected to hear it, Elise was sure her blood froze in her veins. She took a careful look at the future ex—or maybe not?—Mrs. Hale. Her clothes hugged her petite frame, she couldn't be any larger than a size two. The lady couldn't be more than a handful of weeks along.

"I should really..." Mistrust churned in Elise's gut. Had Michael lied to her? Married men, telling lies—she'd seen plenty of examples thanks to her mother. She'd always figured she was too smart to get played like that.

And Michael had promised. *Promised.*

Elise damn well should have known better.

She stood and held up the forms. "I need to check in with Tom before the end of the day. Is it all right if I bring these to you tomorrow?"

"Sure, honey. So long as you remember."

"Great." She turned to the glowing Mrs. Hale. "Congratulations again. Good luck with everything."

If anybody said anything after she turned to walk away, she didn't hear them. She ducked into the hall bathroom and dialed her supervisor at PermaSolv.

The call went to voicemail.

"Hey, Hailey, it's Elise. I think I'm coming down with something. I may need some time off. I know HaleStorm Engineering requested to keep me on for a while longer, and I wanted to see if maybe you had somebody else you could send? They need someone detail-oriented, with strong problem-solving skills. Project management skills and being well-versed in contracts would be a plus." She sighed. "They're dealing with something mission critical, and I don't want to leave them in a lurch, but I don't think I can be here right now."

She needed some space. Time to think.

She coughed a little for the sake of effect, and hung up the phone.

With a tired exhale, she leaned her head against the cool tile of the bathroom wall, trying to calm the war being waged through her insides before she went out the door to face all of her mistakes.

What Elise really wanted was to talk to Michael, but how could she know he'd tell her the truth?

MICHAEL PULLED UP IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE HE'D LIVED IN WITH BECCA, thinking of how much he'd loved the place when he'd found it. How Becca had spent her time remodeling every fucking square inch because she hadn't.

Well. It would sure as hell increase the resale value.

While he waited in the car for Becca to get there, he called Elise so he could share his good news.

"Hello, Michael."

Oh, shit. The frost in her voice went straight to his heart. Something wasn't right.

"Hey." The sun was setting. He looked around, watching for Becca. The security guard at HaleStorm had called to notify him she was on the premises again. Unless she'd gone someplace else, she should be there shortly. "Called to give you an update. Is something wrong?"

Silence.

More silence.

"Elise?"

Finally, a loud breath came though the phone. "Why don't you ask your wife?"

Shit, shit, shit. "What did she do?"

"It's a little more like what *you* did."

Michael's fist pounded the console. "Do us both a favor. Stop speaking in riddles and tell me what the hell is going on."

"That's a little hard to do in the middle of an office building. Hang the hell on." From the sounds of things, she closed a door, perhaps to the conference room where she'd been working during the previous week. "She was in here getting benefits information from HR. For prenatal care. She said she found out *recently* that you guys are expecting a child soon." A hiccup sound came through the phone. "Goddammit, Michael, you said it had been a year—"

"Since we've *lived* together," he growled. "You wanna know how long it's been since we've fucked? And I mean fucked, because I don't know when we stopped loving each other enough to call it anything else!" He slammed his fist against the window. "It was a hell of a lot longer than a year ago." His head fell backwards. "Goddamn her! I don't even know what she's trying to pull. I cannot *fucking* believe her!"

Rage raced through his system, heat and tingles jumped over his skin like live electricity. On the other side of the phone, he heard only silence.

"Elise, this is the God's honest truth."

Nothing.

"Elise."

"I don't know what to believe. Who signs up for prenatal care if they're not really pregnant?"

"Listen to me. Becca used to be a sweet girl but in the past couple of years, a lot has changed. She's playing a shitty, manipulative game. You can't buy into this. You can't. I *swear* to you, she's lying."

