**Jaded**

**Prominent New York acquisitions attorney Courtney Wilhelm had her entire life carefully planned… or so she thought. When Courtney’s estranged half sister, Marissa, succumbs to cancer, Courtney assumes guardianship of Marissa’s daughter, Jade.  
Courtney knows nothing of children and struggles to find balance as the custodian of a minor while trying to maintain a high level of expertise expected by her clients and the firm. When she meets Jade’s prospective new teacher Lauren McCallum, feelings she thought she had locked away rise to the surface and take control.  
Can Courtney let go of the life she planned so meticulously—and clings to so stubbornly—to have the life with Jade and Lauren that awaits her? Or will the fear of failure keep her from the love and happiness she didn’t even know she wanted?**

*“We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”*

*~ E.M. Forster*

*(British novelist 1879 – 1970)*

**CHAPTER 1**

“Ms. Wilhelm, there’s a Ms. Vasquez from Children’s Services on line one for you,” the female voice announced over the intercom.

The slender blonde sitting at the desk dropped the pen in her hand. “Children’s Services? Did you tell her we’re not family law and we don’t do pro bono?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did she tell you what she wants then?”

“No, ma’am. All she said was that it was of utmost importance that she speaks to you.”

She rubbed her forehead in frustration. “Take a message, Mora. I don’t have time right now.”

Acquisitions litigation attorney Courtney Wilhelm got up from her desk and looked out the plate glass window overlooking busy Forty-second Street a few blocks west of the United Nations. She crossed her arms and took a deep breath.

She loved New York. The energy of the city and its people fed her drive for success. Her most important achievement to date was being named a partner at Rosewell and Clooney LLC. She was the youngest and only female partner at the firm. Her accomplishment so early in her career was something her father, Dr. Gunther Wilhelm, world-renowned cardiothoracic surgeon, was extremely proud of. Failure and disappointment were never options for Courtney where her father was concerned.

As the only child of a very successful, driven man, it was a huge weight to bear, but Courtney always stepped up to his expectations brilliantly. She was the valedictorian of her class at an exclusive private school. From there, she went on to earn an undergraduate degree in economics from Princeton, then on to Harvard Law School. She was president of the *Harvard Law Review* and graduated at the top of her class. She was every bit her father’s daughter. The good doctor raised Courtney with love and discipline, all in an effort to keep his ex-wife’s irresponsible and troubling characteristics from bleeding through to her.

Courtney’s mind drifted back to her most recent triumph for which the firm gave her high praise. The communications acquisition she negotiated in Switzerland was genius and gained the firm new business as the representing counsel for the newly created corporation. She savored the thought of the bonus she was due, but more important were the accolades that the senior partners and board of directors were sure to bestow upon her.

And when her father returned from Prague, she would hand him the copy of *The Wall Street Journal* with the article detailing the success of her labor. She felt as if she had the world by the tail and nothing could stop her.

“I feel like a little celebration,” she said aloud. She reached for the BlackBerry on her desk and found the number for Suzanne Dempsey.

Suzanne worked as an account manager for the PR firm hired to handle press releases for Rosewell and Clooney. The two women were occasional lovers, but neither seemed to be interested in forging a relationship that consisted of anything more than an expensive dinner with nice conversation followed by pleasant sex. Courtney usually preferred to go to Suzanne’s place. It gave her the option to leave anytime she wanted. When Suzanne came to her place, she tended to linger in bed longer than Courtney wanted. Her ego demanded she be the one to have the control and make the decisions—sex was no exception.

She made the call. Suzanne agreed to meet her for dinner at Arabelle on the Upper East Side. They would celebrate with champagne and caviar. Later they would go to Suzanne’s place where she would lavish in Suzanne’s perfect body and long red curls, then go home for a good night’s sleep. A delicious way to feed body and soul, she thought.

“Ms. Wilhelm?” It was the voice from the intercom again.

Courtney sat at her desk. “What is it, Mora?”

“Ms. Vasquez left a message. She said it was in reference to,” Mora paused, “your sister’s death.”

“Was that all she said?” Courtney’s voice softened at the mention of her sister.

“Yes, ma’am. I have her cell number if you would like to call her back.”

Courtney tapped her fingers on the mahogany desk for a few seconds while she thought things out. “What I would like is for you to track my mother down. The last I heard from her, she was in Cannes or somewhere on the Riviera. Anyway, start with her personal valet Jacque. He should know where Kaye is. You have the number, right?”

