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MONICA

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MONICA

“Oh my God! When will this shit stop?! I didn’t even drink last night!” I said, beyond aggravated.

Another round went into the porcelain god. This routine had endured for the last week, with no end in sight.

“I guess you need another change of clothes, Monica?” Alicia took the role of mother again, as she appeared in the bathroom doorway.

Royce seemed to have become numb to this daily routine.

I suppose any guy would after hearing this so many times. I only wish I could become immune from experiencing it every morning.

“Waking up and emptying my stomach gets old.” The acid pooled in my mouth as I spoke. I turned and looked at Alicia. “I never pictured you as the nurturing type, no offense. But you’ve really helped me this week. Thanks.”

“Yeah. Just . . . turn back around until you brush your teeth. I’m not that nurturing,” she laughed.

“I’m glad Royce is still asleep. Not exactly something I want him hovering over me about,” I said.

“He’s a bit tired of these 4 o’clock wake up calls, no offense,” Alicia said.

“I am too,” I said as I released another stream. I stood up and cleaned myself off, brushed my teeth.

“I’m joining Royce back in bed. Hope you don’t need me again this morning.” Alicia said. “I still love ya, though.”

“Big words for you,” I said with a smile while the toothbrush went in and out of my mouth.

Rumble.

God, stomach, what did I do to piss you off so much?

“Ugh. I’ve gotta get to work today. Troy is expecting me to work in his office, on some plans for the National Parks. Hiring more staff for them. If only I can get through it without the nausea.”

I rinsed my mouth and spit.

“I just don’t get this. I’m not drunk, I haven’t had sex since . . . that search. Highly unusual for me, but I’m trying to be a good girl.”

The door fit nicely into the frame as I gently closed it. My clothes dropped to the floor, water started streaming from the shower head.

Rumble.

“Don’t start again, damn it. Let me get clean, and hopefully I’ll feel better. And I’m talking to my stomach now. If anyone heard, they’d say I was nuts.”

Water streamed down my body, rinsing away the acid, the heat, the staleness, leaving behind the freshness of a new start.

Sexy Satin Capri pants from Shirley of Hollywood, Loft top, and a pair of Valeros to finish the outfit.

There, sex on a stick, like always.

My image was perfect in the mirror.

“This should get Troy’s attention, though I shouldn’t be thinking that way. Gotta admit though, it is nice to have his attention. Even if that’s all I get.”

The Valeros made a soft click on the floor with each step I took into the living room.

“Who are you trying to distract with that outfit?” Royce asked after a glance.

“Like you really need to ask,” Alicia said.

“Sorry, it ain’t gonna work on me,” Royce said with a smile.

“You guys are funny. And fast to jump to conclusions.”

“The conclusion is set in front of us when you dress that way, honey,” Alicia said.

“This is starting to sound like two parents with a teenage girl,” I said.

“If the shoe fits,” Alicia said with a smile. “And don’t squint your eyes at me.”

“Shut up . . . Mom.”

“Ouch,” Royce said.

“I’m gonna be the mature one and go about my day now,” I said as I snapped my hips in the direction I was headed . . . out of the room.

“I can cut the sexual tension between you two with a knife,” Royce said. “Just jump on each other and get it out of your system.”

If it wasn’t bad enough that both our jaws dropped, they had to drop in unison.

It took willpower to close my mouth, pull my eyes back into their sockets, and swallow, but once the senses were back on track from the shock, I said, “You’d love that too much.”

Royce made direct eye contact with me. “Honey, I’ve seen much more than that. If you two need to get it out of your system, be my guest. I rather enjoy Alicia’s attention focused on me.” He smiled. “Now, if you insist on keeping this up much longer, I’ll just have to make it an order to flush out your desires.”

“An order, eh?” Alicia asked.

I walked across the room, swaying my hips. Standing in front of Royce, I said, “You just really think you’re something.”

“I know I am,” Royce said without looking up. “Now, go about your business unless you intend to satisfy

your desires. But I do believe Troy is waiting for you today.” Only now did he look up and smile, making eye contact while he did.

“Mr. Royce Garrison, King of Alicia’s Castle, sitting there in the chair, newspaper in your lap, coffee on the table. Such a typical picture of an old man.” I smirked.

“You can make smart remarks all you want, you’re not bothering me.” He still maintained eye contact.

“Well, good to see you’re stable again. Seriously, I missed you.”

“I missed me, too.”

“All right, enough of the mushy stuff. I’m ready to cover this floor like you did the toilet,” Alicia said with a chuckle.

“Jealous much? You know I’m not after him, he’s all yours.” I brushed my shoulder as I spoke.

“Yep, I know. You want Troy,” Alicia said as she peered from under her eyelashes.

“Shut up.”

“That’s an affirmative if I ever heard one,” Alicia said.

I willed my legs to move, to take me out of the room. As I slipped through the doorway heading to the kitchen, I threw a glance back, over my right shoulder, and left them a lingering smile.

Now, for some food. Royce is right, I do need to focus on work with Troy today.

Cabinet doors opened, eyes darted from one box to another, from one can to another.

We've got people finally getting on their feet who have never had the chance before.

I heard Alicia walk into the room.

People who have tried to build a business of their own but could never get the financing.

Some of this food is making my mouth water, while some is making me gag.

All these people are creating jobs, which is fueling the overall economy.

I grabbed some items from the pantry, turned the skillet on.

“We’re doing some great things, and this isn’t the time to stop. Now, if only my body will stop getting sick and let me focus with Troy.”

“Well, you’d better focus on what you’re doing here first,” said Alicia. “It helps to turn on the burner that the skillet is actually sitting on.”

“Oh my God. I’m just so out of it lately. I swear, I don’t know where my mind is. This is so unlike me.”

“Yep, so unlike you to be late, to not be able to fix your own breakfast, to be worried about your sex appeal . . . yep, so totally unlike you,” Alicia said as she rolled her eyes at me. Then she added a smile. And patted my backside.

“Fine, have sarcasm and your laughter. But my mind is usually sharper than this. I just choose to use it for seduction instead of programming purposes,” I giggled and bumped her hip with mine.

“I’ll have you know, Royce has no complaints about my seduction techniques. Absolutely none,” Alicia said.

“Oh, do tell. I love sexy details.” I locked eyes with her, daring her.

She stammered.

I smiled.

She cleared her throat. “Oh no, I’m not falling for your trap, lil’ missy,” she laughed.

“Awesome. Now I’m getting out of here to actually make it to work on time.”

Alicia slapped her hand over her chest ,where her heart supposedly is. “Oh . . . my . . . God, the almighty Monica will be,” she paused, swallowed, “on time? Heaven forbid!”

I punched her. And laughed. Then walked out the door.

Damn right I'll be on time today. If I can't have him touch me, I'll at least have his presence.

As I walked into City of Troy Enterprises, heads turned. Yeah, sure, it fed my ego, but after the morning I'd had, I figured feeding my ego wasn't so bad.

The straight girls scrunched their mouths. The ones who were bi raised their eyebrows and smiled. I knew they were whistling under their breath. And the guys . . . well, that's self-explanatory.

I cut to the elevator. Yep, the secret one. I had to get to Troy's office as fast as possible. I was sure he was in there right now.

Damn elevator music. I'm gonna have to talk to Troy about this.

After a torturous ride of all of two minutes, I stepped out. Walking down the hall, pushing the waistband of my capris down just a bit before I round the corner, I'm laser sighted on his office door.

"Good morning, Monica," Troy's new receptionist greeted me.

"Good morning to you as well. Good to see you're having a good day," I said.

Her grin remained and looked genuine as I opened Troy's office door. I stepped in, closed the door, focused on the desk . . . and Troy wasn't there.

"Damn him."

I walked to his desk, sat down in his chair. I pushed the waistband down even further on the capris. Now, when I got up, the top of my ass would be showing. Yes, I know, sex or no sex lately, I'm still a bad girl. Hopefully just bad enough . . .

I closed my eyes in some lame attempt to relax.

I wondered where Troy was. . . and then those thoughts faded . . .

"Monica," Troy said, sitting on the edge of his desk.

What the hell? When did he get there? Hell, how did he walk in without me knowing?

"I'm not paying you to sleep on the job," he laughed.

I opened my eyes, focused, started to get up and realized . . . my right hand was on my crotch. Shit. My face turned red.

"I'm sorry, Troy. I won't do that . . . any of this again." I jumped up.

He laughed again. "It's OK. I was in a meeting. Sorry I was late for you."

"Um, how long was I . . . asleep?"

"Well, the receptionist said you came in about four hours ago." He flashed me a smile.

"Four hours?!"

“Last time I checked, my clock was right.”

I looked at the clock. I'd been asleep about 15 minutes. Bad enough, but now Troy deserved a punch, which I gleefully gave him.

“Hey, that's abuse, from employee to boss,” he said.

God, I want to kiss him so bad right now.

I took the deepest breath I could summon.

“All right, we need to get busy,” I said as I attempted to turn away from him.

God, why did I push my waistband down. As wet as I am, I don't need to mess with my capris now, but damn it . . . it was meant to seduce him.

“Yes, we do, actually. I just had a meeting with some Rothschilds. It was very interesting. Let's just say we need to help small businesses put people to work, immediately. Otherwise I'll have a battle on my hands.”

“What kind of battle?” I asked, feeling incredibly out of the loop.

“Oh, it's a formerly wealthy family who wants ‘their’ money back. Just like every other person who had money. But they believe they are special. I happen to disagree. So, needless to say, you and I have some work to do this morning.”

He gave me a peck on the mouth as he dismounted the desk and picked up a file folder. The kiss sent warmth all the way to my toes . . . and made me crave more.

Damn him!

I was forced to slap his ass for good measure as he walked away from me.

“Careful there, Monica. You’ll start something you can’t finish.”

“I can finish. You can’t.” I managed a smile. One of these days, I swear that day is coming soon, I’ll finish and have him again. Ugh, my body won’t let me leave this any other way.

Troy laid the folder on a table and spread the contents of it. He motioned me to come over.

“Monica, I need you to contact these people. All of the ones on these papers. Find out how much they need to build their small businesses. We are acting as their bank, but without charging them interest. I figure the money will come back in the form of taxes.”

“There must be at least 20 pages here.”

“Yep, and this is just the start. This is the state of Texas. We’ll need to do this for all 50 states.”

My jaw locked. And my hands found my waistband and pulled it up. The sensations seemed to magically disappear.

“Ugh. Can I hire a team to speed this along?”

“Sure, I don’t care. Just get it done.”

“Phew, that’s better.”

He smiled, pinched my ass.

“You didn’t have to pull your waistband up. I kinda liked seeing your ass poking out. But right now we need to work.” He winked and pecked my mouth again. This time he held the peck about three seconds. My eyes closed . . . the sensations raced through my body again . . . and I found myself wishing the team was already busy on the phone calls. I’d sit Troy down and do my work while the team did theirs.

Stop it, stop it, stop it! Damn it, Monica.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it,” he said, much too sardonically.

“Yeah, some of us don’t have an active partner living with us.”

“All right, get busy. Put your team together, or start making calls yourself, or something. But get this done. I’m meeting with Jim now, for a bit.”

As he walked back out the door, I looked hard at the papers. And sighed.

“Damn. This is hell of a task. I guess, on the bright side, he must trust me, to put all of this in my lap.”

I picked up the phone, thought a minute, made a few calls. I knew some people looking for work.

An hour later I had a dozen people in front of me, each working with their own phone and blazing through their own page of the list.

“At this rate, this shouldn’t take long to get through. Phew, I’m good.” I sat back a few minutes and supervised . . . and damned if my mind didn’t drift back to Troy. Ugh.

I’ve got to figure out some way to occupy myself so I don’t dwell on him all the time. He’s not mine. He’s gone. He’s moved on, damn it. Stop obsessing.

“Monica, I’m Jason,” the man said as he waltzed into our makeshift phone bank. “There was no one out front, so I assumed it was warranted for visitors to come straight in.”

“Can I help you?”

“I think so,” he said, smoothly.

Excellent eye contact. His voice rich. A firm but not overbearing handshake. The Versace suit looked custom tailored. The Hawes and Curtis shirt and tie impeccable. If he’d had sunglasses on I’d have been worried.

“What can I do for you today, Jason?”

“I need to speak to Troy. It’s of the highest importance.”

I laughed. “Seems everything is of the highest importance these days. Things ain’t like they used to be.”

“That’s correct. Which makes the urgency of our meeting much more vital.”

“Do you already have a meeting set up with him?” I didn’t remember him saying anything about this.

“No, Monica, but I trust one will be arranged immediately. I don’t have long to be here. Crises are sprouting up around the globe.”

My nerves were firing. Something was beyond strange here.

“If you can track him down quickly, tell him that Jason Rothschild is here to see him. I’d very much appreciate it.”

Rothschild? Why does that seem familiar? Or important?

“All right, let me track him down and see what I can do.”

He smiled warmly and quietly waited for me to get the hint and take off right then to find Troy.

Troy, what have you gotten yourself into now? I swear, boy, you can’t seem to stay out of trouble.

“You all continue making these calls. I’ve got an errand to run,” I said to the newly appointed phone bank workers. Heads nodded.

I pulled out my cell as I left the room. Hit the speed dial button 1. Yes, Troy occupies that number in my speed dial. I know . . . pathetic.

Ring.

Ring.

“Come on, boy. Pick up.”

“I’ve picked up, Monica. What’s your problem?”

“Ugh. Smart-ass.”

“Now that the small talk is out of the way, wanna tell me why you called?”

“There’s a man named Jason Rothschild, I think, looking for you. Wants a meeting with you. Now. He’s waiting.”

“OK.”

“Should I be worried?” Of course I’ll be worried no matter what he says.

“Not any more so than with everything else that’s going on.”

“Who’s this Jason person? Why does Rothschild seem so important?”

“Only because the Rothschild family heads up all of the international banks, and used to control much of the planet’s wealth.”

“Oh.” I heard his laugh on the other end. So cute. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything else.” He laughed again.

“Hey, I don’t know who’s important and who ain’t. It’s all politics and bullshit to me.”

“As it should be. Nothing for you to worry your little head about. Thanks for telling me.”

“He’s not going anywhere. What are you going to do?”

“I know. I’ll be right there. You get back to the phone calls.”

“They haven’t stopped. I can multi-task. Sort of.”

“OK, get back to the clones who are doing your job for you.” He laughed again as he hung up.

Clones. How dare he.

All right, now to figure out what to actually say to Mr. Rothschild.

Important international banker, my ass. Now you’ve been demoted, Mr. Rothschild, to penniless building holder. Ha!

As I walked back through the phone bank door, I noticed Jason was looking out the windows, admiring the view, it seemed.

“Nice vantage point Troy has. I’m assuming he’s on his way?”

He spoke everything without even turning to look at me.

“Yes, he said he’ll be right here. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back to work.”

“Yes, those phone operators have been busy worker bees. Doing a great job. Which will allow you to sit back and rest a bit.”

Now he turned and gave me a big smile. I know it was supposed to feel warm, but instead it felt altogether sarcastic.

“Look, I’m not up on politics and bullshit, but it seems to me you want to apply some kind of pressure to Troy. All I can say is try. Many have before you. He’s not the easiest to crack. I don’t believe you’ll get your way.”

“Scorned woman talk, that is. Thanks for caring, but I assure you, I’m very persuasive.”

“So is Troy.”

“I know you two have a history and I respect that. It’s OK, Monica. I’m not here to harm him.”

“And another thing, how do you know our history and my name?”

He answered with another smile. One that even reached his eyes.

Come on, Troy. Where are you? This guy is creeping me out.

As if on cue, the door opened.