He took a calming breath and thought of Elise. His lips against hers, his skin against her skin. "Now, do you want to ask me how long it's been since you and I made love? Because I can sure as fuck tell you," he growled into the phone, "that even when we went at it over the conference room table, I *absolutely* made love to you."

Headlights appeared in his rearview mirror. Damned timing. “Listen, I have to go. Do me a favor and promise me you’ll wait and talk to me about this. Meet me at the apartment tonight after work. Please.”

Silence.

“*Please.*”

“Okay.”

“Thank you.” He hung up the phone and got out of the car, walking slowly up the sidewalk and down the driveway while Becca killed the lights and got out of the car.

“What were you doing at the offices today?”

She whirled around. “You startled me! What are you doing here?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “What, you thought I simply wouldn’t find out?”

Her mouth opened. “What?”

“I hear congratulations are in order,” he said. “Who’s the father?” He leaned forward, raising one eyebrow. “Sure as *fuck* isn’t me.”

Her mouth closed again.

“I do owe you an apology,” he said. He studied her, looking pale and small in front of the massive home that had belonged to only the two of them. “You were never happy with me, and vice-versa. I was a terrible husband, I was never home, and you deserved better.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “I hope whoever got you knocked up will be that guy. *But*—you’re gonna have to do it without using my company’s health insurance. Sorry.”

She started crying then. “But don’t you remember? It was that night two months ago when you picked me up from that happy hour because I’d had too much to drink. You carried me into the bedroom and...” Her lip trembled. More tears streamed down her cheeks.

Michael prayed for patience. “Yes, you had too much to drink. I brought you home and carried you to the bedroom, and you fell asleep as soon as I

put you there. Not even a button out of place, I might add. I told you *then*, and I am reminding you now, that I can't be the guy you call for help anymore." He took a step back. "Especially not when you're busy trying to turn the company my father built into rubble."

Wide eyes. Blank stare. Her chin fell to the driveway's frozen blacktop. "What?"

He pulled Karen Summers's business card from his pocket. The card he'd found in Becca's kitchen. "I had an interesting meeting before I came here. Did you know Karen Summers specializes in high-end commercial and residential real estate in the Tysons Corner area? Of course you knew. You had her business card.

"It happens that I've met her nephew, so I recognized the name." He flipped the card in his fingers. "I didn't make the connection right away, but I figured out after a while why you've been so reticent to sign those divorce papers. All the development going on in Tysons Corner. The value of HaleStorm Engineering's commercial property has gone up quite a bit."

Becca sniffled. "You can't possibly think I'd be so awful."

Michael smiled. "Oh, I do. If my company went under, and my only choice was to leverage the real estate, you'd be entitled to a piece of that action if you were still my wife, right? Was that the idea?"

She shivered. The tears started pouring down her face. "No," she whispered. "I wanted you back. You were always married to that company more than me! I thought if you didn't have the company...and then we'd have the money from selling the property as a fallback."

Michael stared, long and hard. "Was getting pregnant part of that plan?"

"It was a mistake!" she wailed. "A stupid, drunken mistake. It was one time!"

"A big mistake," Michael said. He drew a long breath. "But I sort of doubt it was one time. Anyway." He clapped his hands together. "Here's what's going to happen. I've already explained to Karen Summers why my

offices *aren't* for sale. She is, however, preparing to let her nephew list this house. So you need to get ready to move. You will cease and desist in any and all dealings with either Anya Evans, or any current or past HaleStorm Engineering customers. You *will* sign that divorce agreement.”

His hands clenched and released. “You will sign it without any further delay. If I have not heard from my attorney that those papers are signed, notarized, and at his office by the end of the day tomorrow, I will call the private investigator I hired a year and a half ago and have him send the photo evidence that you violated our prenuptial agreement.”

Becca’s mouth dropped open again. “But—”

“*If* you are in fact pregnant, those images are date-stamped. I can easily show that you didn’t wait for me to walk out the door before you started interviewing replacement fathers.