“Yes, ma’am, I have it.”

“When you find her, transfer the call to me immediately.”

“I’ll get on it right away.”

“Thank you.” Courtney sat back in her leather chair and considered the possibilities for the call concerning her half sister.

Marissa was the product of a reckless affair her selfish, social-climbing mother had with a member of the Spanish nobility. The Viscount de Alvarez was a handsome, dark-haired, single rogue of a man who Kaye Blanchard-Wilhelm met at a New York society party. Seeing money and a royal title, she sought to escape a loveless marriage and pursued the viscount with vigor, eventually becoming pregnant with his child. The viscount tried to deny the child was his, but through paternity testing, he was forced to acknowledge that Marissa was his daughter. He had no interest in playing the part of a parent and returned to Spain to escape the media. For a while, he sent money for the care and support of his daughter, but that too soon disappeared.

Kaye and Gunther Wilhelm battled through an ugly divorce. Gunther was granted full custody of his only child, leaving Courtney with her father in New York City. Kaye globe-trotted through high society on the money from her family trust and divorce settlement with Marissa and nanny in tow. When Marissa reached school age, she was sent back to New York and was reluctantly taken in by Dr. Wilhelm. It was only for Courtney that he did so. He wanted his daughter to have supervised contact with her half sister, believing that at some point, Marissa would re-enter Courtney’s life. He would have total control over their relationship as children and see to it that Courtney’s life would proceed as planned without intrusion or negative influence from her mother’s mistakes later.

Courtney looked up at the grandfather clock across the room. It was 11:45. She had a lunch date at noon with her mentor and family friend Virginia Beckman. She never missed their dates. They were usually part lunch and part therapy session. Virginia saw the potential of the ambitious young woman as an intern with her firm and hired Courtney immediately after graduation. She worked under Virginia for two years watching and taking in the older woman’s technique for securities and acquisitions. When a position opened at the prestigious firm of Rosewell and Clooney, Courtney jumped at it with Virginia’s blessing. The two remained friends, and Courtney looked to Virginia for guidance and reassurance from time to time.

If she hurried, she could make it to Bar Americain on Fifty-second Street right at noon. She grabbed her suit jacket and the Dior leather bag from under her desk.

“Mora, I’m on my way to lunch. I should be back in an hour or so,” Courtney said on her way out.

The chunky middle-aged mother of two looked up from her computer screen. “Yes, Ms. Wilhelm. Oh, what shall I tell your mother if she calls?”

“Transfer the call to my cell. It’s paramount that I speak with her as soon as possible.”

“Will do, Ms. Wilhelm. Enjoy your lunch.”

Courtney stepped up her pace toward the elevator. She was never late for an appointment, regardless of what it was for, and had no tolerance for anyone who kept her waiting.

She arrived at the restaurant with two minutes to spare. Virginia was always early and would be waiting at the bar as was her usual practice. Courtney spotted her on a bar stool and waved. Virginia gave a warm smile and waved back. She picked up her glass and joined Courtney as the hostess seated the women at a table.

Virginia set her glass down and wrapped her arms around Courtney’s shoulders. “How are you, dear? It’s so nice to see you.” She gave her a small kiss on the cheek.

“I’m wonderful.” Courtney took a seat.

“I saw the article in the *Journal*. I must say you have surpassed me with your negotiating skills. Your ability to get the deal done was exemplary.” Virginia patted her former assistant on the hand and sat.

“I was educated by the best.” Courtney smiled back at the older woman.

Virginia pointed a beautifully manicured finger in Courtney’s direction. “Don’t kid yourself. You have the intelligence and instincts. That’s why I hired you right out of school. I saw that hunger in your eyes.” She took a drink from her martini glass.

The waiter approached the table and welcomed the women, then took a drink order. Courtney asked for iced tea, and Virginia requested another martini.

“I don’t know how you can drink in the middle of the day.” Courtney peered over the top of the menu.

“When you’ve survived as long as I have as a litigator, a few drinks are needed to get you through the rest of the day, dear,” Virginia said with a wink.

Courtney shook her head and continued to peruse the menu.

The waiter returned with drinks and left with their selections.

“Have you spoken to my mother lately?” Courtney asked with a furrowed brow.

“No, why? Is there something the matter with her?”