“Hi, Jason. Let’s talk in private, shall we?” Troy didn’t wait for an answer. He immediately led Jason to another office.

I couldn’t help it; I felt pinpricks all over my body. I didn’t care how much Troy said not to worry. My nerves were on edge. This wasn’t right.

“Earth to Monica,” Jim said.

“Huh?”

“Wow. You look like you’ve had a vision of the end of the world. Don’t worry, we already passed that point, thanks to Troy. Now we’re putting it back together,” he said with a chuckle.

“I’m not so sure, Jim.”

“What has spooked you so much, Monica?”

“Have you heard of a Jason Rothschild?”

“Yeah, who hasn’t?”

I made a deliberate effort to give him a look that could kill.

“Oh yeah, those who aren’t in our profession may not have heard of him . . . maybe. But even that would be rare . . . but then, you are a rare woman,” he smiled.

“Quit being a smart-ass. Who is the guy?”

“Only one of the more powerful men in the world. No big deal. Well, he *was* that powerful, until Troy took over. Now he’s not much of anything other than a prominent name.”

“Troy’s in that office meeting with him.”

“And your point?”

“You’re not scared?” I almost lost control of my mouth at the realization that Jim didn’t care. Troy could be murdered behind that door right now.

Wow, Monica, when did you get to be such a paranoid person?

Jim grinned, looked directly into my eyes. “Rothschild holds little more power than Royce used to. And you see where Royce is now.”

“Yeah, but I never saw Royce wearing Versace suits, Hawes and Curtis shirts and ties, and . . . “

“Royce doesn’t care so much about fashion. Doesn’t mean he holds any less power.”

I huffed.

“Yes, I know you’re high class, Monica. Translation: high maintenance. You require money from your man. You, of all people, should know about Rothschild.”

I punched him.

“Thanks, now I can get workers’ comp. Oh yeah . . . that probably isn’t available now.” He was really enjoying himself today.

“You’re having entirely too much fun at my expense.”

“It’s just so . . . easy right now, though. Which is actually not like you. You’re usually much sharper witted than this. And much less paranoid.”

“I know. I don’t know what my problem is.”

“Eh, you’re just withdrawing from Troy, that’s all. Like any other drug addiction.”

“Troy is not an addiction!”

“Wow. Calm down there, little miss. I’ll just step away now. Let you delegate tasks to your minions.”

“Ugh! Go. I’ll just sit here and hope that Troy comes back out of the office with Rothschild. Or hell, even without Rothschild, for all I care right now.”

“Geez. Remind me to never get on your paranoid side. Troy will be fine, hon. Don’t worry.”

As Jim walked down the hall and turned the corner, out of sight, I held my breath. I think I held it for a while. I felt like I was about to turn blue when Troy finally opened the door and came back out.

Amazingly, he smiled at Jason and turned back to me. I was almost afraid Jason would draw a gun while Troy wasn't looking. OK . . . I *was* afraid.

It took every ounce of my willpower not to jump up and wrap my arms around him.

“Hey babe,” Jessica said as she walked around the corner.

Phew, good thing I didn't jump up.

“Hey, hon, doing OK?”

He should be asking me that! I'm the one sitting on pins and needles worried about him and this Rothschild guy.

Wow . . . where did that come from?

“Yep, doing good, sweetie.”

“Good. I just met with a prominent member of the Rothschild family.”

“They just won't give up, will they? Can't they work like everyone else?” Jessica said.

How is it that even she knows who this character is?

“How are you today, Monica?” Jessica asked so sweetly.

“Other than every nerve tingling, I’m doing fine. Just delegating all of my work to this makeshift phone bank.” I squinted my eyes at Troy on that one.

“Nerves tingling? What’s wrong?”

Did I just say that? Oops.

“Oh, I was just concerned with this Rothschild guy.”

“Gotcha. I understand that one. It’s all right, though. Troy can handle him.”

She gave him a kiss on the lips.

Those are my lips. Stop, Monica!

“I’ve gotta get some fresh air, if you two don’t mind.” I got up before they could answer.

“It’s OK, Monica. I’m sure your workers can handle themselves, all alone, for the next half hour while you putter around outside.”

Troy let that last sentence follow me down the hallway. I knew it was meant out of fun. That he wasn’t being mean. I told myself none of them were being mean. I used to be the one pushing their buttons. Now they were pushing mine with anything they said, it seemed.

I felt like I wanted to crawl out of my skin. What the fuck was going on with me?

One minute I've got ants crawling under my skin everywhere, the next my mouth is dry, and through it all my mind is racing and I'm not sure of anything anymore.

It seems the anxiety gets worse by the day, too.

I thought we were all supposed to be doing better, lifting the weight of the old anxiety and pressure with Troy leading things now.

Why wasn't it working for me?

I needed some great sex. That's what it was. I just needed a really, really good fuck. I hadn't had one in way too long.

I curled my fingers, blew hot air on my nails, rubbed them on my shirt.

That's what it was. That was the difference. I was used to regular sex. I needed that again. I felt rather satisfied with the resolution I'd just come up with.

Now, just need to find that partner that can do my body justice. The problem is . . . the only one for that right now is Troy. I can't seduce him. I can't fuck up him and Jessica. They've got a good thing going.

But, my God, I was wet just thinking about him in me again.

Damn, the thought of digging up another guy to satisfy me was daunting. At least standing on the rooftop was nice. Apart from the noise of the fans or whatever this

stuff was up here, it was pretty quiet. Always a nice place to come to get away for just a few minutes.

I closed my eyes, letting the coolness of the air soak into me. Letting it try to calm me. Hopefully it would massage and soothe my nerves. I inhaled a deep breath, letting it flow through my body. I wanted to feel it all the way down in my toes, if possible. Feel the coolness caress my body. I needed that right now.

“Time to get back to my phone bank. I’m sure I’m the glue holding them together.”

Opening the door and walking down the steps back into the office, I let the coolness linger on my body, in my mind.

“Bout time you came back,” Troy said as I walked in.

“Aw, how cute. You were lost without me.” Ah yes, my sarcasm was coming back.

“Well, not exactly, but you do have a job to do. I’m not supposed to be doing it,” he winked.

“Troy . . . “

“Yes?”

“I need . . . “

“Finish the sentence. Need what?”

I stopped. Decided to speak quietly into Troy’s ear.

“I need sex. Great sex. I need a release. Haven’t had one since the last time we had sex.”

“And I’m supposed to help you how?”

“Well, obviously asking you to personally help would be overstepping your boundaries, but maybe you could . . . suggest someone?”

“Wow, I’m a pimp now. Nice. I’ll add that to my worldly obligations.”

“Babe, I just need some relief. Seriously.”

“I know. I’m sorry. Just playing with you.”

“It’s OK. I know you are. And see, I’m so on edge, this is why I’m looking for someone to help me get a release. I need one . . . *bad*.”

“I’ll see what I can use my connections to do.” He kissed my forehead.

How sweet, how tender, how romantic. How . . . hot.

“How do you handle hormones that jump from making your skin crawl to making your panties wet, with seconds in between?” I asked Jim when he walked back in to check on me. Well, he said he was checking on progress, but I knew better. “I think I’ve got the flu or something.”

“You handle that by giving the drugstores some business and picking up a pregnancy test.” He turned away, then halfway turned back. “Anything I should mention to Troy?”

I felt my jaw tighten. I had absolutely no control over it. It felt like lead suddenly. And I was speechless. Me, Monica, speechless.

“Or have you hooked another ex-multi-billionaire now?” He winked.

I regained control of my mouth, at least temporarily. “I never gave Royce any.”

“Good to hear. But you should still pick up a pregnancy test.”

“I couldn’t be. I just couldn’t. No. It’s impossible.” I cleared my throat. “No, impossible, just can’t, just . . .”

“Just pick up a test and get the negative out of the way, then.”

“You’re right. Prove that I’m not. Yes, that’s what I’ll do. Right away. I’ll just head down there. Just as soon as . . .”

Jim put his right hand over my mouth. “Less talking, more feet moving.”

“Yes.” One muffled word through his hand. I nodded my head.

“Don’t worry. I’ll watch your phone bank for you. Now go.” He smiled. Jim always was the courteous one.

“OK, be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“Monica.”

“OK, OK!”

I willed my feet to move quickly. Out the door, through the hall, down the elevator. *Troy, you’ve GOT to change this elevator music. Geez, it’s enough to drive anyone fucking crazy.* Opened the front door and hit the nice refreshing air. Ah. I spread my arms wide. I needed to let it penetrate my body.

“Jim can’t be right.” The words came out before I could stop them. “Ugh, I’m going crazy. What the fuck is wrong with me?”

I willed my body to relax. Scanned the people walking into the office, the vehicles parked orderly in the lot.

“Everything and everyone has their place in this world, ‘cept me right now.”

Drugstore. There’s one on the corner.

As I walked, the air rejuvenated me.

Maybe I just need to work outside.

After navigating the intersection, I finally made it through the door the drugstore. I scanned the shelves quickly. Found the desired box.

Oh, how lovely. A long white odd shaped thingy that I need to pee on. And it has symbols on it. Lovely. Just lovely. Why can't men be subjected to this?

I grabbed the box, walk to the cashier.

“Is that all?”

“Yes.” I was suddenly feeling cranky again. Wanted to snap at the cashier. But why? He wasn't rude.

Ugh, I better just be going insane. This shit is for the birds. I can't handle nine months of this.

I threw my money, snatched the box, and found myself running back to Troy's office building. I had the uncontrollable urge to get the result right then.

Rushing into the first bathroom downstairs, I pulled my pants down. I'd ripped the box apart, threw it on the floor. Holding the device under me, between my legs, I felt like the world would move on without me before I could push anything out onto this testing thingy.

This is ridiculous.

I realized I couldn't do this here; I needed more privacy. I threw my pants back around my hips and rushed to the private elevator.

Fucking music. Damn it Troy, you're changing this shit today.

When it finally stopped, I was waiting forever to see the doors open, then I ran into the bathroom just inside Troy's office. Yes, where the phone bank is. And Jim.

Don't look at me with that grin on your face.

Dropping my pants around my ankles again, then checking to make sure the door was actually closed, I studied this thing in my hand again - as I willed myself to let something drip. I knew it was there. I could feel it.

Finally . . . a drop. Surely that's not enough for this test.

"Ugh. Come on, damn it."

"You OK in there, Monica?"

Shut up, Jim. Just shut up. I wouldn't be so damn focused on this test if you hadn't mentioned it.

Another drop.

You're probably in there with a smile on your face, thinking all of this is funny. Probably have me on some wild goose chase, getting me all worried that I might actually be pregnant when I haven't even had sex in a while. Damn you, Jim.

Finally . . . the waterfall came.

Now what the hell are these symbols? Is this the one line, two line thing? Where'd that box go? Damn it, it's downstairs, on the floor.

I looked at the results window.

Patiently.

Too patiently.

“With all the technology today, they can't improve the design of these things.”

“You sure you're OK in there, Monica?”

“Hush up, Jim.”

“I heard that.”

I heard him chuckle. I wanted to call him a bastard, but I couldn't help smiling.

“Get your ear off the door and stop eavesdropping, perv,” I said, then laughed.

A plus sign.

Oh my God. No. How? When? Who? No. This is wrong. No.

I took a deep breath. Didn't help. I sank to the floor, letting my back slide against the wall on the way. My hands covered my face without me telling them to.

“Jim? I know you’re listening. Help me . . . please.”

The door opened. He slowly walked in.

I looked up at his face. Saw the concern in his eyes.

“This is one time I really don’t want to be right, Monica.”

My lip trembled. I was trying to force air into my lungs.

He looked directly into my eyes. I felt like he was seeing my soul. I didn’t care right then. I needed help. And I knew I could trust him.

He stepped forward. Extended his hand.

I grabbed his with mine.

He pulled me up.

As I stood, my legs felt shaky. I’d swear my soul was unsteady at that moment. I met his eyes directly now.

And . . . with me having absolutely no control over my emotions . . . tears started pouring from my eyes, my lips parted and sobs came out. I could hear them, but I couldn’t control them.

Being the gentleman he is, Jim pulled me against his chest, wrapped his arms around me.

He ran his fingers through my hair, soothed me.

I wanted to curl up and die.

“What am I going to do?”

“You’ll be fine, Monica. You have so many friends. We are all here for you. You know that. You know we won’t waver. We are by your side through thick and thin. You know this.”

“Thank you. I’m scared.”

“I know, and that’s OK. You’ll make it. I promise.”

We walked out of the bathroom. Sitting in the chair, making the effort to control my breathing, I looked at my stomach. I couldn’t believe it. It hadn’t sunk in yet. The phone bank was going on without a care in the world. At least something was.

Even though I'd had a couple of hours to calm down after Jim consoled me, I still felt the emotions boiling just under the surface. I guessed I'd have to deal with this for a while.

"Wow, I've never seen such an . . . un-confident Monica. Sorry to say it that way, but damn. This is so unlike you," Troy said as he walked in and came to a dead stop, looking at me.

"Yeah, well, I've never been in a situation quite like this before."

"Need to talk about it?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"Monica, we may not be together anymore, but I'm still here for you if you need to talk."

Oddly, that felt comforting. I met his eyes with my head tilted down. That used to be a seductive look for me. Now it seemed like a "lost" look. Which was how I felt.

He stepped to me, put his right hand under my chin, lifted my head to look into my eyes directly.

"I'm serious. Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"Can we talk privately?"

"Of course. Let's go to the office down the hall."

I followed.

In seconds we were walking through the other office door. As it closed, I heard the deafening silence of the room. Then it hit me . . . there was nowhere to turn, to run, to get out of talking to him now. Me and my big mouth.

“You know, normally you’d use a situation like this to seduce me, and I’d have to tell you ‘no’,” he said with a smile.

“Yeah. I miss that Monica.”

“Wow. All right, spill. There’s definitely something going on in your mind.”

“You know how we used to talk about having kids?”

Troy’s eyes got big. Quick. He swallowed. Hard. He licked his lips. Drew his lips into his mouth. Surprisingly, he kept eye contact with me the whole time.

“I’m not gonna come between you and Jess, don’t worry.”

He opened his mouth. No sound came out. Nice. At least I wasn’t the only one who was speechless from this.

I know I’m cruel, but this was a relief to me.

“I . . .” he stuttered.

As if it were a natural thing to do, I wrapped my arms around him. Laid my head on his shoulder. He

wrapped his arms around me, too. Held me close. I felt him sigh.

“Look, I’m not gonna be a bitch about this, OK?” I raised my head, looked him in the eye.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say or do right now,” he said.

“I understand. I’m lost too. I’ve never experienced this before. I don’t know what to do, what not to do, how to handle myself. I don’t know anything right now.”

He pulled me closer.

Without thinking about it, I put my lips on his.

After a second of hesitation from both of us, I felt his lips move, returning my effort.

As his lips opened for mine and I tasted the sweetness of him again, my hormones suddenly kicked into overdrive. I reached my left hand up, grabbed the back of his hair, pushed his lips harder against mine. I pushed my body harder against his.

God, I’ve been so horny anyway, need a release so bad. But I didn’t plan to seduce Troy again. I’m trying to be a good girl with him.

I broke my lips from his for just a second. “Troy, we don’t have to.”

His strong arms pulled me harder against his body.

All my defenses shattered.

I turned into an animal and just started taking in all of his presence. Before I realized what I was doing, I had my pants down, ripped his off, pushing him down to the floor. I didn't care about foreplay right then. I needed relief.

“You look like you’re feeling much better. Amazing what a few hours can do for you, huh?” Jim noticed, with a smile, as he checked on me again.

Yeah, amazing what a phenomenal release can do for you, too.