“I did warn you—and I do not bluff about these things. Am I clear?”

She simply stood there, face red.

“I’m waiting.”

She bowed her head. “We’re clear.”

“Good. I don’t want to hear from you again, Becca. And my clients better fucking not, either.”

With that, he left

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NINETEEN

When Michael got to the apartment, Elise stood in the center of the room with her coat on. Her bags, her keys, everything she'd brought with her the night before, lay neatly stacked by the door, ready for her to leave.

"You said you'd give me a chance to explain." He came in and pushed the door closed behind him. "Looks to me like you're already out the door."

"I left a message with my supervisor. I haven't heard back yet, but I've asked to be replaced for the duration of the time that you need a contractor onsite from PermaSolv."

Michael grabbed her hands in both of his. "I need you."

"I'm not convinced I'm the best person to serve your company's needs right now. I'm distracted, I'm confused, and frankly, I don't think I can take the guilt of running into your pregnant wife in the hallway one more time."

He pressed their foreheads together. "You don't understand what's going on. And I need you on this project. Fuck. I need *you*, period."

Her swallow echoed in the nearly empty apartment. "I have to be honest, I'm feeling tangled up and scared right now. I haven't let my heart make my decisions for me since I was twenty-one and developed a silly, immature crush on my boss." Her chest rose and fell with the force of her

breath. “And right now, not only do I feel stupid for getting duped, but I feel like I did something really terrible.”

Michael squeezed Elise’s arms. “You have no idea how much I want—”

She shook her head. Tears slid down her cheeks. “Don’t. This is all so much to handle right now. I showed up here last week thinking maybe if I was lucky, I wouldn’t see you at all, you know? Now everything is upside-down.”

“You have to let me explain.”

Elise raised her chin, staring him in the eyes with a snuffle. “Explain.”

Michael collapsed on the sofa. He patted the space next to him with hope that Elise would sit as well, but she stayed standing, staring.

“All right. First of all, Becca has been banned from the premises of my office building. I already had her on a watch. When I last spoke with security, I told them not to let her in anymore. She kept showing up to...I don’t know, try to claim ownership on me. Make people think she was still rightfully my wife. Possibly even to gain access to the information that helped her farm my clients to Microstrive. It’s hard to say for sure. Whatever the reason, she’s done. And with any luck, she’s on the last crazy train out of town. I’ll buy her the ticket myself.”

At that news, Elise *did* sit. “You’re saying *she* was the one who tanked all those projects?”

Michael nodded. “I didn’t think her capable of it at first, but yes. Over the past few years, she’s been with me at every fundraiser, company party, client dinner...” He closed his eyes against the horror. “She knew the employees, the points of contact for some of the customers. The disgruntled folks and the people still working at HaleStorm. She made it look like she and I were still a happy couple to get insider information. Then, either out of spite or some twisted bid to save our marriage—the jury is still out—she sold the information to Microstrive. Her plan was to have the company worth nothing so I’d cash in the business and move on.”

Deep lines formed in Elise's perfect, pale forehead. "That is...so fucked-up."

He reached for her and smoothed his thumb over her skin. "You know, I don't remember much about my mom. She had some mental health issues, too. Given that, she might have been wrong when she said faces would freeze that way. Let's not risk it though. You're too beautiful."

She breathed a laugh and pushed his hand away. "Stop."

But her anger appeared to have diffused, and for that, he nearly kissed the carpet at their feet. "I will if you will," he said.

She looked up. "What about your wife being pregnant?"

He did a "search me" gesture. "I don't know if she's pregnant or not, but I know for sure it couldn't be mine. Either way, she's lying."

"You're sure?"

He slipped a piece of hair that hung in her eyes and moved it behind her ear. "Beyond a shadow of a doubt. I would not do that to you. To us." Michael's heart thumped hard, like it wanted to beat its way out of his chest to get to Elise. "The day you showed up at HaleStorm, I had already handed her the papers. And it was well overdue. She'd rescheduled on me three times. Now I know why. She'd been stalling for time."