“No, no. Strange, though, I got a call from Children’s Services this morning in regard to Marissa. Kaye is the next of kin. She’s the one they should be contacting.”

Virginia looked surprised. “What involvement would Children’s Services have in Marissa’s death? Your mother said she died alone in that nasty apartment.”

“I have no idea why they would be involved. It’s just odd.”

“Where is Kaye?” Virginia asked between sips of her martini.

Courtney released a puff of air from her lungs. “I don’t know. She was somewhere on the Riviera when she called to tell me to send the bill for Marissa’s funeral to her accountant in Rome. That was five or six weeks ago. Quite the loving parent,” she said with sarcasm.

Virginia rolled her eyes. “Yes, Kaye always did portray the picture of motherhood with mockery. When did you last see Marissa?”

Courtney thought for a moment. “God, I would have to say it was maybe seven years ago. It was just after I turned thirty and only a few months into my position with Rosewell and Clooney.”

“I didn’t realize it had been that long,” Virginia pulled the olive in her drink from its skewer with her teeth.

“I bailed her out of jail one last time. Imagine, twenty-three years old and on her fourth arrest for drug possession.”

“That girl was always troubled.”

Courtney wiped the moisture from her glass of iced tea. “I tried to help her get on her feet, but she spent every penny I gave her on drugs and adamantly refused to go into rehab. It was too much to handle.”

“And all the while your mother was hiding in Europe.” Virginia shook her head in disgust.

Courtney brushed the hair back from her face with one hand. “Kaye was never any help. She washed her hands of Marissa when she sent her back as a child. I was all Marissa had.” She paused. “There wasn’t anything more I could do, and I was tired of funding her heroin addiction. So I did as my therapist suggested. I walked away.”

“Your sister’s death was not your fault, so stop blaming yourself. You can’t help someone who doesn’t want to be helped.” She covered Courtney’s hand with her own.

“I know, but I can’t stop the guilt. I should have been a better big sister.”

“You were in law school when Marissa got involved with the wrong crowd and ran away all those years ago. You couldn’t be held accountable for the actions of a seventeen-year-old with no real parental supervision. Anyway, she should have been Kaye’s responsibility from the beginning, not your father’s and the battalion of nannies she went through.”

“You’re right.” Courtney sighed. “As soon as I track down my narcissistic mother, I plan to dump Children’s Services on her. She can deal with this, I’ve done everything else.”

“So right.”

The waiter appeared with plates of food.

“Now shall we enjoy our lunch?”

The conversation moved on to work and more pleasant topics, such as vacations and social events. When lunch was over, they shared a taxi back to their offices.

The yellow Crown Vic pulled in front of the building that housed the offices of Rosewell and Clooney. “Thank you again for lunch,” Courtney said with a hug.

“Anytime, dear. Let’s not wait so long to do it again.”

“Deal! Oh, will you tell Evelyn I said hello? I’ve been meaning to get over to see her new restaurant. Maybe when Papa gets back from his conference, we’ll plan a dinner. You must join us,” she said as she got out.

“I’ll give Evie your hello the next time I see her. She’s gone so much since the new place opened, I’m beginning to think I don’t have a wife.” She dismissed her comment with a laugh. “Dinner would be delightful. Call me.” She stood in the cool autumn breeze and waved as the taxi pulled away from the curb.

The glass door to the law firm on the twenty-fifth floor glided open in silence. Piped-in music filled the background of the reception area. Courtney whisked by the front desk on her way back to her office. She pulled out the BlackBerry in her pocket thinking she might have missed the call from her mother, but knowing full well that it wasn’t possible. She entered the private area of the firm where the offices of the partners were located.

“Mora, any word on my mother yet?”

The woman grunted. “I managed to speak with her valet, but he was less than helpful. He said Ms. Blanchard was in a remote location and not able to be reached at this time, but he would give her the message as soon as she was back in touch.”

Courtney felt the heat of anger roll up the back of her neck. “Such silly, stupid games. I have a mind to call him myself.”

“You might want to do that later. Mr. Rosewell wants to see you.”

She wiped her hand down the back of her hair. “I suppose you’re right.” She needed to be calm and focused around the senior partners. That was more important than her mother and her drama. She tossed her bag in a chair as she entered her office.

Her meeting with Mr. Rosewell was brief. He praised her once again for the job she did in Zurich and invited her to a dinner for the partners he was hosting at the private roof club at the Gramercy to celebrate. Once again, her pride swelled at the thought of a party in honor of her hard work.