“Thanks for checking on me. I’m doing fine right now.”

“You’re much more relaxed. I can see it in your body. And your color is looking better, too.”

I smiled and looked into his eyes. “Thanks.”

“And the sparkle is back in your eyes. All right, I’ll leave you alone for a while.” He was back out the door before I could say bye, not that I really wanted to at the moment. I was finally feeling more at ease.

Amazingly, I didn’t feel the need to talk. The worker bees were all still handling the phones. They hadn’t had any issues with their calls in a bit. I was sorting my mind out. The world was good again, at the moment.

Until the gold knob on the solid wood door turned and Royce walked in.

“I hear the Rothschilds visited today,” he said.

“Yep, whatever that means.”

“It means Troy’s real battles are just starting. I was one of only three people in the world who held power over the Rothschilds. They will bring the heat down on Troy.”

I’m too busy basking in the after effects to worry about those politics.

“I’m sure he’ll handle it,” I managed.

“You must’ve taken a sedative or something.”

He studied me.

Got his face close to mine.

“You’ve had sex.”

My eyes suddenly widened. My lips parted. I tilted my head to the right as a dog would when trying to figure something out.

“On that note, I’ve got some business to attend to.”
He walked out.

Phew, getting through this work day was actually rough. I don’t see tonight being much easier, since I’m living with Royce. I kinda want to curl up in a ball and hide.

As I walked in, I could hear Royce and Alicia talking in the living room. Not about me, fortunately. This gave me the chance to slip through to my room.

“Monica,” Royce called from the other room.

Oh God, not the person I want to see right now.

“Monica, you need to come here.”

Great. Just great. Definitely not in the mood.

The door swung open slowly, and I saw a shocked face peer in.

“Monica, you really need to come here,” Alicia said.

“Why?”

She grunted. “You just . . .” She looked down, looking for words. “You just really need to come here.”

Strange behavior for Alicia.

“Fine. But I’m coming right back in here. I need some quiet time.”

“Um, you may need more after this.”

“Real enticing way to get me out of this room,” I said.

I got up and walked behind Alicia, wondering what could be so damn important. I mean, seriously, the last thing from Royce today was him getting in my face and saying, “You’ve had sex,” like duh, why is that any of your business?

I followed her through the hall, into the living room . . . and when my eyes landed on him I froze. Suddenly I felt paralyzed. My mouth went completely dry. My heart thumped like a bass drum. I couldn’t believe who was standing in front of me.

Brad.

“What . . . ? How . . . ? Where . . . ?”

“I know you’ve got a lot of questions.”

His voice sounded rough.

“You could say that.”

“I’m sorry to just pop in here like this, but I’ve really missed you, Monica.”

“No, you’re fine. I’m not bothered by that. In fact, come back to my room. We’ll talk.”

“You sure?” Brad asked.

“Yes.”

“Really?” Royce asked.

“I said yes, didn’t I?”

Royce closed his mouth but raised his eyebrows, and then turned the other way. Another father figure. The last thing I wanted right now.

As we walked back to my room, I felt an uncanny sense of calm. Walking through the door, I stepped aside, motioned Brad in, and closed the door.

“Have a seat,” I told him, pointing to my bed.

“Obviously you’ve had a lot change in your life,” he said.

“That’s putting it lightly.” *If only you knew how much has changed. What’s going on inside me.*

I sat next to him. Amazingly, I was comfortable with that.

“I’m sorry about how I pushed you away before,” I said.

“Baby, don’t worry about it.”

“No, seriously. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have treated you that way. In fact, I used you pretty much the whole time we were seeing each other. I was a real bitch to you.”

“I was no walk in the park, either.”

“Brad, stop. I’m trying to apologize.”

“OK, gotcha. I accept.”

“No. No, you don’t. Not that easily. Not after how bitchy I was.”

“What? You want me to punish you or something? Hon, I recall I became kind of cold too, before my little accident.”

“Accident?”

“Yeah, accident. The news report got buried among all of the financial catastrophes that have gone on lately.”

“I thought you just vanished because I was pushing you away. Being a bitch.”

“Ha ha. No. You weren’t getting rid of me that easy.” He put his left hand on my right knee.

I didn’t mind. “What happened? Is that why you look a bit banged up?”

“That would explain it, yes.”

I put my right hand on his left knee, moved it up to his inner thigh. “Tell me, what happened?”

“I was hit, smashed into a pole. Crushed the car.”

“How did you make it out?”

“Well . . . I was thrown from the car actually. If I hadn’t been, I’d have been killed.”

I covered my mouth with my left hand.

“It’s OK. I’m here, I’m all right now.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“I know. But I’m here now. With you. That’s what counts.”

He moved his hand up to my inner thigh.

“Well, we definitely have a lot of catching up to do.”

I got up, walked to the door, locked it. I wasn’t in the mood for interruptions tonight.

He raised his eyebrows at me.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I didn’t do that as an invitation for sex. I just don’t feel like any interruptions. I’ve been a bit cranky today.”

“You, cranky? Nah, can’t see that at all,” he laughed. And covered his shoulder in anticipation.

I shrugged my shoulders, acting like I wouldn’t do anything. Till he moved his hand. Then I punched him.

He feigned shock.

I sat back down on his right.

He put his right arm around my back. “I’ve really missed you. I had so much on my mind before my accident. So much I wanted to talk to you about. But that’s not

important right now. Why have you been, um, unusually cranky?”

“Good boy, for saying unusually.”

He squeezed my left knee with his free hand.

“Well, I’ve been a bit sick for the past week.”

“Sick? Or bitchy? Just kidding.”

“No, seriously. I’ve been sick. As in throwing up.”

“Well, you are a partier,” he said.

“I know, but the problem is, I wasn’t partying. It wasn’t hangovers or anything I could’ve induced like that.”

“OK.”

“I couldn’t figure out what it was. Alicia kept waking up with me. It didn’t hit her either, I guess.”

“What am I missing?”

“Jim suggested I run down to the local drug store yesterday and pick something up.”

Brad listened patiently.

“I ran back to the office. I slipped this thing between my legs. Frantically, actually.”

“You got a new vibrator?” Brad asked.

I sighed.

“No. Listen. Carefully.”

“I’m sorry. I am listening, just not catching on yet.”

“I’m carrying a little bundle of joy inside me. Although I’m not exactly joyful at the moment.”

I watched it sink in. His eyes were narrow at first. As he caught on, his eyes widened. He turned his head and met my eyes. I saw a mixture of awe and fear.

“We’re having a baby?!”

Oh shit, hadn’t figured that into the equation. Fuck. I don’t know if it’s his or Troy’s!

“Seriously?!”

“I . . . I suppose so. I think I need a professional test,” I added quickly.

“Of course. Of course.” He grabbed me tightly in his arms. “Oh, I’m not hurting your breasts, am I?” He pulled away.

Before I could answer, he had his lips on mine. After about five seconds he released.

“I’ve got a lot to learn about this,” he said.

“Wait. This is all still spinning in my head.”

How is it that he’s accepting it so easily?

“Come on, lay down with me, baby. Let me just hold you, and our baby.”

Not knowing what else to do, and needing peace and quiet anyway, I obliged. I lay down, let him spoon me. I have to admit, it felt pretty good.

“Careful, or I may fall asleep like this,” I told him.

“Please do.”

Amazing.

That was my last thought before darkness took over.

It was both weird and strangely comforting waking up with Brad's arm still holding me, his body pressed against mine.

I pulled his hand to my mouth, kissed the back of it. Put it against my chest. I inhaled deep, wondering if this was what I had to look forward to. I tried to smile, but my mouth wouldn't allow it.

Brad stirred.

"Hey babe, good morning," he said and kissed my ear.

I turned my head, said, "Good morning," and then jumped up before he could ask for morning sex.

"Grab you a shower so you can get to work. I'm gonna enjoy this bed for a bit, if you don't mind," he said.

Damn. Amazing.

"No problem." I'm definitely not arguing. Time for hot water.

The water streamed down my body. Droplets gliding over my skin, taking the soap I lathered with them. Picking up all the filth from yesterday as they slid down to the shower floor, taking it all out the drain.

A fresh start. A fresh day.

Let's start all this again.

Yeah, right.

Like I can really shake off all that happened yesterday. The baby. Brad. Everything. It's with me, tattooed on my soul. With me for life.

Suddenly I felt the need to cry again. Tear drops started blending with water drops.

Hey, at least I wasn't throwing up this morning. Thank God for small wonders.

Alicia had breakfast waiting for us when Brad and I walked into the kitchen.

“You’re becoming all domesticated. Or something,” I told her.

“Hush your mouth. I’m a computer geek.” She beamed.

“Don’t worry, I take stomach medicine before I eat,” Royce said.

Seeing Alicia’s evil eye, Royce wrapped his arms around her.

“I still love you though, baby,” he said as he kissed her neck.

She smiled.

“Y’all are making me sick. I’m sure you don’t want me to feature another round with the porcelain.”

With that said, Royce stopped in his tracks and looked at me. Rolling his eyes, he turned away.

“It’s lovely having another father figure around,” I said smartly in Royce’s direction.

“I can feel the love in this house,” Brad said.

“Can’t we, though?” Alicia said.

“Awesome. You guys feel all the love you want. Right now I’ve had my share,” Royce said.

“How sweet of you. I thought you were a changed man,” I said.

“I am. But not changed enough to tolerate those daily rounds of yours.”

“OK, enough potty talk,” Alicia said. She looked at each of us in turn, obviously hoping to break things up with a chuckle. No luck. “I know, I’m no comedian.”

“You don’t say,” I agreed.

“You and Royce are just too much alike,” she said.

“Which is why you love us both,” I said.

“You I tolerate. Him I love.” Her eyes twinkled.

12

Brad dropped me at work with nothing more than a goodbye kiss. As I walked into the office, greeting everyone, I was still trying to piece all this together. My body and mind were so out of whack, and Brad wasn't acting how I expected.

Did his accident change something in him?

Troy pulled me into that same side office we were in yesterday. "Hey, are you OK this morning?"

"So far. I didn't throw up last night. I actually slept pretty well."

"So you're OK on both fronts?"

"Oh, so you know Brad popped up last night, too?"

"Yes." He looked into my eyes, held my shoulders with his hands, gently.

"Yes, honey, I'm fine." The sarcasm came out involuntarily. I guess I still have that streak of Monica in me.

He pushed his lips together. "All right, just making sure." He let me go, walked to the door.

"Wait, Troy."

He turned. Looked at me.

"Yes, I'm OK. Thanks for asking."

“No problem.” He turned and walked out.

13

“Jim, this checking on me stuff is getting old,” I said as he walked in again.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” he said with a smile. “Actually, I have another reason for stopping this time. Now that everyone else is busy, I need to bring something up to you.”

“Oh great, what now?”

“You need to see a doctor.”

“No shit, ya think?”

“Seriously. You don’t know how far along you are or whose this is.”

“Shit. How far along I am. Hadn’t considered that.”

“As I said, you need to see a doc. Right away.”

I thought a minute.

He touched my shoulder.

Thank you.

“I feel like I’m doing this all alone, Jim.”

“I understand, because you pretty much are. Yet another reason to find out whose baby this is. Whichever guy it is, he will support you.”

“How do you know either one will support me?”

“We both know Troy will. And, I also happen to believe Brad will. It seems he’s fairly smitten with you.”

“Damn you. Who taught you to be so observant?” I squinted my eyes at him.

“Ha! Everyone thinks I’m observant except my wife.”

“Nah, typical stuff there. She’s your wife, after all.”

I covered my face with my hands.

“I know you’re overwhelmed. Very understandable right now. Especially with Brad making an appearance again.”

I looked at him in shock.

“What the fuck? Does everyone have some spy camera that follows me around?”

“Ha! No, hon, we just watch out for each other.” He looked tenderly into my eyes. “Now seriously, you need to be getting this doc thing out of the way.”

“Yeah, yeah. But who, where, how, when? Ugh.”

“It’s called the Internet. You connect through a computer. You search things and people.” He feigned a gasp. “You know what? You could probably find a doctor on there, wow.” He squeezed my shoulder.

“Fuck you.”

“Sorry, hon, I’m spoken for. And so are you.”

“Ugh. Damn. Damn!”

“That’s not a bad thing. Especially right now.”

“I’m not gonna enjoy having you hang around through this pregnancy, am I?”

“Probably not. But you’re stuck with me. So deal. And dial.”

“Dial? You’re so old school.” I patted his hand tenderly.

“No, I’m not old school. I’m straight up ancient. Now dial that doc.”

With that he walked out of the room.

Fortunately for me, doctors these days aren't backed up for a week. In fact, some are almost desperate for the business. Since the hospitals had closed and the medical profession had nosedived, docs now are trying to get back into the game. So there I sat in one office, a couple hours after calling them. I saw the typical boring magazines sitting beside the couches. The ugly wallpaper that I think is supposed to calm you, or make you feel comfortable, or some shit like that. All it did was irritate me. The carpet wasn't any better, barely thick enough to walk across.

And the seats. Wooden arms, thin cushions, and stacked right next to each other so you didn't have elbow room if someone was sitting by you. How lovely.

"The doctor will see you now."

"Me?" I asked.

She looked around as if there was anyone else in the waiting room. Gave me a smile.

"I know he's busy back there. I can wait."

"It's OK, sweetie," she said, "Everyone is scared at first. Do you need a sucker?"

The sarcasm wasn't lost on me. I follow her lead to the back.

She measured my height. 5'8".

"Well, that hasn't changed."

She smiled.

Takes my weight. 130 lbs.

“That hasn’t changed yet either. I don’t want to see it when it does.” I looked at my breasts. “I don’t want to see them when they do, either.”

“If you’ll step into this room,” she said as she opened the door. “He’ll be with you in just a minute.”

I stepped inside, she shut the door.

I wonder if I’ll have to get undressed. I already feel so violated. Strange.

I voluntarily shook my body a bit, flapped my arms, tried to calm down. I sat on the paper that covered the bed. I looked for stirrups . . . yep, down at the end.

Thank God they are put up, anyway.

Seconds later, the door opened.

“I’m Doctor Feinstein. It seems you need to look into your pregnancy.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

“No need to be that formal here. Relax. Let’s figure out a possible due date for you.”

Amazingly, I was still fully clothed.

“Lie down on the bed. We’ll simply raise your shirt up to see your belly.” He took out a white wired device like a thick wand and put some cold gel on it. I gasped from a cold shock as he touched it to my skin.

The picture popped onto the screen. White lines and curves against a black snowy background. Then . . . movement.

“Excellent,” he said.

“Is that good?” *Well duh, Monica.*

He smiled.

I deliberately smoothed my breathing.

“We have a heartbeat,” he said as he moved the wand around, spreading gel all over my belly.

He punched keys, entered data, took measurements. After a few minutes of this, he studied the screen.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

He was quiet. Maybe he temporarily forgot his bedside manner.

“Doc?”

Still quiet.

OK, granted, he’s used to being busy, used to having his nurses perform the routine tasks. I understood that, but . . .

“Doc?”

“Oh yes, I’m sorry. I was observing.”

“Observing what? A problem?”

“Oh no, no problem at all. Baby looks good at this point.”

Phew.

“You say you haven’t had sex in the past month, roughly. Correct?”

“Yes. Why? Is something showing up fishy?”

He chuckled. “No, ma’am. Just clarifying. So you should be at least one month along.”

Suddenly my nerves were alive all through my body. Paranoia was setting in, my mind was racing. I needed to pee.

“Don’t baby me.” *That didn’t sound right at all, saying it to an OBGyn.*

He smiled again. “Nothing to worry about, Monica. May I call you Monica?”

“Yes, please do.”