She put her fingers to her lips. "I want to believe you. Everything that's happened, though, it's been crazy. I'm not so sure I can keep doing this."

The way the war went back and forth on her face, it hurt to watch. Michael's chest tightened. "If you need time, Elise..."

His body went numb even thinking it, but he would give her whatever he needed. This was his fuck-up, and it was his to fix.

"I'll do whatever I need to do to prove that I'm serious." His palm slid over the satin of her cheek. "I am so in love with you. I loved you five years ago, and I was too stupid to realize it. If I had to wait for you as long as I have, I can wait a little longer until this feels right for you."

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip. Another tear splashed from her cheek to her collarbone. “I love you too. I just feel like there are so many ways I could get hurt here. Worse than I have. I need to think a little, at least. Maybe I need to go home for a while.”

Uh-oh. His pulse picked up. “You mean to visit your mother again?”

“Not there, no.” She sniffled. “She was doing much better when I left, and I think I need to remember that her mental health isn’t my responsibility.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“I mean home to my apartment. I need to feel like I have my own life again for a little while. I think you’ve hung out more with Jeff than I have lately.”

Michael smiled. “That’s hardly true.”

“You know what I mean.”

He squeezed her hand, wishing desperately he could kiss her, but she was overwhelmed enough. “One favor. Stay and help me get this company back on level ground. You’ll report directly to someone else. You and I can take a step back, if that’s what you need. You’re great at what you do, and I need your brain. Please.”

Uncertainty played across her face. “I already called my supervisor at PermaSolv.”

“I’ll un-call them.”

She laughed. “All right. I’ll stay. To help with the shaky projects.”

“Thank you.” Instead of a kiss, he went for a hug. It was a start.

ELISE CHARMED THE CUSTOMER AT THE PRESENTATION. HALESTORM Engineering was praised for its assiduousness in responding to the validation issues.

One project saved. Half a dozen or so more to go. Excellent start to the morning.

After lunch, Michael met Dave in the HaleStorm Engineering lobby. “Thanks for meeting me.” He held out a hand to his brother.

His brother accepted the handshake with understandable hesitation. He glanced around as if he expected hidden cameras. “After our last meeting, I thought maybe our next communication would happen through attorneys.”

Michael cleared his throat and gestured for Dave to follow. They passed the elevators in the main lobby and instead headed down the hall on the ground floor past HR, through accounting, the kitchen, and the admin department. Michael pointed out the primary areas to Dave and waved hello to a few people before they headed up to the executive floor.

Dave turned to him when they got on the elevator. “Uh, I know it’s been a while, but I’ve seen the building. What’s with the tour?”

“Like you said, it’s been a while. I figured I’d give you the lay of the land.”

“Because?” Dave craned his neck forward, pretending he strained to hear Michael’s answer.

They stepped off the elevator. “We’ll talk in my office,” Michael said.

When they entered Michael’s office, he didn’t sit at his desk but at the small round table he occasionally used for planning meetings. “There’s something you need to know. Right now, there’s a potential threat to the financial stability of HaleStorm Engineering.”

Dave laughed. “Oh, so now that the company is in the shitter, you’re willing to play ball?”

Michael sighed. “No, I’m trying to do the right thing. But you need to have all the information.”

Dave rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay. What’s the deal?”

Michael picked up a pen on the table and tapped on the surface. “I know you’re pissed Dad left the company to me. I know you’re also pissed about

his affair with my mom. I can't do a thing about what happened thirty-five years ago."

Dave grunted and shifted in his seat.

"You also have to know," Michael continued, "that you turning your back on him hurt Dad deeply. Especially when he was dying."

"I didn't turn my back on him. My mother's had her own health problems. I was supporting her."

"Maybe you were. But he missed you. You know that's why I got full control. It wasn't vengeance, it was hurt."