She hurried back to her office after the meeting. She needed to call Suzanne and reschedule their date for Saturday. While she was sure the partners knew she was gay, she kept her private life private. She was most comfortable attending work-related events on her own. For the more important occasions, her father was often her escort. A twinge of disappointment struck as she picked up her cell phone to make the call; she would have to wait to enjoy Suzanne’s company another night.

Around the time the grandfather clock in her office struck three, Mora’s voice came across the intercom once again. “Ms. Wilhelm, your mother is on line one.”

“Thank you,” Courtney said in her most reserved tone. Inside, her nerves were jumping. Kaye was the most unpredictable and uncontrollable person in Courtney’s life. Even a simple conversation with her mother caused her anxiety.

She took a deep breath and released it slow and steady, then she picked up the receiver. “Hello, Mother.” Her voice was cool and monotone.

“Oh, hello, my darling. How are you?” As cool and unemotional as Courtney tried to be, Kaye was the opposite. Her voice was whimsical and full of cheer.

“I’m fine. Where are you?”

“Sardinia, darling, on the most fabulous yacht.”

“That’s nice,” she said unimpressed. “Listen, there’s a woman from Children’s Services who’s been calling me in regard to Marissa. What do you know about this, and why is she calling me? You’re her next of kin.” She thumped the desk with her fingers as she spoke.

“Oh, I spoke to Ms. Vasquez, she’s a lovely woman. Since I’m out of the country and unable to return anytime soon, I asked that she contact you.”

The heat was rising on the back of Courtney’s neck again. “What business does Children’s Services have with Marissa?”

“Nothing really. They were concerned about the welfare of some person they thought she was sharing the apartment with, but as you know, she was living alone. Now they want a signature for the release of the report.” She made an uncharacteristic pause in her sales pitch. “Courtney, darling, it really is no big deal. It’s nonsense for me to come all the way to New York to sign a few papers when you’re already there and can take care of this. You’re the attorney, darling, you understand these things.”

The attorney in Courtney wasn’t buying her mother’s sketchy explanation. Once again, she was thrusting her responsibilities on her daughter. “If this is no big deal, as you say, why can’t they fax you the paperwork?”

“If only it were that simple. You see, the state has required that a responsible party sign the release in person, and it must be notarized. I’ve already deferred my consent to you. Ms. Vasquez will need you to sign the papers as soon as possible, so this whole mess can be wrapped up.”

“You’re still not telling me everything. This doesn’t sound right. I want all the facts.”

“We can talk more about it later. I really must go, they’re holding dessert for me. Kisses, my darling, ciao.” The line fell silent.

“Mother, wait. I still have questions.” Courtney slammed the receiver into the base. “Damn her! Why can’t she take responsibility for her own problems just once in her life?” Her anger was directed more toward herself than her mother. She had come to know Kaye as a self-centered egomaniac who was very good at using people, and she was no different than all the other people her mother took advantage of.

She got up from her chair and paced across the center of her office. As she thought through her next move, she realized that from childhood, she was the only one Marissa truly depended on. It was clear that she would be the one left to close the books on Marissa’s painful life. As a child, her sister was forced to live in the shadows as the family’s dirty little secret. As an adult, she would continue to carry that burden wrongfully bestowed upon her to the grave.

She decided she would do right by her only sibling and put her to rest once and for all.

She reached for the intercom button. “Mora, may I have the number Ms. Vasquez left with you, please?”

**CHAPTER2**

The throbbing in Courtney’s head was down to a dull ache. Too much champagne at the partners’ dinner the previous night left her with a sore head and cotton mouth. She usually didn’t drink to excess because she was vigilant about maintaining control, but the champagne tasted good, and she had two or three more glasses than was normal for her. That morning, she was paying the price.

She stepped out of the elevator with a large cup of coffee in hand and made her way into the office, thankful that it was Friday. The ibuprofen she took before leaving her penthouse was slowly kicking in. She was grateful there was nothing pressing in her appointment book. Her brain just wasn’t up for strategic thinking. She tossed her bag under the desk and pulled out a packet of papers from the Italian leather briefcase her father gave her when she graduated law school. The well-worn bag with its straps and buckles accompanied her to every case she argued. She planned to review old contracts from a client in preparation of upcoming negotiations. She would eventually delegate the negotiations to one of the junior partners under her watchful eye.