“OK, Monica, don’t let the paranoia suck your life out of you. It’s normal, and I understand, but these are normal questions.”

I cleared my throat. I thought that stuff was supposed to help clear anxiety. It doesn't.

He studied the screen more, moved the wand around more, took more measurements.

"Looks like you're eight weeks along. Would that line up with your sexual history?"

I thought about that a minute.

"Yes, it would." Relief washed over me. Then dread hit me. I still didn't know whose it was. I couldn't ask for a DNA test. That would make me seem . . . slutty.

"You don't look very relieved," he remarked.

"Just a lot to take in."

"Yes, that's true. Give yourself time to process."

He wiped the gel off my skin, pulled my shirt back down.

"You're free to go. Set a follow up at the window up front. One month."

He walked out.

As the door shut, I lay a minute more and let this sink in.

I'm pregnant. I'm really pregnant. And I still don't know if it's Troy's or Brad's. And I don't know how to find

out yet, either. Well, short of looking like a slut by asking the doc for a DNA test.

“Why can’t things ever be easy?” I let the words hang in the air, then fall on empty chairs.

Walking out of the office, carrying my reminder note with me, I felt the tingling coming back. The nerves, the paranoia. I hoped this wasn’t a symptom I’d have to deal with for the next nine months. Wait, eight months, and not a second longer. Maybe even seven months.

Right, Monica. This is life. When does life ever go as it’s supposed to?

Shut up.

I turned quickly, wondering where that other voice in my head came from.

“Get a fucking grip, Monica. Damn, you’re not psycho. You’re just disoriented. That’s it. Get a grip on yourself.” Again, the words fell silently to the ground.

“Happy now?” I handed Jim the appointment reminder. “One month.”

“So you are pregnant. Who’s the dad?”

I squinted my eyes at him.

“This is going to be a lovely nine months,” he said.

“Seven months. Eight at the most. And not a second longer. Damn it.”

“I’ll just leave you alone for awhile. Get you some water. Just stay away from the caffeine.” He backed away from me.

“Hey, honey!” Brad popped his cheery face around the wall. “Hope you’re having a great day. I wanted to stop by real quick and bring you these.” He pulled out a bouquet of flowers from behind his back. Extended his hand and offered them to me. I just looked at them. He laid them on my desk. “I see you’re not having a great day.”

Like, DUH!

“Sorry. Been stressed and busy.”

“Yeah, I understand. I mean, your body is changing.”

I kept my head angled down, but looked up at him. Did he seriously just say that?

“And I really don’t want that piranha bite I see coming. Sorry, hon. I’m just trying to cheer you up. I wanted to see you for a minute. I miss you.”

His words should have been warming me, even melting my coldness. Instead, I felt even colder.

“I’ll be fine, dear. Thanks for the flowers.” I put a big smile on my face now. “Let me put them in some water till I leave.” Gave me the opportunity to get up and walk away.

He pecked me on my right cheek as I walked by.

“See you tonight,” he said.

I walked away. It like everything was closing in on me. Damn it, I used to have so much control. Control over these men, over certain things that happened. My sex appeal alone was powerful. Add my brains to it and I did pretty well. Now I feel my nerves jitter and shake (and not from sex). I’m a bit lost.

I walked outside, got some fresh air. Seemed to be the most relaxing thing lately. Ground floor. Watching people walk in.

I spotted two gentlemen who looked suspiciously similar to that Rothschild guy. One was wearing a Dolce and Gabbana suit, the other a Luis Vuitton.

Damn. These guys apparently won’t quit.

I walked toward them.

“Can I help you guys? Are you trying to cause trouble or something?”

“No, ma’am. No trouble from us. We’d simply like peace and order. We are looking for Troy Estrada. Where can we find him?”

“He’s working, like most folks want to these days. But I gotta warn you, if you want to find him, he’ll likely chew you up and spit you out. We had another fellow visit him already.”

“Rothschild. We know. He’s an associate of ours. Didn’t get the answers we wanted.”

“I see. Sounds like my Troy. And who are you two?”

“Kennedy,” said the one in the Dolce.

“Vanderbilt,” said the Luis Vuitton. “Did you say ‘your Troy’?”

Oops.

“Yes. I misspoke.”

They looked at each other. Vanderbilt approached me, studied my eyes. Kennedy then approached me. His hand covered my mouth and everything went black.

I pried my eyes open, feeling the skin peel apart, crust falling down my cheek. My eyelids felt heavy as cinder blocks. A mixture of smells hit my nostrils. One of a man-made fragrance floating through the air, the other couldn't be manufactured. It was the smell of death looming over you. The heavy, filthy tar and soot appeal of the damned, who happened to be in the room with me. The stale air that made your stomach produce more acid and churn away till it either eats you up or releases the overload.

I was lying in a bed in some swanky hotel room. Both men were sitting at a table next to me. My body felt numb. My head swam in confusion. The lights all seemed too bright, while the decor itself had been created to be warm and inviting. No matter what man did, he could not take away the dreadfulness of death.

I looked down. Amazingly, I was still dressed. And tied down.

“I see you're awake,” Kennedy said.

“What do you want?”

“What else? We want to set things straight,” Kennedy said.

“I think you should be warned, right now. First, I'm pregnant. Second, Troy will find me.”

“Ah yes, we are counting on him finding you,” Vanderbilt said.

“Why me?”

“Why not you?” Vanderbilt again.

“I meant to think that, not say it.”

“You’re crazy, aren’t you?” Kennedy.

“I’m feeling more and more that way with this pregnancy.”

I looked around. I didn’t know where we were. I wasn’t familiar with these high end hotels. It’s not like I had vacationed frequently or anything.

“You can look for signs of where you are all you want, but you’re not talking to Troy anyway. So it’s useless. We’ll deal with him when he calls,” Vanderbilt chimed in.

“You do know I’m not actually his girl, right?”

“We know he cares about you a great deal. We know you’re his ex-wife, and we know you’ve still had sex since,” Kennedy added.

“You guys think you’re so connected. Think you know everything.”

“If we knew everything, Troy wouldn’t be in power any longer. But this is helping us restore that balance,” Vanderbilt smiled.

“If I lose this baby . . .”

“You don’t want it anyway, and frankly, I don’t care if you lose it or not. Not our concern.” Vanderbilt looked at Kennedy after saying that. They both nodded.

Suddenly my blood boiled.

“You guys are fucking assholes.”

“Thank you. We’ll take that as a compliment.” Vanderbilt again.

I spit, but it didn’t reach them.

They both laughed.

“How long have you had me here?”

“About two hours now.”

Damn. What did they do to me to put me out for two hours and transport me? “Troy should be calling anytime.”

“We’re counting on it. We know it shouldn’t take him too long,” Kennedy said as he studied me.

“Those hungry eyes are creeping me out.” Though they didn’t look hungry at all. More studious.

RING.

Saved by the bell. I hoped.

Come on Troy. Get me outta here, baby. I’ll repay you, whatever it takes.

Kennedy picked up. “Is this Troy?”

Silence as he listened.

“Yes, we have Monica and the . . . love child.” He looked at me. “Satisfy our demands and you can have her back. The child will cost you more.”

That’s why they picked me! Damn it.

“Release our money back to us and you can have Monica back as your mistress.”

His mistress. I’m getting more and more infuriated.

“If you also want the child, we want you in exile.”

Exile? What?! Wait . . . how are they going to give me back without this child?”

“You have 24 hours to decide.”

Decide? What?! Troy doesn’t know if he wants me?! Deep breath, Monica. Come on, you can do this.

Kennedy hung up. He turned to me and smiled. “I guess we’ll see how important you are to him now.”

“Don’t you people understand your reign of terror is over?”

“You haven’t seen a reign of terror yet,” Vanderbilt added. “But don’t worry, in 24 hours you’ll start getting a taste of it. The bombs are already set. Everything is in place.”

Bombs?

I suddenly felt very sick, and it wasn't the baby this time.

“You people will learn to stop playing with fire. Keep your hands where they belong,” Vanderbilt said. “This money isn't yours. It's ours. It always will be. There is no other way. We are the royal blood lines.”

“You guys are sick. Bunch of in-breeders.”

“It's called protecting the royal blood, and it must be done to keep impurities out of our lines,” Kennedy said. “We were taught by the elder Rothschild. He taught Hitler as well. Too bad the man went insane.”

My stomach turned over. Started doing multiple flips. And the baby wasn't liking it, either. I closed my eyes. Tried to sleep. It would be better than hearing all this. It was beyond sickening.

Come on, darkness, take me back. Engulf me, please. I beg you.

I concentrated on slowing my breathing. Blocking all sounds out. Tried to take my mind elsewhere. I felt my stomach churn more.

Have to sleep. No choice. Can't deal with this if I'm awake.

I heard the door bust open and guns go blazing. Briefly I hoped I'd get hit by stray bullets. I didn't feel anything, though.

Once it went quiet, I felt a hand on my left arm.

"Monica, are you OK?"

A familiar voice. Foggy mind. But . . . that's Troy. I opened my eyes.

I smiled.

"Thank you." Tears came from my eyes involuntarily. He wasn't supposed to see that.

"Hope you didn't think I was abandoning you. Just took time to find you and get to you."

"Where are we?"

"New York City. Long Island, actually."

"A swanky hotel on Long Island?"

"No, hon. This isn't a hotel. This is a private residence. Hey, at least it's ocean front. Not that you'd have known that. Biggest estate on Long Island."

"Wow."

"Yeah, but you're safe now. I'll get you back home." He kissed me quickly on my lips. "Brad is outside

waiting for us. I made him stay outside in case something happened to me.”

Reality set back in. Brad . . . Troy. Father of my child. Damn.

Troy carried me to Brad. Brad laid me across his lap in the car. Caressed my hair and face.

“Royce,” Troy said on the phone, “We found her. Yep, Kennedy and Vanderbilt are dead.” He listened. “I realize they won’t be the only ones hunting me down. That’s why I need everyone to go under for a while.”

Go under? If this wasn't so terrifying I might actually enjoy this spy stuff.

“I’m not going under anything,” I said when he hung up.

“Don’t be obstinate, Monica. This is not the time for it,” Troy said as he looked into my eyes through the rear view.

“Obsti-what? Troy? What the fuck are you talking about? Why are you giving me orders? I’m not on your damn clock right now. Don’t fucking leave me in the dark. What the hell is going on? Who are these men?”

“Wow. Damn. There’s a peek at the old Monica,” Troy said.

“Shhh. Don’t urge it on,” Brad said while rubbing my left knee.

Damn these emotions. They were quickly sending me over the edge of sanity. I inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly.

“All right, let me try this again.”

“Wow, she hit reset?”

“Stop being a smart-ass, Troy,” I threw in, just for my own satisfaction.

He smiled.

“As I said, let me try this again.” I cleared my throat. “What . . . the hell . . . is going on? Simple enough to answer that, right?”

“Simple question. Not so simple answer,” Troy responded.

I looked at Brad.

“Nope, don’t look at me. I’m about as lost as you are here. Remember, I’ve been missing for the last month.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“Monica, those two men are of old royal families. Royal blood, at least in their own minds. Their families imported themselves from across the ocean. They think that makes them more important than the rest of us. These families used to hold tremendous power in this world. They obviously want that power back. As with any cartel, they weren’t the heads of the families. Which means I still have

entire families that are after me and will now be hunting me down.”

“So where does that leave us? What can we do? Run for the rest of our lives?” I asked.

“Not at all. But we do need to be aware of the threat in order to fend it off,” Troy explained.

“So what’s your plan, Great One?” Brad lent his voice to the conversation.

Brad looked at Troy.

Troy looked at Brad.

“Oh, am I supposed to answer that? I don’t see a Great One in this car.”

Nice way to cut the tension.

“Batten down the hatches, as they say.” Troy smiled. “Which means we need to talk to Royce and learn everything we can about these families. He’ll obviously have the answers we need. Then we’ll decide whether we need to continue laying low or come out guns blazing. Not literally, by the way. But we have to know what we’re dealing with before we can form a counter.”

“Counter? Can we shop later, Troy? I’m more worried about these hatches right now,” I threw in, happy to contribute some little thing to the words zooming over my head.

“Defense, Mrs. Monica,” Troy added.

“Mrs.? Mrs.? You better watch your tongue, Senior Citizen Troy.”

Now I had the joy of laughing, all by myself. Though I saw Brad smiling as he rubbed my back.

“I’ll carry you, hon,” Brad said as we pulled back up to the office.

How sweet . . . blah.

“That’s OK. I think I’ve rested enough now to walk on my own, but thank you.” I grabbed his hand and squeezed.

Whatever happened to my ‘sex on a stick’ side? It seems a million miles away now.

“So what are we doing here? Everyone is gone for the day,” I said.

“I’m not sure where we’re safer right now. Here or at our homes,” Troy said. “We’re meeting Jim, Royce, and everyone else here to figure that out.”

“I see. So your plan is already starting,” I said.

“Something like that.”

We walked in together, Brad with his arm around me. Strangely, that made me feel good. I thought I still liked Brad. I thought. He sat me down in a nearby chair. He perched on the corner of the desk.

Troy leaned against another desk. “It’s OK. It’s just us,” he called out.

Everyone walked down the stairs.

“Royce, we need details. Who are we dealing with? What will be their next move?”

“Since they don’t have money now, they’ll be pulling in all their favors. Which will be a lot of pulling. They’ll have assassins crawling all over.” Royce swallowed hard.

“So I take it we’re not safe at home,” Troy said.

“Troy, we aren’t technically safe anywhere right now. Not at home, not here, not in some underground bunker.”

“We need to move first to keep the upper hand,” Troy instructed.

“Moving first is dangerous. I don’t like dangerous,” I said.

I didn’t have to look. I felt every head turn and look at me. Every single one. My hair began to stand on end and the electricity fizzled through my body.

“All right, y’all don’t have to burn a hole through me.”

“Pregnancy does not work well with you. You’re just not ‘you’,” said Royce.

“Is there anyone who doesn’t know?” I asked.

“Ha! Oops,” Alicia slapped her hand over her mouth after the unexpected outburst.

Royce laughed. “Monica, you are a completely different person now. That’s something when even Alicia can tell.”

“I know I am. And I don’t like it. I want myself back.”

“Oh, give it about a year,” Troy threw in.

“Shut up,” I said.

“We’ll enjoy this while it lasts,” Jess added.

“Glad someone will, while I feel my skin crawling every day.”

“That won’t last the whole time,” Troy assured me.

“Is this meeting adjourned? Because I need to get away from this conversation.”

“You’re free to go,” Troy said.

Sitting outside on the cool ground, letting the air soak into my skin again, alone with my thoughts, I closed my eyes.

“Ma’am,” a male voice said.

Oh God, not again. I have to quit coming outside.

I opened my eyes. I raised my right brow.

In front of me stood this man in a leather jacket, long dark hair, black beanie with grey and white stripes. He spoke smoothly, but not like the Kennedy and Vanderbilt guys. At least that was a slight relief. His body language wasn’t aggressive like theirs, either. He was more laid back, confident.

“I’m looking for Troy Estrada. Do you know where I can find him?”

“Who isn’t,” I sighed.

“I know. That’s why I’m coming around when the world is asleep.” He stepped towards me, but in an easy manner. He seemed to magically slip a card from his hand. “Here’s my business card. People call me a financial guru. I call myself a financial planner. I’d like to help Troy with making this new government profitable, unlike the previous ones.”

Something about him seemed sincere. And interesting.

“Hang on. I’ll take your card, but I’ll also introduce you to him. After I feel this cool air a second more.”

“It is cool out here. Wouldn’t want you to get sick.”