Dave's sigh was audible. "I missed him as well. I'm not always sure I made the right choice, but I made the best one I could at the time." His gaze flicked up to Michael and then out to the cityscape beyond the window. "He came to speak with me one day. I couldn't deal with it so turned him away at the door. Six months later, I read about his death online. I have...a great deal of regret."

Michael nodded. "As do I. Which is why I'd like to offer you the opportunity to help me run HaleStorm." He smiled slightly at Dave's dubious expression. "Like I said, right now, things are rocky. They were rough when Dad got sick and it's really gone downhill. I need a strong management team to get this situation stabilized if we're going to stay afloat."

"What do you propose?"

Michael ticked off fingers. "I had to fire my information officer, and my new VP would rather write code than do anything that's actually administrative. I'd like to offer you the position of Senior VP, starting as quickly as you're willing to come onboard. I've got a contractor in-house right now to help bridge the gap left by my missing CIO, and if possible, I'd like you to work with her on handling the clients who are threatening to leave. They're going to need dedicated resources, and I'd rather not pull in project managers that are already stretched too thin."

Dave nodded slowly. It looked like he was thinking. “How likely do you think it is we can save these projects?”

“Some of them?” Michael swiveled in his chair. “I think we’ve got a damn good shot. The projects were sabotaged by my ex, and I think the misunderstandings can be explained. Everything is stalled by their contractual requirement to give thirty days’ notice anyway. We’ll have to spend that time kissing a whole lot of ass.”

“And the others?”

“Do you pray, Dave?”

Dave shook his head. “Shit.”

“I’m not going to lie. Microstrive has their hooks in some of these guys. Their sales lead may not be playing aboveboard. This could be an uphill battle.”

Dave narrowed his eyes at Michael. “What even makes you think I have the experience to take on a colossal risk like this?”

“I googled you. You served as the Chief Operating Officer for Limly Systems from 2008 until just four months ago, when you announced you were stepping down to spend more time with your family.” Michael looked down at his brother’s folded hands. “Although, I see you don’t wear a ring.”

Dave sat back in his chair. “Charles Limly was my father-in-law.”

Oh. “Aha.” Michael cleared his throat. “Was. My condolences.”

Dave shrugged slightly. “Thank you. It’s an awful lot of starting over.”

“I hear you.” Michael stood. “What about Josh? I called him but got no answer. I’d really like to have you both onboard.”

“He’s got a bigger chip. I can talk to him.”

“Thank you.” Michael smiled at his brother. “Why don’t I introduce you to Tom and Elise, and you can let me know what you think?”

Elise was bent over Tom’s desk when they approached. Tom may not have been appreciating the view, but Michael couldn’t help himself. He’d

promised to keep things strictly professional for as long as she needed, and he would.

Goddamn, though, it would not be easy.

She turned when he and Dave entered the room, smiling broadly as they approached.

No, it definitely would not be easy.

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TWENTY

Elise pushed at Jeff's shoulder. "Would you stop yanking on my arm, please?"

"Come on, you've been moping around here for weeks. Come with me."

"Not weeks."

"Weeks." Jeff stepped back and threw his arms wide. "Look at me, I'm in my grown-up clothes."

"You look so handsome," Elise agreed. "Which is why I can't go with you." She gestured to herself. "I've been wearing sweats and eating Cherry Garcia all day."

"So?" Jeff bounced on the balls of his feet. "Just throw on something that isn't sweats. Please?"

He stomped over and grabbed Elise by the shoulders. "Honey, I sold my first million-dollar home. *My first million-dollar home!* Feel that fact. I'm going to take this guy his keys, and I'm going to get a commission that's going to pay our rent and groceries for like an entire year." His head bobbed as if independent from his body. "You *do* get that, right?"

Elise laughed. "Okay. This *is* a big deal, and I'll make myself presentable so I can come and cheer you on."