Mora appeared in the door with a stack of legal briefs. She took a good look at her boss as she set the folders on the desk. “Is there anything I can get you, Ms. Wilhelm?”

Courtney looked up and smiled. “No, thank you. I’ll be fine once the coffee and painkillers take hold.” She thumbed through the papers that Mora put in front of her. “Will you set up a preliminary meeting this afternoon for the Crammell versus Nosheki case? Oh, and I’ll need the research people to do some extra legwork on this one, so ask Doug Enwright to join us, please.”

Mora finished her notes and headed back to her desk. “Just a reminder, you have an eleven o’clock meeting with Ms. Vasquez.”

Courtney clenched her teeth. “I almost forgot. Thank you.” She would like to forget the whole mess, but she was determined to take care of the last of Marissa’s unresolved issues. It made her sad to think her sister died in tragedy with no real accomplishment for which to leave her mark upon this earth.

She brushed off the sentimental thoughts and tried to concentrate on the reports Mora left on the desk. There was no time for her to rest on her laurels. The next big case was shaping up to be a real fight. The merger of two software companies seemed easy enough. However, the son of the founder, wanting to preserve his father’s legacy, vowed to block the merger and defy the board’s decision.

The purchasing company planned to cut costs. The merger would result in jobs lost to streamline product development and production. The company’s main interest lay in the technology, and it was offering a premium price for it. The trial would involve almost every department within the law firm and promised large legal fees for Rosewell and Clooney. Of course, Courtney was the obvious choice to defend the acquisition.

At ten forty-five, she gathered her things and left for Children’s Services. She would sign the paperwork they needed and possibly get the rest of the story from Ms. Vasquez that she couldn’t get from her mother. From there, she would grab a quick lunch somewhere, then head back to the office and the meeting with her legal team. She was in control of her day, even though her head was still not right from the previous night’s celebration.

“Mora, I’m on my way to meet with Ms. Vasquez. Would you please call my home and remind Stella to pick up my dry cleaning today?”

“Yes, Ms. Wilhelm,” she said, reaching for the phone.

In the taxi, Courtney checked her e-mail on her BlackBerry while the driver navigated New York City traffic north to the Bronx. She found a message from her father. He wrote to say he was proud of her success in Zurich and would plan a celebration when he returned Monday.

She looked at her watch. “Driver, how much longer?”

“Traffic is heavy today, miss. I’d say about ten, maybe twelve, minutes,” the ebony-skinned man said with a Jamaican accent.

She let slip a heavy sigh while cursing her mother with her thoughts. She had a new case to put together. Going all the way uptown to the Bronx of all places to tend to her mother’s obligations was an imposition and an annoyance.

The taxi finally arrived in front of the dingy building that housed Children’s Services.

She passed off cash to the driver as she got out, surveying the other building on the street as the taxi pulled away and left her on the sidewalk.

“I can’t believe my sister ended up here,” she said to herself.

Inside the entrance to the waiting area sat a receptionist along with two security guards manning a metal detector that blocked the hall to the employees’ offices.

“Good afternoon,” Courtney greeted the African-American woman at the desk. “I have an eleven thirty appointment with Ms. Vasquez.”

The look on the young woman’s face told her she was not impressed by Courtney’s formal introduction. “What’s your name?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“What’s your name so I can tell Theresa you’re here?”

She looked a bit surprised at the woman’s tone and speech. “You may tell Ms. Vasquez that Ms. Wilhelm is here to meet with her.”

The young woman picked up the phone and punched in a few numbers. “Theresa, there’s a Ms. Wilhelm here who says she has an appointment with you…okay, will do.” She returned the receiver to its base. “She’ll be right up.”

Courtney turned and examined the torn and stained tan vinyl of the few chairs in the reception area and decided not to sit. Instead, she turned to examine the hall and the metal detector as she waited.

From around one of the guards came an African-American woman of about fifty. She was dressed in a black skirt with a white blouse and colorful African print jacket. Her hair was mocha-colored and braided long. She extended her hand as she approached Courtney. “Ms. Wilhelm, my name is Theresa Vasquez. Thank you for coming to see me in your mother’s absence.”

She accepted the social worker’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m sorry to say my mother’s absence is no accident. Nonetheless, I’m here to take care of my sister’s final affairs.”