“Ha!” I said, and then covered my own mouth. “Don’t worry, my sickness ain’t coming from the weather. It’s coming from the package in my belly.”

“I see.” He smiled. “Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Let’s head inside,” I said. “Troy is right in here.”

As we walked in, heads turned. I could see the defensive body language spring into action as Royce, Troy, and Jim all tensed and leaned forward. Ready to attack.

“It’s OK, guys. This isn’t one of the big three families. Troy, this is . . . what is your name?” I turned and looked at him.

“Troy, my name is Francis Kane.” He extended his hand to Troy’s, shook.

“Obviously you know I’m Troy. This is Royce and Jim,” Troy said as he pointed to them.

Kane shook their hands as well, being just as friendly with them.

“What do you believe you can do for me, Kane?”

Kane slipped his right thumb into his pocket, let the hand hang. “Troy, I help people manage and multiply their greenbacks. Or, more accurately, I’m a penny watcher. I

look at everything going out and coming in, what percentage is allocated to where. I figure out what really needs the money and what doesn't. I'd like to offer my services to you to make this new government actually show a profit. I figure, if we can swing a profit for the government, the country overall will be much better off."

"Good sales pitch," Troy said.

"Nothing, and no one, is that good," Royce said.

"It's your job to be skeptical, Royce. Cool your heels, bulldog," Troy smiled.

"Hey, if you're not skeptical, you'll take any old bum in and take their word. It's good to be skeptical," Kane said. "The difference with me is, I have credentials, a track record." He perched comfortably on a free desk.

"Good to hear. What is your track record? Who have you helped to increase their wealth?"

Kane smiled. "The very people hunting you down. Kennedy, Vanderbilt, Rothschild. The richest, excuse me, what were the wealthiest families in the world. You see, they can inherit all the wealth in the world, but if they mishandle it, they won't keep it. That's where I came in."

"Are you still working for them?" Jim asked.

"No sir. And I won't go back to them. I went into hiding when you took control of the money, Troy. I'm glad you did that, actually. I was looking for a way out from those families. They trap you. When they went running

around blindly, I saw my chance and took it.” He steepled his hands, pointing toward the floor.

“You’ve done your research,” Troy said.

“Absolutely. You don’t become as successful as I was without doing your homework.”

“I’m liking you so far,” Troy said. “I’ll get to know you a bit more before I throw any money into your lap. You understand.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. If you’d operated any other way, we’d have issues,” Kane said.

“It’s hard to know exactly who I can trust these days. This group here, these are my people. I know them. I trust them. With my life. Anyone else has to earn their way into this group now.”

“Excellent,” Kane said.

I saw Royce squint his eyes. Apparently he felt really uneasy about Kane. I looked at Jim. Either he had no feelings whatsoever, or he hid them well. Royce cleared his throat, took Troy aside a minute.

Troy walked back, took Kane’s hand again, shook. “Kane, you get a temporary pass to our team. Let’s see what you can do.”

The events of the day floated around my mind as I lay in bed trying to relax.

Thankfully, Troy had decided we should all get some sleep in actual beds. I didn't care that he brought us to a hotel. At least it was a bed. And Brad was rooming with me, so that was a plus, too.

Lying in his arms, I tried to let all of my emotions flow away from me. I missed my old self. In the recent past, me and Brad would have been having wild, passionate sex right now. Instead, I was dissolving in his arms. Not that he was complaining, but I knew this was not me.

I need to rejuvenate myself. We're in a hotel. A nice one. Away from everything, we hope. I should enjoy this as much as I can.

I turned to Brad.

He was awake, watching me, looking deep into my eyes now that I was looking into his.

I raised my right hand to his head, ran my fingers through his hair. Yes, I'd used and abused him. He'd used and abused me. But I pushed it further with him. Yet, here he was, comforting me. I'd found a new appreciation for him.

Closing the distance between our faces, I let my lips brush across his.

I didn't expect it, but I felt my breath catch.

I brushed our lips again.

This time he opened his mouth more. I extended my tongue to taste his.

My hand found the back of his neck and I sealed his lips against mine.

As he kissed me, a moan came out of me and became a part of him. I pressed my body against his.

Damn clothes!

Not wanting to pull away from his lips, I wrapped my legs around his left leg, putting it up against my crotch. I started grinding.

He put his hand on my ass, squeezed, pulled me harder against his leg, and then pushed me back, put me on my back.

I looked at him in wonder.

He glided my shirt over my skin, took it off. Rather smoothly for him, he unfastened my bra and slipped it off. Then he seemed to flip my pants open, took one hand on each leg and slid those off as well. Underwear aren't my specialty, so he didn't have to worry about that.

In the next moment his lips found my neck; his tongue trailed my shoulder. I felt his lips slowly kiss every few inches of my skin on their way to my right breast, where he made circles around my nipple with his tongue.

I felt an ache start in both breasts, wanting more.

He obliged.

His lips made dots from my right breast to my left one, then trailed around that nipple as well. God, both nipples were so hard.

I feel a path traced from my breasts down to my stomach as he slowly made his way between my legs, stopping at my belly button and trailing around that as well.

He was inches from the glory, then stopped. Raising up, he met his lips to mine again.

My mouth was so hungry for him. I almost inhaled him, wrapping my hand around his neck again. Our lips moved against each other's like a symphony, then he broke free again. Took his mouth back to my glory. The second his tongue touched me I almost felt the dam break, but I managed to hold it back.

He put pressure on that special spot with his tongue, made circles. I was grabbing the sheets, trying to remain relatively quiet, though small moans couldn't help but escape.

After what seemed like just a few minutes of this, my dam broke for the first time.

"We're just starting," he said as he raised up, put his lips back on mine, and plunged himself into me.

My mouth tried to break free of his to let the next moan escape, but he wouldn't let me. Which intensified things even more. My back was arching and I can't help it.

My hands frantically searched for something to grab. I found his back and dug my nails in.

This sent me over the edge again, but more powerfully. With this one I pushed against him harder, pushing him inside me deeper.

He reciprocated and pushed further.

I pushed my breasts against his chest, craving the feel of his skin against mine everywhere I could.

His mouth was still hot and heavy on mine, he was finding deeper spots within me, and my explosions were coming closer and closer together. He took his mouth off mine, lifted his chest away from me, grabbed my legs and raised them up.

Putting them over his shoulders, he opened me up more to push in deeper. As I felt him plunging in and out, not only were my sensations lasting longer and longer, but his was close now, too.

I reached up, grabbed his upper arms, squeezed them.

He went deeper.

I reached higher, caressed his neck.

He went deeper. His eyes started to roll back.

I reached even higher, put my hands in his hair . . . and then grabbed and pulled.

He gasped, his mouth opened, his eyes closed, and he released his explosion inside me.

I needed that.

I pulled him down on top of me, kissed him softly.

He rolled to my side, turned my back against him, and held me.

Now, I could sleep in his arms. I let the darkness take me over.

It took till around noon the next day before I saw the door to Troy's office open for the hundredth time while my minions worked hard on the phone. This time, Jim's face whipped around it and he walked my way.

"Monica, we need to talk," he said abruptly. "I know you want to put this off, but you can't. You've got a baby on the way and two men . . ."

"I stopped this morning on the way in," I spat out.

"Yes, I know you want to delay . . . what?"

"I said, I stopped by the doc's office this morning, on the way in. I think you need to clean your ears out,"

"For?"

"The DNA test, obviously. Come on Jim, keep up."

"Wow, uh." His mouth hung open.

"Yeah, I know, you thought I'd be harebrained and just keep evading the answer."

"Well, I can't say . . ."

"You don't have to. You rushed in here with that on your mind," I smiled again.

He closed his mouth, swallowed hard.

"Anyway, I got the test done this morning. Seeing as how their office was totally backed up, you know, with

the thousands of people the doc sees on a daily basis now . . . they'll have the test back pretty quick."

"How quick?"

"Within 48 hours, they said."

"Good. At least one thing will be off the full plate," Jim said with a sigh.

"Why are you so relieved? You're not pregnant." I smirked.

"Hey, I know as well as you do what's at stake. What happens if the results go one way or the other."

"Which way do you want them to go?" I asked.

"You never mind that, Missy."

"Now you're starting to sound like an old geezer."

"That's because I am an old geezer, thank you very much."

"You said it," I beamed.

"Old smart-ass Monica."

"It may be a smart-ass, but it's still sexy."

"Yep, you're coming back full steam."

"Isn't it great?" I plastered a fake smile, cocking my head to the left. "Now, I need to get back to work observing

these minions. I suggest you become useful again too, Old Geezer.”

“Your wish is my command . . . Commander.”

“Get out of here, Jim, before I have to kiss you.”

“Yeah, I’d say that’s my cue to go if there ever was one.” He smiled and left me with my thoughts.

And boy, did those thoughts roam. From baby belly to DNA tests to two dads to . . . these Kennedys, Vanderbilts, and Rothschilds. They actually remind me of a part of the old me. The Monica that thought I was entitled to having men cater to me. How I could simply say jump and expected men to ask how high, just because I was saying it. I used to say I knew my power over men. In reality, that was the only power I felt I had and I think I was scared not to use it. So I guessed these families were the same way. They were scared now that they no longer had the power they’d treasured for generations. All gone in an instant. And we all know how dangerous people can get when they suddenly lose power they’ve coveted and held onto with everything in them.

I guess this world just never will change. Depressing shit, this is. People just can’t be happy unless they are creating drama and hardships for someone. God, why can’t everyone just get a life? Their own life, that is. Speaking of life.

I rubbed my belly, then patted it.

I actually have a life in here. A life that is depending on me. Me . . . Monica, the sex-on-a-stick

woman. I'm growing a life inside me. Wow. Amazing. How did it pick me? I'm always fighting guys off that want inside me, now I have a baby planted inside me.

I shook my head. The world is full of mysteries. Not likely I'm going to figure this one out any time soon.

The door opened again. This time Kane walked through. Making eye contact with me and sparing a smile, he walked to Troy's desk.

"Are you using this computer right now?" Kane asked me as he turned it toward him.

"Nope, just sitting here lost in my thoughts," I said.

"Excellent. I need to take a look at a few things for Troy."

"Do what you gotta do," I said and kept one eye on him.

He sat at the computer and seemed to ignore me. He took out a notepad and pen, jotted stuff down. His eyes narrowed and brows creased as he concentrated on the computer screen. Hitting a few keys, he took more notes.

"So you've really done the books, as they say, for those big families? You really helped them become rich?" I'm trying to strike up some conversation, see how he handles it. Play my little spy role.

"Yes, I handled their books. No, I didn't help them become rich. They had money. But they wouldn't have kept their money without me."

"Oh, so you helped them be crooks?"

He laughed. "No. I helped them on their business matters. I kept their business finances in order. Telling them what they could spend on their business, like an

allowance, and keeping them reined in so they didn't get reckless."

"Oh, gotcha. Funny to think about someone giving a billionaire an allowance. Maybe that's what we should do with these guys now."

"That's actually not a bad idea. Of course, at this point, it's almost like we're giving everyone an allowance, just to get the cash flow circulating again. In order for us to help the little man start businesses to create jobs to circulate the cash, you could almost see it as an allowance for the business man. Banks used to call them loans," he winked on that note.

I realized he was giving me the same game plan Troy had been talking about.

"Are you just telling me this 'cause that's what Troy said he wants? Or is this really where you're coming from, too?"

"Oh no, this is totally where I'm coming from. I'm a businessman at heart. That's why I'm good with these numbers. That's also why I wanted to leave those other families. They became crooks. I want everyone to be able to prosper. And they can if they are simply given the chance."

He leaned back in the chair, put the note taking on hold.

"I've always had the philosophy that if government tells us what to do and when to do it, it takes our freedom away, which takes our money away because the

government will automatically take more money from us to pay for what it wants us to do. If the little man is given an opportunity to pursue his dreams, he can then create jobs for others. This prospers everyone involved. This circulates money. Then, I have more people to consult for, which helps me to prosper more too. See, it's a win-win all the way around."

"Careful or you'll win me over. Then I'll have to tell Troy my little spy game backfired."

He smiled. "I'm sorry to make your little spy game more difficult. I'll try to accommodate you more next time."

"There's a next time? Oh goody, I'll sharpen my talons."

"You do that. I look forward to sharper talons and more conversation. I plan to hang around a while. I like what Troy wants to do," he said as he got up from the computer and walked out.

We wrapped up the work day and Brad gave me a ride home.

“How long do you plan to stay at Royce and Alicia’s?”

“I don’t know. Hadn’t thought a great deal about it. Everything is turned upside down these days and the recent turmoil is so fresh. Plus, now that I’m pregnant, I don’t know what’s safe for me to do.”

“What if I stayed with you? Would that be OK?”

I smiled. It’s not like I hadn’t been thinking about it.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I bet you’ve been thinking about it all day,” I said.

“I won’t lie and say I wouldn’t love it. I’ve missed you.”

“I know. I think I’ve missed you too.”

“You think? Well, in that case I guess I’ll just stay at a motel. Stay out of your way and all.”

Ah, he’s set the fish hook. He was reeling me in, and it was working.

“No, you’ll stay with me.” I took his right hand in my left. Squeezed.

“I need to get another job myself and help us get our own place,” Brad said. “We need to do things right for this baby.”

Hm, maybe he'll be a decent dad. Even if he is a bit of a pushover.

“Well, you could always come work for Troy,” I chuckled.

“I think everybody in one way or another is working for him these days.” He raised his brows and glanced at me.

“That’s true, when you’re holding all the wealth.”

“Maybe I’ll just start my own business. Get him to bankroll it. Help the country and all, you know?”

“What would you do?”

“Teach people how to run an office efficiently,” he said, “and teach the guys how to not show favoritism towards that smoking hot minion they have.” He pushed my hand away and grinned.

“Minion? Minion?!” I laughed, pushed him back.

“Yeah, that’s what all management calls their staff. Didn’t you know that?” He blew across his curled fingers, rubbed them on his shirt.

“Fine, I’ll make you my staff now.”

“Ha!” He slid me a sideways glance.

“You’d take the job and you know it,” I said.

“Actually, there’s a talent I have that you don’t know about yet,” he said.

“You think so? Sorry, I know about your talent of being a smart-ass, Brad.”

“No, I learned that one from you.”

“This is already feeling like old times,” I said.

“I know. Isn’t it nice?”

“This part is, yes. So what’s your hidden talent?”

He glanced at me again. Pulled the car over. Looked me straight in my eyes. “I’m a musician. I play an electric guitar. Could play lead if I had a band.”

“And that’s supposed to impress me? Oh, I know, girls just *love* musicians,” I said mockingly.

“I can play well enough to give lessons.”

“Awesome. So get your ass over to Troy’s and ask him for the start up money,” I said.

“I just might.” He slapped my hand as I patted his knee, and then pulled the car away again to finish the trek home.

As I drifted into dream land that night, my mind actually had good thoughts running through it.

You know Monica, this just might work out for you after all. Brad has a plan. You have a job you can work for a while. You're a part of rebuilding the country, although you don't know the technical details about that. You've got the best friends anyone could ask for. A baby on the way. A man who wants to step up. Just a month ago everything seemed so dark. Now, little rays of light are peeking through. Almost looking like a wall is about to fall down and sunshine will just cover everything.

Sigh.

Almost seeing that light at the end of the tunnel.

Darkness overcame me.

And in the darkness, strange dreams invaded my mind.

Dreams of guns popping, bodies exploding, blood flying. Dreams of old oppressors, new friends. I'm floating somewhere. Where am I going? I can see the city below. It looks like a new city. Cars like I've never seen before. Buildings absolutely gleaming under the rays of sunlight. White puffy clouds. Warm air massaging my skin.