She went into her room and rifled through her closet until she found a clean dress that would be suitable enough to wear while Jeff gave some rich guy his new house keys.

“Make sure you put on a little makeup,” Jeff yelled through the door. “The buyer is pretty hot, and if you’re not planning to call Michael anytime soon, I think we need to start looking into hooking you up.”

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the closed bathroom door, trying not to cry. When she opened it, she gave Jeff her best effort at angry eyes, but he looked too much like an excited puppy. “Let’s just go,” she said. “I told you before, Michael is off-limits.”

“Oh. You meant talking about him? I thought you meant touching him.”

She smacked his arm. “Don’t be silly.”

“You love me.”

“Lucky that I do.”

It was lucky for Elise, actually. Even in his frenzied effort to get up to speed with his aunt Karen’s real estate business, Jeff had been there. Elise had been grateful, as always, for the shoulder.

She missed Michael terribly. For a while, he’d pursued her, but her fear had been too raw. Weeks later, when she’d come to her senses, he’d stopped calling. Elise decided maybe that had been fate telling her the way things ought to be.

She and Jeff drove a short distance to one of the parts of Northern Virginia that still had large plots of land and expanses of green grass. They passed one palatial mansion after another, and Elise shuddered to think about the prices of these homes. She couldn’t imagine living in something so massive.

“God, these houses are so huge. We could put our whole condo building in one of these.”

Jeff nodded, slipping on his sunglasses at a stoplight. “Wait till you see this one we’re going to. It’s actually the baby on the block. The previous

owner bought a big piece of land, fronted it with lots of trees and a long driveway. The house itself is actually small, comparatively. Elegant, but more like regular single-family sized. If you moved it to a different neighborhood, you'd probably cut the value by half."

He leaned forward, pointing to a For Sale sign across the street. "I should see how long that one's been on the market. Maybe the owner is interested in changing agents. At the very least, I need to get inside."

She turned to him with a smile. "Look at you. You're actually sounding excited."

Was he blushing? It looked like he was blushing.

"I thought it would be boring, but you know, it's actually a rush. Like extreme shopping with really large products."

They turned, pulling up a tree-lined drive. "These houses are crazy expensive, and they're not easy to sell. This one..." He pointed ahead as the trees parted and they came up to a neat-looking contemporary home. The size was generous but small compared to the opulent homes they'd passed earlier. "This one sat on the market for a long time. The guy who built it was a little eccentric. Floor plan's sort of funky. When he passed away, it was hard to sell because it was so much smaller than the other houses on the street."

"Funky?" They headed inside to check it out. "Oh my God," she breathed as they stepped through the entryway. "It's awesome!"

The floor plan *was* interesting. She remembered one of her mother's friends had a house like this when she was young. Sunken living room. Curved lines. Massive back deck. *Hot tub*.

"Cool, huh?" Jeff held out his hands. "Like I said, a little funky. But awesome. It just needed the right buyer. See? It's like matchmaking but with houses."

"I'm actually having house envy." She passed the breakfast bar with an open range, running her hands over shiny marble countertops and stainless-

steel appliances. “I mean, I love our apartment, but this is so kick-ass. Ooh, professional-grade gas oven.” She didn’t cook much anymore. With an oven like this, she so would. She looked up abruptly, realizing she was fondling the knobs on some stranger’s stove. “Hey, so where’s your buyer?”

“Yeah, he’s running late. I’m gonna check outside.”

While Jeff left out the front door, Elise backed out of the kitchen and went to admire the view in the gently sloping backyard. Fenced-in and large enough to run around. She found herself wondering if the new owner had kids.

Footsteps behind her. “Great yard for kids. I heard the schools in the district are some of the best in the country.”

She turned at the sound of the familiar, low rumble. “Oh my God.”

Michael.

He didn’t.

“Did you...?”