Storm clouds moving in, rain pouring down. Lightning flashing, striking trees and fuel. Fires starting. Flooding. Catastrophe after tragedy all over the city, the world. I don't know what's happening.

Then Brad's smiling face. A baby's cry. Brad's sweet kiss. A little girl running around, laughing. A nice, huge house. Our own home. Money in the bank, Brad successful.

I can feel the incredible warmth and love from him.

I don't want to wake up.

But I must.

My legs were wet. I needed to pee. I thought I'd already peed.

Getting up, I stumbled to the bathroom, turned the light on. As I sat down, my foggy mind snapped awake with horror. I had blood all over my thighs.

“Brad! Brad!!”

I heard him jump out of bed, run to me.

“What, hon? Are you OK?!” He ran into the bathroom. His eyes widened with horror. “Oh my God! We need to get you clean, baby!”

I heard him, but my mind didn’t focus on getting clean. Instead, I pictured something else.

The addition, or maybe now . . . abyss . . . that could be in my body. A life was growing inside me. It might not be, now. I was responsible for. For this, life. I am. Whatever is going on inside me, I’m responsible. I don’t know what happened. What did I do? There could be a hole, a missing piece, lost. What if there is?

I seemed to have lost the ability to talk. I started shivering. Shock.

No, not now, not shock. I need control. Answers.

Brad put a warm washcloth on me, started wiping me off. He assumed the role of nurse almost like he’d done it for years. Using warm water and soap, he wiped down my legs, thighs, hands, stomach, and ass.

Then he held me while my body shook and shivered. My mind wanted to race but couldn’t.

“We need to take you to the hospital, Monica,” he said.

“No. We already know it’s gone.” I sighed, sobbed.

“We need to go and have them check you out. Maybe there’s something that can be done. Somehow save . . . “

“No, don’t say that. I know it’s not true and don’t want to hear it.”

“I know you’re crushed right now, baby. I want to help you. Any way that I can.”

“Then just hold me.”

“I need to let Alicia and Royce know . . . “

“NO! Absolutely not.”

Brad looked at me, lifted my chin to look into his eyes. “What, sweetie?”

I looked back down.

“Monica, this is not your fault.”

“How do we know that? How do we know anything?”

“Monica, baby, that’s why we need to get you checked out. We need to find out what happened. They can tell us.”

“Why are you still saying ‘us’? I’m not pregnant anymore. Don’t you want to go?”

He only pulled me to him. Held me tight. Rubbed my back. Kissed my ear.

Finally he spoke. “I absolutely am not leaving you because of this. If anything, I’ll stick by your side even more now. You need support and I need you. That’s how it is.”

He placed his lips on mine, kissed me.

“Now, I’m telling Royce and Alicia. They are great friends of ours, of yours. They need to know. They care a great deal about you. I’ll be right back.” He cupped my face, looked into my eyes. “I promise.” He kissed me again before he left the bathroom.

Minutes later I heard Alicia and Royce rushing in. *God, don’t make such a fuss, people.* I felt like I wanted to throw up.

I pulled the trash can around just as they stepped in.

The stream gushed forth.

“Baby, are you OK? I’m sorry, I know you’re not. What can I do? We need to get you to the hospital, sweetie.” Alicia, assuming the mother role once again.

“I bet you thought mothering me was over.”

“Don’t you dare, Monica. Royce is here too. We love you. I’m so sorry this is happening.”

I started shaking again. Brad took my arms, held me.

“Monica, we are taking you to the hospital, like it or not,” he said.

He lifted me up, carried me to the car. They laid me down, all crawled in. I managed to come as close to sleep as I could on the way.

Upon seeing the bright lights of the hospital, I started blacking out.

I was in and out enough to see ceiling lights flashing by me, hear muffled voices, see nurses with needles, see people wearing masks, feel people lift me and move me around. I felt my clothes being removed, but I couldn't open my eyes to see who was doing it.

I felt an IV in my arm, had no idea who put it in or when. Felt warmth spread over my arm, my shoulder, my chest . . . and I drifted off again.

I see warm fields filled with corn as I run through the stalks. I hear laughter, turn around to find out where it's coming from. Little girls I remember from my childhood, it seems. How are they little girls now? I look down at myself . . . I'm wearing a little dress. A couple of boys are trying to run and hide with me, from the other girls.

The field is mixed with smells. Corn sprouting, stalks growing, wild flowers, warm sunshine baking the earth, fresh green grass, spring breeze bringing the scent of far away food and domestic animals on it. The warm air caresses my skin, calming me.

One of the boys stops me, turns me, kisses me. Just a peck, then his face turns red. I smile and run away from him.

I trip, fall. The boy was right behind me, so he falls on top of me. He is embarrassed again. Tries to say sorry, stuttering it out.

I opened my eyes, saw extremely bright circles of light. Two of them, right in front of me. I heard a doctor talking to nurses. My eyes closed again.

The boy is back on top of me. He starts pushing on the ground to get up. I pull him back down.

“Stay down, be quiet, or they’ll find us,” I tell him.

He doesn’t speak. Just stares into my eyes. His eyes are bright green. Cute, really. His hair is short, bleached blond from being in the sun so much over the summer. I reach up and touch his mouth with my pointer finger on my right hand. He stiffens up.

“It’s OK,” I tell him.

I hear the laughter growing louder. The corn stalks are starting to move. The others must be getting close.

He’s still staring into my eyes. I touch his hair.

The girls find us, crash down on us. He is pinned between me and the other girls; his head ends up nestled on my left shoulder.

“Monica.”

He’s speaking, but muffled.

“Monica. Monica. Can you hear me, Monica? Take my hand if you can hear me.”

What?

“Monica. Wake up, baby.”

I gasped for air, shot up in the bed, my face ended up right in Brad’s face. He inhaled sharply, closed his mouth and swallowed hard. He gently pushed me back down.

My heart pounded in my chest. “I’m thirsty.”

“OK,” he said and he gave me the water that was already sitting by the bed.

He put his hand on his chest, inhaled. “You scared the shit out of me when you popped up like that.”

“Sorry. What happened? What did they do?” I tried to clear the dream, or whatever it was, from my mind.

“They checked you. Took out what was left, cleaned you up. I’m sorry,” he took my hand. “I love you.”

Sure, he picked now to say that.

I sighed, felt my lip start to tremble. Felt the tears start forming in my eyes. As they ran down my cheek, he took his finger and wiped them away.

“The DNA test results are in, too. We didn’t look. Figured that was your place.”

Do I really want to know? Who knew sharing a glass with both men could determine paternity.

Back home, in bed, Brad and Alicia waited on me practically hand and foot. I was still holding the piece of paper in my hand, folded, that held the results. The paper I haven't looked at yet that tells me who the father was to my baby. This was the only thing I had left of who was growing inside me. I'm almost afraid that once I look, that feeling will be gone.

What if it was Brad's? What if it was Troy's? Does it even matter now?

Honestly, yes. Whichever man the baby belonged to deserves to know. But do I want to know?

"Baby, I think we should go for a ride today. Me and you. Yesterday we were held up in the hospital all day. Today you're resting, which is good. But I think some fresh air will help you, too. Go for a ride out into the country. Just see the sites. Get back into civilization and enjoy the beautiful day," Brad suggested.

"Sounds pretty good, if I'm up to it." I felt the paper in my hand again.

Brad looked at my hand. "You know, it's completely up to you what you do with that paper. But I want to say this. If you just continue to hold it and that's all you do, it'll eat you up inside. You'll need to either toss it and move past it or look at it, gain the knowledge of what's inside, and then move past it. Sitting on the fence will only make it fester."

I smiled, sighed. "I know."

He stepped into the bathroom.

I unfolded it halfway, tempting myself to open it. I closed my eyes. Put the paper against my chest. I felt the sorrow deep within my heart.

Brad came back to me.

“Brad, talk to me a minute.”

“Sure, hon.” He sat down on the bed.

“If this paper says this baby was Troy’s, how will that affect you?”

He immediately smiled. Even his eyes smiled.

“I’d be fine with it. I would’ve still loved the baby as if it was mine. I still love you, regardless.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’d want the baby to be mine, obviously. And yes, it was a shock when you were in the hospital and news came around that this test result was in. But since you were out and I had nothing else to fill my time, I was forced to face the possibility. I realized I couldn’t hold it against you.”

“Wow. You really did some deep reflection.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of that lately.”

“I guess it’s helped?” I asked.

“In more ways than you can know right now.”

“I’m glad you came out with me. This day is beautiful,” Brad said as he drove us through the open fields.

“Yeah, it’s reminding me of the cornfields from my childhood.”

“Really? Interesting.”

I sucked in the fresh air. Felt good in my lungs.

“I’ll pull over up here so we can just sit outside for a while. Let you take it all in. Let you heal some more.”

Minutes later we were sitting on a blanket he had spread over the ground. He leaned back on his elbows. I sat Indian style.

And looked at the paper in my hand again.

He didn’t say a word.

I started opening it again. Halfway.

I looked at the paper. It lay half open in the palm of my left hand. All I had to do was open it one more time and look at the words on it. That’s it.

I can do this. I can handle it. I’m Monica. I can handle anything.

Taking a deep breath, I flipped it all the way open . . . with my eyes closed.

I looked over at Brad. He looked at me with the sweetest smile on his face.

“You’ll be OK, babe. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I let my eyes drift down to my hand. My eyes focused on the words.

The paternity of the baby . . .

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I immediately broke down crying. Tears started streaming down my face, my body was shaking.

“I’m so sorry, Brad! I’m so sorry . . . “ I cried. I screamed. “I’m so sorry I did this to you. I’m sorry for treating you the way I did!”

He raced over and held me.

“It’s OK, hon, it’s OK. I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere, no matter what. Nothing has changed with me. Regardless of whatever that paper says or what happened in the past. This is the present. I’m here.”

I cried more.

“Can you ever forgive me?”

“I already have. It’s done. It was done before you ever opened that paper.”

I pulled back. My face was soaked.

“Brad,” I looked into his eyes. I searched. I only found comfort. “Brad . . . I’m sorry. The baby was Troy’s.” I cringed, waiting for - I didn’t know what.

He held me tighter. “It’s OK, sweetie. I still love you. I’m still here for you. No matter what, like I said.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am.” He wrapped his arms further around me. Pulled me into his embrace tighter. Kissed my head.

“No one can know about this. I don’t want to fuck up Troy and Jessica. OK?”

“It’s our secret. Don’t worry.”

We sealed our little pact with a kiss.

Driving back home, Brad held his right hand on my left knee, and I held my left hand on his hand.

“Monica, we still need to have a place of our own. We need to have more privacy and build a home for ourselves.”

“You’re deadly serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I want us to start looking right away. We’ll need to save money, obviously, but we need to start looking. See what’s out there.”

“Well, it should be easy to find something right now,” I laughed. “With the turmoil in the world, I’m sure we can find some great deals.”

He laughed. “We could take advantage of that, sure.”

“All right, the idea is warming on me. I’ve just had so much stress and everything getting tossed and turned in my life. I don’t feel like I’m good for much of anything right now. But a fresh start does sound good.”

“That’s exactly what we both need right now. A fresh start,” he said. “I’ll even talk to Troy about working for him for a while. Help us move faster with this. I really want us to do this, Monica. I want us to make our relationship solid.”

“Don’t bring up counselors already. I sense that’s where this is going,” I said, but I laughed.

He smacked my leg.

“Brad . . . I love you too.”

Suddenly he stopped the car on the side of the road.

“You OK?” I asked him.

“Wonderful,” he said, and leaned over to put his lips on mine. “Just wonderful.”

I looked into his eyes. They were sparkling, a fierce green. His face was completely lit up.

I feel warmth filling me up.

Do I deserve this? Yes, I do. I deserve to be happy, to be loved, to be adored.

“Last night it felt so good to be held in his arms,” I told Jim. It was mid-morning and he was doing his customary check-in.

“Good,” he said simply.

“You know, you can stop this paranoia anytime. Stop worrying about me, Jim. I’m gonna be OK. I promise.”

“Why would I worry about you?” He smiled.

“You can’t stop worrying about me.”

“That’s true. I worry about all of us. You just a bit more right now.”

“Yeah, well, my big scare has apparently passed. Which should be to everyone’s relief.”

“Except yours.” He looked into my eyes.

I looked away. I couldn’t keep eye contact with him right now.

“Monica, I know you’re hurting. We all care about you, which means you don’t have to hide it from us. This group of ours, it’s a special thing.”

“I can’t look at you right now. I’ll cry.”

He put his right hand on my chin, turned my head to look at me.

“I know, and you should. You should let it out. It’s a good, healthy thing.”

“But . . .” and I couldn’t hold back anymore. Tears started running. “I’m hurt, I’m scared. I don’t know what to do. I don’t want things to change, but everything is in such turmoil. Brad is treating me really well. I want to treat him right. Troy, we are finally on this even keel and I don’t want to fuck that up. Then, the rest of you guys, you’ve all been so good to me lately.”

“Monica, we are all starting over. All we really have is each other. Which means you should let yourself go with us. Let the walls down. We need each other. We should be even more tightly knit. We are, after all, all we can really count on.”

“And now, with losing this baby . . .”

“We’re not holding that against you either, sweetie.”

“I know. But if you knew whose it was . . .”

“We still wouldn’t hold it against you.” He bent down, looked directly into my eyes. Like getting to the level of a child. “Is that why you’re afraid of knowing the truth?”

I inhaled. Let it out slowly. Closed my eyes, opened them. Looked straight into his.

“I know the truth.”

His mouth opened, no sound came out. He closed his mouth, swallowed.

“And, you’re not ready to tell anyone.”

I shook my head. My lips trembled. More tears ran.

“You need to know that we absolutely will not hold it against you, regardless of what the answer is.” He put his left hand on my left knee. “You have to know that.”

I looked down at my own lap, looked back up.

“Brad knows. I opened the paper while I was with him yesterday. I figure if I’m gonna work this out with him, I needed to see how he would handle the truth. Whichever way it went. He impressed me. I’m starting to feel safe with him.”

“I understand.” Although I saw the wince flash across his face.

“I know it hurts you that I shared it with Brad and no one else.”

“I can’t say it doesn’t hurt, but I do understand.” He stood up. “Tell you what, I’ll leave you alone for a while. I know you’re doing fine. If you need me . . . “

“I know where you work and live,” I laughed.

As he turned and walked out, I lowered my head again. I knew I had hurt him. I knew this hurt all of them. But I had to think about myself, too. What was best for me, best for me and Brad. Me and Brad. Was that such a good

idea? Could it really last? Could I get over my feelings and lusts for Troy?

“Wanna have some lunch with me?” Troy asked as he peeked his head through the door. “I mean, since you’ve commandeered my office and all.”

“You’ve talked to Jim.”

“I always talk to Jim. Every day. What are you talking about? What, do I need some ulterior motive to have lunch with you? You do work for me, you know. For now.” He grinned.

He put his right hand on my left shoulder and squeezed.

“Come on. I brought some food. Let’s sit here and eat. And talk. We haven’t talked much in the past few days.”

“I’ve been a bit busy,” I said.

He laughed. “Yeah, you and me both. I mean, some of these people are fucking crazy.”

“Oh my God, that’s right, you’ve had those people after you.” My eyes got wide.

“Yeah, but my issues are minor scratches compared to what’s been going on with you.” He put my food in front of me, his in front of him. Looked at me. “Which is why we should talk. I realized I’ve been neglecting you. I’m sorry.”

“What? Hell no, you haven’t been neglecting me. I’ve been taking rides and walks and just hanging around, kinda keeping to myself, you know?”

“Yes, I do know. Which is unlike you.”

“Yeah, well, some things change a person.”

“Yes, they do. And this, this is not a natural change for you. So, we need to talk. Help you touch base again.” He winked.

“Aw, how sweet. You want me in your life.”

“Yep, that’s what this is all about. For sure. You’ve nailed me.” He smiled, but then the smile quickly left his face, and shock landed there instead. “Um . . . bad choice of words there, considering.”

I couldn’t help it. I bust out laughing. A rolling laughter.

After a few minutes, when I could finally open my eyes again, I looked at him. Struggling not to keep laughing, fighting for control.

“Yeah, that was pretty sweet. Me nailing you the other day. Caught you pretty well off guard, eh?”

“Shut up. We won’t talk about such matters.” He looked away, but I saw a grin.

“Aw, and you enjoyed it.”

He cleared his throat.

“I think I better move away from you before you get any ideas that you can physically overcome me again.”

I laughed out loud, had to. “Boy, I could physically overtake you anytime. And don’t you dare think any different.”

He swallowed. Looked at me. And I realized I was trying to kid myself into believing I could stop wanting Troy.

He licked his lips. I licked mine. I moved closer without even realizing it.

He balled his hands into fists, to stay still. Yes, he was trying to will himself to be a good boy with me. And I was losing that same battle within myself. My body desired him. I could feel every lust within me firing. Every nerve was standing at attention. My breathing had increased and I didn’t even notice. My lips craved his. I felt some external force pushing me to move closer to him. I saw his body tensing even more, trying to stay put.

The veins on his arms started popping up from his struggle to keep from being intimate with me again. His hazel eyes glowed with want. Those dark brows formed a small V as he squinted. His arms bulged with restraint.

I opened my mouth. Struggled to spit words out.

“We are kidding ourselves. We might as well face the truth, that we will always want each other. But I know we can’t work out an actual relationship, and we both have partners who are great people.”

He sat up straight. “You just said Jessica is a good person?”

I laughed. “Yes, she is. She really, really is.” I paused. “And she loves you with all her heart. I do too, but I’ve screwed my chance up. I know that. And Brad loves me with all his heart. So, though you and I have this irresistible pull, we also have something else just as great. And I don’t know what to do about your pull anymore.”

“I’m trying to figure that out, too.” He released his tension, reached out with his left hand and held my right hand. “I do love you. Always will. I’ll always care, too. No matter what. And yes, I do still want you. I also know there’s a huge pit we both are in danger of falling into. We can’t work out a relationship with each other, but I believe we can with the other ones we’re with right now.”

This roof is beginning to be my best friend.

Thoughts of the field with Brad and lunch with Troy played through my head. Almost trying to intermingle, if they could. Two completely different men. Both were good for me in different ways. I think both were bad for me in different ways, too.

Troy had Jessica. He should be with her. She was much better for him than I had been. Though I wanted to be greedy and have him to myself. But I knew I just dragged him down.

Brad wanted to give me the world. That was the bad part. I wasn't there yet, but I guess I could learn to reciprocate.

Troy had brought out the best and worst of me. I didn't realize that before. I had ended up focusing on the worst.

Jessica made Troy shine.

I seemed to draw out the love in Brad. But what did he do for me? He helped me be a better person, when I allowed him to.

I had wasted so much time purposely being a bitch. So much energy. I'd thought it was fun at the time. I knew better now. But I had gotten something good out of it: confidence. I know who I am now, what I'm capable of. I know how to handle my sexual, passionate, and logical sides now.

The question was, who did I want to be?

Brad wanted a life with me. That would be a good choice. I loved him, and I knew he would be good to me.

Troy, I loved him too, but that was more of an animal side of me that he unlocked.

But I couldn't have Troy. I didn't need to mess with Troy.

What could I offer Brad?

Myself, my love, my heart, mind, and soul. I could give him all of me. I could go to sleep with him every night, wake up with him every day. That would be easy to do with Brad. He was comfortable.

He had been exciting . . . or was it me who had brought the excitement? Could I bring it again?

I'm Monica, of course I could.

I knew who I was now. I knew what my buttons were, what those guys' buttons were.

And, last but not least, I was OK with losing this baby. I could always have one later. It would always hurt, but I could handle it.

When I felt weak, I had friends who were there for me. Who loved me, cared for me. Just as I did for them.

I'm Monica. I could do this.

I took the deepest breath I could manage. Filled my lungs till they felt like they would explode. Then I released, letting all of this go. Letting it flow out of my mind and body.

“I can do this.”

“Hey, babe, I talked to Troy,” Brad said when I ran into him in the hallway. “I have some good news and some bad news.”

I can handle it.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“He does want me to join the team, so to speak. He wants me to run a whole office, or division, for him.”

“That’s great,” I smiled.

“That’s the good news. The bad news is, he wants us to move to New York City. Eight percent of the U.S. population lives there. He figures we can handle that together.”

“He actually said he wants both of us to move there?”

“Yes, those were his own words. I’m not complaining. Are you?” He raised his brows at me.

“No, no. I just didn’t expect that.”

“Me neither. I’m just relaying what he told me.”

“When?”

He looked down. Put his hands on my arms. “Right away. Can you handle that with everything else that has happened?”

“God, I’m beginning to think things will never settle down. That it’s just gonna keep being one upside down event after another. It sounds good, you and me moving away, but damn, all my friends are here. Wow.”

“I understand. We don’t have to hop a plane tonight if you aren’t ready. I’ll let him know.”

“That’s OK. Let me talk to him. OK?”

“No problem. But hey, this could be a good thing for us,” Brad said with a smile.

“Yes, I know. It is a good thing. Let me just think, OK?” I kissed him.

As I walked away to find Troy, I felt tears filling my eyes. Couldn’t let Troy see that. I composed myself, finally.

Walking in his door, I saw that Troy was looking over some papers on his desk. He looked up.

“Hey, Monica. I guess you got the great news?” He smiled.

“Yeah, I did. Can I sit?”

“Of course.” He motioned for me to take a chair.

I sat, adjusted myself. “Are you sure you want me and Brad to move? Does this have to do with our conversation earlier?”

He looked into my eyes. Opened his mouth, closed it again.

“It does. I thought so. Look, I’ll control myself around you. I don’t want to mess up you and Jess. Seriously. I want the best for you too. And Brad wants to make this work with me and him, so I need to focus on that. Troy, I don’t want to cause problems anymore.”

“I wasn’t thinking that you were trying to.” He shook his head. Leaned back in his chair.

“Am I missing something?” I asked.

“Do you know,” he steepled his hands, “how hard it is on me to have you in front of me everyday?” He put his hand up to say *stop* to me when I opened my mouth. “I don’t mean that in any offensive way.” He leaned forward, looked me in the eye. “I’ve been fighting this within myself. I’ve now acknowledged this. I still want you. I enjoy being inside you. I still have this lust, this desire, every day when you’re around me.” He leaned back again. “Do you really think that’s best, for either of us? Much less for Jess and Brad?”

“I definitely understand, because I’m fighting the same thing.”

“I know, so you can’t tell me that it’s best for you two to stay here. As long as you are here, we are both going to go around this circle.”

“So you don’t want to see us again. Or, well, you don’t want to see me again.”

“Oh, God no! I’m not saying that at all.” He got out of his chair, moved around his desk, sat on the corner in front of me. Reached out with his right hand, took my left hand. “No Monica, I’m not saying that at all. I think we can be the best of friends, but we have to somehow get past this lust between us first.”

“All right, I see what you’re saying. I understand. I feel better with that understanding.”

“Good.” Relief came through.

I looked at his hand, felt it in mine.

This would be the last time I’d have his hand in mine for quite a while. I wouldn’t have him in front of me every day.

I looked up, into his eyes.

Unfortunately, that lust was firing hot between us once again.

“I’ll miss you,” I told him.

“Monica, I’ll miss you too, believe me.”

Without saying another word, or letting him have any say . . . I unbuttoned his pants.

As I walked out of his office, not turning back, the guilt hit me. Obviously I had loved it in the moment, but now my mind was consumed with Brad and Jessica. What would they do if they knew Troy and I were still having sex?

We were too dangerous for each other. Troy was right. Brad and I needed to go.

Tonight.

My breathing quickened.

My steps sped up.

I had to get to Brad.

“Baby, we do need to leave. ASAP,” I said as Brad held me in his warm arms.

“A bit of urgency now?”

“I talked to Troy. He’s right. We need the space. We need to focus on us.”

“Can we at least get a good night’s sleep?”

I sighed. “I suppose. I guess that would be best. But I don’t want to keep hanging around.”

“New York will be a nice change for us.”

“Yep, big city life. Should be able to find a nice place there, too.”

Brad swallowed. “Actually, he’s already set up a place for us. He’s already told me things we need to watch.”

I lowered my head. “Figures.”

“It’s not so bad, really. It’s a huge estate, from what he said. It’s a place in Hampton Bays. 107 Lyn Avenue. Gated. Waterfront. We need to watch over Riker’s Prison there in NYC and Indian Point Energy Center near Peekskill. Along with eight percent of the country’s population.”

“Well, I suppose it would make sense to watch areas like that. And, if he’s setting us up in a mansion, I guess we can accept that.”

“Only the best, or something like that,” he said.

“Yeah, right.”

“Well, the place where he’s putting us up really ain’t bad. It’s got a tennis court, an outdoor swimming pool, indoor one too, six-car detached garage, a north and south wing, an attached guest house, and an attached three-car garage. Even has two levels. Yacht attached to the pier, which is attached to the back yard. Two entrances, again, both gated. And best of all, it looks like a quiet rural road when you’re outside the property.”

“He’s doing that out of guilt,” I said, and then laughed.

“Call it guilt or whatever you want. I don’t care. I’ll enjoy the place. We won’t have to worry about traveling

into New York City every day. We can mostly work from home.”

“How do you figure?”

“Well, that’s the best part. The home will be equipped with video monitoring systems for each location he wants us to watch. The computer will be hooked up to be a central communication center and storage for all the major systems in New York City, considering that’s the financial district of the world. See, Troy wants to make sure the financial center doesn’t move to Dubai.”

“Shit, more political stuff, huh?”

“Pretty much. I see the urgency, though. I mean, they already have tons of cash over there and some of the biggest buildings in the world. And they are even building their own mini-civilizations. It’s not a comforting thing. So, since Troy has this power now, he wants to thwart their plans. I’m on board with that.”

“Well, all that sounds good, so I guess I’m on board too.”

“Trust me, you are. That way we can live in peace with each other.” He pinched my shoulder.

“OK, so is the flight booked, too? Since he’s got the rest of the arrangements already made.”

“No, he actually didn’t do that yet. He said he didn’t want to push us,” Brad smiled. “Quite considerate of him, don’t ya think?”

“That’s Troy, Mister Considerate.”

“Well, I don’t think he’s doing too bad a job of considering us.”

I leaned my head on Brad’s shoulder. I couldn’t respond to that one.

“Is there anything you want to do, here, before we leave for our new home?” Brad asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind feeling you inside me while we’re outside. One last time in this area.”

“Do you mean that field again?”

“No. We don’t have to do that. Just somewhere around here. Doesn’t have to be anyplace fancy. Just something to spike the excitement. Create a memory for us to take with us.”

“Oh, like taking a risk on getting caught,” he said.

“Something like that. And it would be nice to have you hold me and star gaze a bit after.”

“That would be cool. But I know we’ll be able to do plenty of that after the move. Our yard will be big enough, and far enough away from the city.”

“I’ll be back,” I said.

I walked to my closet. Took out something I would have worn before this whole mess happened. A stunningly short denim dress. Something that would show all of my treasures if I simply bent over just a little.

Just the ticket for tonight. I’ve got to bring out the old Monica again. This is all I need. Nothing underneath.

I slid it over my head, walked back out of the closet. Brad’s mouth dropped. His eyes locked on my legs.

“Don’t drool, big boy.”

“Come here and make me close my mouth, baby girl.”

I obliged. The kiss was incredibly hot and heavy. It felt good to draw the old Monica back out. Tonight would be fun.

As we sat under the clear sky, taking in the vast expanse of space above us, Brad held his arms tight around my waist. Hot air from his mouth warmed my left ear. His body meshed just right with mine.

“Do you think we’ll be all right, Brad?”

“What? Where in the world did that come from?”

Nobody ever said he was the best at picking up subtle signals.

“I mean, with everything that’s been happening. Do you think civilization will be all right?” I had to divert the real meaning of what I was saying.

He chuckled. “Babe, Troy ain’t gonna let civilization go down in flames. He’ll make sure things start getting straightened out now. That much I know. I believe it deep within me.”

“Good to hear.” I snuggled into his chest a bit more, laid my head against his.

“And while Troy is busy saving the world, we have plenty of toys to play with at the new homestead.”

“Don’t call it a homestead. That’s so last century. We need to move forward.”

“We are moving forward. Me and you, baby. We’re gonna be great. We’re in the perfect position as things get rebuilt. And we just may end up in the perfect spot, too, being in New York City.”

He squeezed his arms a bit around my waist.

“And although we won’t be physically seeing him, we’ll still be in contact with Troy every day. So those butterflies you have about leaving your friends behind won’t be so bad.”

“Troy isn’t my only friend, dear.”

“Thank God, or I’d have to get jealous.”

“There’s no reason to be jealous. I love you and I’m with you.” I followed that statement with a sharp hiccup. Unintentionally. I think.

“We’ll need to get some sleep very soon, hon. We need to be leaving early tomorrow. I want to have you sleeping in my arms,” he said.

“I’m in your arms now.”

He rubbed his hands across my stomach, around my breasts. “Yes, I’d say you are, and you feel so good. But we’ll need to actually sleep,” he practically whispered in my ear.

“There’s a back seat,” I laughed.

“I want to be comfortable.”

“Ah! Are you saying you wouldn’t be comfortable sleeping next to me?” I feigned hurt.

“Ha. I’m saying I want to sprawl out all over you in a nice comfy bed. That’s what I’m saying.”

“You’ll have plenty of time for that after we move.”

“The old Monica is definitely out to play.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re being difficult.” He kissed my ear.

“Apparently you love it,” I said as I felt his warm breath caressing my ear again.

He grabbed my hair with his right hand, pulled my head back. My senses fired immediately. My mouth watered, my legs heated up.

“If we stay out here, we won’t be sleeping. We do actually need to sleep before this trip, baby,” he said.

“Well, I have a suggestion.” I turned and look at him. “I say we burn out these sparks that are smoldering, then go get some sleep.” I put my mouth on his.

“Sounds,” he struggled to say, muffled, between kisses, “pretty,” another kiss, “good to me.” Then his mouth was absorbed with mine. We lost ourselves completely in the moment. Just like we needed to.

My heart raced as I walk into Troy's office hand in hand with Brad. I was so ready to just get out of there. I think I even felt some sweat pouring from my own hand. Damn.

Brad squeezed my hand. He was excited.

"Good morning, guys," Troy said from behind his desk, which seemed to have mushroomed in size overnight. Made me feel like some ant standing back here. Walls seemed to be closing in.

Get a grip on yourself, Monica!

Deep breath. Exhale.

"Are you two ready for the flight? It's been arranged," Troy said.

"Flight? Oh shit. Didn't think about that. Oh hell, time to get groped up," I added.

"Or X-rayed," Brad said.

Troy smiles. "You don't have to worry about those things anymore. I've ordered all of the new full body scanners to be destroyed. We still have the pat-downs, but there will no longer be pornographic pictures taken for the enjoyment of flight staff. Even the full body pat-downs are less invasive now. I think all of that shit was ridiculous."

"Nice," I said.

“So, you two don’t have to worry about perv Tom and stalker Jane getting an eyeful before your flight,” Troy said.