He held up a set of keys. “Your friend Jeff is quite the smooth talker. I’ve enjoyed house hunting with him.” He pointed to a staircase that circled the back curve of the house. “It has five bedrooms. Enough for kids, plus office space. Space to,” he lifted a shoulder, “problem-solve with a special someone, maybe.”

Her face heated. “Michael?”

Was he asking her to move in? He couldn’t be. They hadn’t talked since she’d left her consulting position at HaleStorm.

He licked his lips. “I said I would give you whatever you needed. You had space. You had time. You can have more if you need to. Meanwhile, my divorce is a done deal, and my house is sold. The apartment you remember is all packed up. I have a new home that’s mine and only mine.” He stared her down. “I’d like it to be ours. I made a point of getting a place with big windows so you could see the sunset.”

“Oh God.” Her heart fluttered in response to his words, and her head just buzzed with white noise, drowning out all the logic. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

Said her brain. Inside, in her heart, it was all a done deal. She was as sold as the house in which she stood.

“I’m no longer your boss. We’re both still single. I checked with Jeff.”
She groaned.

“I miss you. I want you. *Only* you. Let me show you how much.” He came forward, taking her hand in his. His hot, minty breath puffed on her skin. “There aren’t any reasons we can’t be together now. Please say yes.”

He’d gotten nothing but more handsome with time. Longer hair, scruffier stubble, but nothing short of unbelievably gorgeous.

She allowed him to bend her back in his arms. Oh, hell. Who was she kidding?

“I really have missed you.”

“I haven’t stopped thinking about you,” he said.

“Same.”

“I love you, Elise.”

Oh, God. Toast. Completely and totally burnt to a crisp. Her heart fluttered, rapid and frantic. “I never stopped.”

“So. You have to at least say you’ll be having dinners with me again. I saw the way you looked at that oven.” He grinned. “There’s a fantastic table in the office I’d love to show you, too.”

She couldn’t help but laugh, heating with the memory of the time they’d made love on that conference room table. It seemed like an eternity ago.

He brought his hand to her cheek. “Can I take that as a yes? You’ll stay?”

She turned, noting with only minor annoyance that Jeff’s car was backing down the driveway.

“Yes,” she said. “I’d love to stay.”

Author's Note:

I met and fell in love with my own husband in a whirlwind office romance, and this story is very special to me. I hope you enjoyed reading. If you feel moved to write a review, or just to let me know what you thought, please consider doing so. And thank you for taking the time to read One Week Fling. –Elisabeth Staab

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I adore this book, and I am truly grateful to everyone who helped me put it together. Thank you, *thank you* to Tere Michaels and Kelli Collins for such fabulous editing, Jenn Shanks Pray for proofreading, and to Elizabeth Babski for going above and beyond to design an awesome cover.

Nyrae Dawn, thank you for being there to beta read, to bounce ideas, and to generally prop up my sanity. Damon Suede, I wouldn't be the writer I am without having known you. And Mary Calmes, you always make me feel so amazing about my work, I'd write for you if nobody else in the world ever read a word.

Thank you to Lori Wilde, Marie Force, and Elisabeth Naughton for encouraging me.

Jillian Stein, Sharon Stogner, Braine, and all the other bloggers who've gone above and beyond, thank you for your friendship and loyalty. Special thanks go to Viviana Izzo and all the members of "The Staab Mob," for helping to spread the word and continuing to show support!

Thanks to all my friends, my family, *my Tom*. Thanks to Jen Loizeaux for the babysitting assist. Thanks most of *all* to the readers and the bloggers who make doing this so worthwhile. *big hugs*

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ABOUT ELISABETH STAAB:

Elisabeth Staab took a long time to find her passion. After many (many!) jobs, she realized that nothing beats romance. She digs coffee, saucy stories, and sexy things that go bump in the night. Once, she ate dinner in a jail and liked it. She lives in the Orlando, FL area with her incredible family and does her best to juggle life while ignoring the laundry.

Find out more at ElisabethStaab.com

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