“Nah, just a handful, so they can go whack off after the flight leaves,” Brad added.

“Better than pictures being passed around,” Troy said, “Wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, better, and thank you. Now, let’s go,” I said as I squeezed Brad’s hand.

We turned and started walking out. As the door closed behind us, I couldn’t resist taking one long look at Troy. I noticed he was returning the look. Our eyes met and locked, even over the distance from his desk through the closing door.

As the plane touched down at La Guardia Airport after flying over Central Park, I had to admit that I was smiling, just a bit. Away from Troy and the pull he has on me. Able to settle into a new life with Brad, in a new place. The heavy air of New York City filled my lungs. Sure, it wasn't the cleanest air, but it was a change of pace.

Stepping out into the streets of New York . . . it was a *huge* change of pace. More than I'd bargained for.

"Babe, we're only about an hour from our new home now," Brad told me.

"Do we get to explore the city?"

"Do you want to do that now? I thought you'd want to get settled in first."

"Should we? I guess we can come back anytime."

"We can definitely come back anytime," he assured me.

"But Times Square is just down the road, Rockefeller Center isn't far from here, and doesn't that belong to . . ."

"Yes, that's one of the families Troy is fighting right now." He looked into my eyes. "Why do you think he wants us here?"

"I'm getting a fuller picture as the minutes tick by," I said.

“We’ve got a driver waiting for us, hon. Let’s head to the house, get settled in, and then come back. We’ll have drivers available 24/7. We can come and go whenever and there are plenty of places to come back and see after we’re settled in. Besides, I need some food.”

I found I was speechless as my eyes filled with the sheer vastness of this city.

“Driver, stop at that Annie’s pretzel shop up there. Get us four or five pretzels to eat on the way to the house. I’m starving,” Brad directed him.

In one mile there were more metal and brick high rises than I ever knew existed within a whole city. Multi-colored marketing signs took up every available inch of space that man has made and the eye can see from the street. I bet a thousand people could live in each of these buildings. Stack ten side-by-side for a block, and wow. I saw retail businesses on the street, apartments for rent above them. Mix together name brand retailers with local merchants to get the NYC flavor.

We drove by Shea Stadium, through Queens, and took a detour to pass St. John’s University Center for Global Development.

“We have to keep an eye on this place too, hon,” Brad says.

From there, we zipped down Grand Central Parkway. Alicia Keys’ singing of “The Concrete Jungle” aptly described this city.

In a 20 mile stretch, I've seen the scenery change so many times from green parks to brick and mortar buildings and back that I've lost count. It feels like every couple of miles is another neighborhood with its own park and community contained within. We'd been up and down ramps to enter and exit highways, gone through what NYC calls small neighborhoods, and seen shopping centers from the highway. I had no idea so much could be contained in such a short space.

Then we hit Cross Island Parkway. Cross Island actually turns into Laurelton Parkway and Belt Parkway, each for almost a mile, it seems.

As we traveled this patch, I started seeing more upscale housing communities. Things started looking a bit nicer. I lost count after we slipped past the first 15 of these complexes.

From there we finally hit Sunrise Highway, which took us almost to the front door of our new home. Things started coming down to earth for me, here. The further we went down Sunrise, the bigger the individual homes became, the nicer the landscape. The more expensive and cleaner the vehicles, too. Each home was spaced out slightly more than in the city. Acres of land were allotted to each piece of private property. The streets grew progressively quieter.

It was a whole world of difference from the hustle and bustle and the vastness of the city we just left. Hard to believe.

We had gone from a city where everyone comes to make their dreams come true, to almost total seclusion out

here, where it seemed you'd almost thirst for human presence.

"This house is situated right on Shinnecock Bay. That's what your pier extends into. Bennett Cove and Tiana Bay are both minutes away, even by water," the driver says.

"We have a pier?" is all I could come up with.

The driver chuckled.

"For future flights, we'll be using Brookhaven airport. It's just minutes from here as well and will be better for security purposes," the driver added.

Brad opened the door.

"Watch for prying eyes, you two."

"I suppose Troy has briefed him, as well," I said to Brad.

"Yes, ma'am. Troy didn't want to leave any holes. We have an effective leader now and I couldn't be happier."

"Oh," is all I could say. Yet another reminder of how I fucked up. I sighed. I had thought this was an effort to get away from Troy's pull on me. Oh well, Brad was good catch too. I had to focus on that.

We stepped out of the car. Both of us planted our feet on the ground, stretched, took in the fresh air, and it was indeed fresh now . . . and we both froze.

Our eyes focused on the structure in front of us.

“My God, you said big, Brad. You didn’t say gigantic.”

“I . . . I didn’t know. Wow. My mouth is suddenly dry.”

“What is this, like three football fields or something?” I asked.

“Actually, it’s about 33,000 square feet of livable space, then we have the detached garage, attached garage, the buildings in the back . . . “

I turned and looked at the driver, drooling. His words faded from my range of hearing, though I saw his mouth still moving.

All I could focus on was the number. 33,000.

33,000 what? Did he say square feet? As in, the same thing my place back home was only about 800 of? Um . . . I’ll need a maid, butler, whole house staff for sure here. Oh my God. Troy, remind me to thank you the rest of my life for this.

“Is this a permanent home?” I finally managed to ask, effectively cutting the driver off mid-sentence. What that sentence was, I had no idea.

He cleared his throat, letting me know how rude my interruption was.

“Yes, Monica, if you’d like that to be so, it will be arranged.”

“Don’t worry about being so formal with me . . . sir.”

“Formal? Why, I have no clue what you speak of.” He straightened his back, then smiled.

Jokester.

“Would you two like a tour? May I say, this house is fabulous inside. I’ve served several years at this particular home. My personal favorite.”

“Just tell me this,” Brad said, “Are there secret passages inside? Because if there are, that’s all I need to know. I’ll have a lifetime of fun finding them.”

“As a matter of fact, yes, sir.”

“No, no, no. Don’t call him sir.” I pinched Brad and grinned at the driver.

“There are, in fact, 23 secret passage entrances and exits within the expanse of this property. They even,” the driver adjusted his vest, “connect the main building to each one of the others. Underground.”

Brad looked at me and beamed. “Oh, honey, we are going to have tons of fun playing in each and every single one of those magic hidden passageways.” His green eyes were sparkling more than I’ve ever seen them.

It actually warmed me inside.

Brad and I finally started to compose ourselves.

I looked at the front of this beyond-McMansion building and spotted several entrances, I thought. One, however, in the middle, had six marble white columns on each side of the door, what looked like a balcony above it with a rail and tables, chairs, and barbeque pit. The door itself looked gold from here. And the windows on either side. Oh my God, “bay window” doesn’t begin to describe the size and appeal of these things.

“This was built to be an oasis,” the driver commented. “Amid the busy world, this is meant to be a place of solace.”

“I’d say it’s an oasis,” I barely whispered. “And here I thought, on the road, that this was a secluded place away from any markings of civilization.”

“Believe me when I say that none of your neighbors, absolutely none, have the . . . level of modern conveniences you do in this humble abode,” the driver informed me.

“Humble? Did you actually just call this place humble? Wow, it must be different living in New York City for a long time,” I said.

“I’ve only lived in this wonderful city about five years now. I’ve also worked and lived in Dubai, Los Angeles, Paris, Tokyo, and Honolulu.”

“Well, you just can’t get away from the *uber* upper-class stuff, eh?” I looked at him.

“I’d prefer to think it’s my ultra sophistication that allows me to continue working with the *uber* upper-class . . . Madam,” he said with a slight edge of sarcasm.

“I hear the sarcasm. I’m liking you more now. Quit being so stuck up around me.”

“Are you two done flirting?” Brad asked. “When you are, I’d like to explore the eighth wonder of the world which we will be living in.”

“Jealous much?” I said.

“Not at all,” he answered, and pushed my left shoulder with his right one.

“All right, kids, time to go in for the night.”

I glanced at the driver, caught the smug look on his face.

“I believe I shall enjoy the presence of two such ultra-sophisticated abode dwellers,” he added.

I couldn’t help it. On that one, I bent over laughing. So much that I started crying.

“Brad, does he realize who he’s talking to?” I spat out between tears and holding my stomach.

“I believe he does. After all, I’m preparing to run this city,” he smiled.

“Oh my God, two supremely smug men. I thought I was leaving all of that behind.”

“Not at all, sweetie,” Brad said and slapped my ass. “I believe it’s time to show us to our bedroom.”

If our mouths hadn’t dropped before, they sure did now. We feasted our eyes on the biggest bed I’ve ever seen, complete with canopy, overhead mirror, and private luxury bathroom. This bedroom alone was bigger than the entire apartment I just left behind.

As the driver motioned us inside our time portal, he said, “The gold door we entered through is one of the cheapest amenities of this home. If you ever have the need to lock yourself inside this room - for professional reasons, not for fun, you have an entire control room here to run this estate as well as the city.”

He opened a hidden door within the bathroom and a whole new room opened up in front of us. Computers, monitors, security controls. It’s like we were stepping into the 30th century. Not only was I at a loss for words, my body was lost for action. I didn’t know where to step . . . where it was safe to step.

“Brad, I’m gonna tell you right now, you better not live in here.”

“Damn, not even married yet and you’re already taking the fun out of things.”

Just hearing that word sent my heart racing. I looked at Brad.

“Did you just say . . . “

He smiled.

“Yes, Ma’am. He did. You two really need to work on your communication.” Another smug smile from our lovely driver.

What have I gotten myself into here?

Enjoy this excerpt from:

ROYCE

As Alicia caught her breath, face flushed, skin glistening, we heard Monica performing her ritual.

“Ugh, perfect timing. At least we got done this time,” I said to Alicia. “Time for your motherly duties again.”

“Don’t talk about motherly duties after you do,” she let out a huge sigh and closed her eyes momentarily, “what you just did. Oh my God, I don’t want to get up. I feel so relaxed.”

I rolled off. Patter her ass.

“Come on, babe. She needs you. I’m going back to sleep now.”

“Yeah, typical father figure,” she said as she reached her head over to kiss me.

“I’m not her father figure,” I smiled. “And I don’t want to be.”

Alicia got out of bed. I watched her tight ass as she walked into our private bathroom.

Damn. Things are nice. Too bad it won't last. Although, since Troy is running things now, maybe I won't have the headaches I used to have. Can I deal with a life of more leisure? Guess we'll find out.

Alicia came back out of the bathroom, still naked. Her petite breasts looked amazing, till she threw the robe on.

“Doesn't Monica realize she's just pregnant? Wouldn't this be so much easier if she dealt with that reality?” I asked Alicia.

“I'm not sure she's ready to handle that reality yet.”

I sighed. “OK, have fun then.”

“One of these days you'll be having fun like this,” she said.

“Don't threaten me with a pregnancy, woman.”

She smiled as she sighed and walked to find Monica.

2

Once she was gone, I checked my phone. Just as I thought. Missed calls and messages from the Kennedys, Vanderbilts, and Rockefellers. They weren't going to stop unless Troy did something drastic.

I wondered if he realized that yet.

These guys meant business. They would protect their money, power, and royal bloodlines at any cost.

What disturbs me most is that Alexis Soros, the one illegitimate child I know of, lives in Southampton. She parties all hours and is always looking for a handout. Manipulating as hell, too. Unfortunately, she gets that from me. There's no telling what she'll do when she gets hold of Troy.

I needed to call my Private Investigator buddy and see what he knew about Alexis lately. Troy and the rest of us would need to be prepared for whatever came from her. Troy couldn't even withstand the temptation of Monica right then. I didn't think he could stand the temptation of Alexis if she turned it on him. Of course, I could have been wrong, but not likely.

One solution would be to help Jess and Troy become closer than ever.

God, I should've gone back to sleep. I hear Monica all the way in here. Such as sexy thing to hear after Alicia and I just had sex.

"I need to tell Troy the extent to which the Rothschilds have gone to preserve their royal bloodline and power. And the fact that they've taught the other families to do the same thing," I verbalized to myself. Had to make a mental note of it.

"Are you talking to yourself again, dear?" Alicia asked as she walked back in. "Might wanna stop that before I have you committed. I'd rather rejoin you in bed," she said with a smile.

“If you want to rejoin me, you better quit threatening me,” I winked. “Wouldn’t want to give me the wrong impression, now would you?”

“No, definitely not.” Her lips rested on mine as she slid back into the bed.

“Just a little heads up, I’m not feeling exactly sexy after catching those sounds that drifted down the hall. Well, I don’t think they drifted. I think they rushed toward me, actually.”

She laughed. “Glad we took care of that before I got up then.”

She cradled her head against my chest as we laid back down. I closed my eyes, but my thoughts were wide awake. Mental notes, checklists, game plans, all of that struggling to find its place. What we’d need to do, as a team, about Alexis, how to handle the other families as those problems arise, and exactly how much I should tell Troy right now.

I sat my coffee cup on the counter, studied Alicia as she moved about the kitchen, getting our food.

“Baby, I need you to be aware of some things,” I said.

“What’s going on?” She glanced my way.

“Things are still gonna get sticky. I’m sure you realize that.”

“When is life not sticky?” she said.

I sighed. “Not this sticky. I want you to be prepared for what’s coming. I’ll have to fill Troy in on this as well. We’ll need to convince him to spend some money on defense. Defense within our own country.”

“So talk to me. What’s coming at us? Fill me in. I can handle it. I’m a logical woman.”

“I know. I’m counting on that. See, many past missions of our National Defense have been blundered internally. But that was under our previous dysfunctional government. I believe our current team can fix that issue. For example, the Battle of Cistema, Germany took out our first, third and fourth battalions all in one fight. Six men escaped out of 760. I’d rather our defense be much better than that.”

“Well, you guys can make sure that turns around. I’m sure you can, if no one else can,” she smiled.

“Defense starts from within our government. The CIA has a highly secretive Special Activities Division which contains an elite Special Operations Group. This is the top tier of our own government. They tap soldiers from Delta Force, which is what most people think is our first line of defense. Delta is known to be the best of the best.”

She sat down with our food. Looked at me, listening.

“So when people within our government are corrupt, it’s easy to see how our Defense Department can be highly compromised. And right now, a weak defense is

exactly what we don't need. With all this turmoil and change of power that's happened."

We both started eating.

"See, this whole thing is a pyramid. When people are recruited into the different branches of the service, it's kind of misleading. You go out for Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, or whatever labels you want to give each branch, and you think you're a special soldier within that branch. Nah. When you enter, you're not even a general purpose soldier yet. You train, get some experience under your belt, you become general purpose."

I paused.

"I'm still with you, hun."

"From general purpose, we watch those who start excelling. Then, the top brass of each division start tapping those who excel. They become elite within their individual branches. They think they've really achieved something. And, in some respects, they have. But in the big picture, they are still tiny pawns. You see, in each division of the service, the top ranks are Green Beret, Army Rangers, Navy SEALs. All of which are considered Special Forces. Delta taps men from all of those. Delta is above all of those. And, beyond that, the elite Special Operations Group is so top secret that it's above Delta and taps men from Delta to join them. They take the cream of the cream."

"Wow. That's a lot to absorb."

"So, when that guy signs up for initial training to join some branch of the service at the bottom, he's *way* at

the bottom. He has absolutely no idea there's so much above him. And, with each promotion, every man has to go through additional boot camp training to get into the higher level of knowing how to kill a man."

She chewed her bite, thought a minute.

"OK, you're wanting to convince Troy to spend money on all of it?"

"Well, right now, Delta and the CIA. I think that's where we need to start because that is the top of the pyramid and not have things leaked out."

"Makes sense. I think you'll be able to get him to understand this."

I let out a deep breath, finished my food.