She smiled back and pointed toward the metal detector.

Courtney laid her bag on the counter and walked through the detector. The guard rummaged through the Zagliani black python bag with an apologetic expression on his face.

“Please be careful. The bag is very expensive.”

When he was done, he handed her the bag. “Sorry, miss. Everyone that enters has to be checked.”

She turned away from the guard and rolled her eyes. Did he really think she looked like any of the people who passed through his checkpoint? She wondered how many of them wore Prada suits and Christian Louboutin pumps.

They walked to the end of the hall and entered a large open room with about a dozen desks spaced out. The room was cramped with file nets and other office supplies and equipment throughout. The room was abuzz with phones and conversations of the other occupants of the overpopulated room.

Courtney followed Theresa Vasquez to her desk in the rear corner of the room. It was partitioned off from the others by two large file cabinets and a bulletin board.

“Please have a seat, Ms. Wilhelm,” She pointed to the chair next to the desk and turned to one of the file cabinets. “We’ll start with the paperwork for next of kin.”

“If you don’t mind, I would like to read the report before I sign for its release. My mother was very vague about everything, and I would like to know what it is I’m releasing and to whom before I sign.”

Theresa sat at her desk with a large file in her hand and looked at Courtney with a bit of surprise. “I have no problem with you reading anything you would like, but I’ve been following your sister’s case for a number of years. The file is quite large.”

She was astounded by the comment. Why would a Children’s Services case worker be following her sister’s drug abuse? She had too many unanswered questions, and it was beginning to frustrate her. She had been too many years out of Marissa’s life to try to catch up now. She simply wanted to take care of the business at hand and be on her way. Anything more, she promised herself, she would throw back on her mother. She had done all she could for an estranged sister whose life ended so troubled and tragic.

“Very well, Ms. Vasquez. May I see the papers you need signed?”

Again surprise rose on her face. “I think we must have some confusion over what it is you’re here for.”

“Yes, I’m sure we do. Again my mother gave me no details, only that I was to sign for the release of a report involving someone Marissa may have shared her apartment with.”

Theresa released a sigh with a smile. “Yes, she did share her apartment with someone, and I have written many reports since I took over Marissa’s case five years ago.”

“She no doubt had some junkie boyfriend living with her to help support her habit. That would be no surprise.”

“Maybe not, but I don’t believe she had a boyfriend.” Theresa shifted in her chair. “What you don’t know about your sister is that she was clean for the last five years and doing quite well. That is, until she got sick. She was still receiving some assistance from the state but was working part time in a bakery. She was trying very hard to get her life together for Jade.”

Confusion covered Courtney’s face. “Wait, sick? Jade? Who is Jade?”

Theresa set the papers in her hands down on the desk. “Ms. Wilhelm, did you not know anything of Marissa’s life?”

“I’m sorry, no, I didn’t,” Courtney said. “We had a falling out over her drug abuse years ago, and I haven’t spoken with her since.”

“Let me fill you in on a few important facts then. Marissa died of cancer. She was sick for a long time but fought the disease to the end.”

Courtney looked at Theresa in disbelief.

Theresa continued. “Jade is Marissa’s six-year-old daughter. Your niece.”

Courtney was speechless. For the first time in her life, she could not come up with the words to express her shock over what she was just told.

“You didn’t know Marissa had a child?”

“No, I didn’t. Did my mother know?”

“Yes, of course. She’s listed as next of kin. I’ve been working tirelessly for over a month to come to some kind of agreement with her, but since she’s out of the country, the entire process has taken longer than I’m comfortable with. She finally conceded temporary custody of the child to you.”

“Custody of the child? To me? That’s impossible. I have no means for which to care for a child. I know nothing about them. I wouldn’t be a proper custodian for her.”

“That does create a problem. We held Jade out of long-term foster care because we were told she had next of kin who would be willing to take her. It’s our policy to try to place children with acceptable family members first in cases like this. The foster system is already overloaded with children lacking the proper immediate family.”

“What about the father? Shouldn’t he be given custody?”

“We don’t know who Jade’s father is. Marissa didn’t list one.”

“That’s no surprise, either.” Courtney rubbed her forehead. “I’ll sign whatever papers you need to relinquish my rights. I simply cannot take charge of a child.”

“It’s not that easy. You see, I was prepared to release Jade into your care today as your mother instructed. I won’t be able to begin to set her up in foster care until Monday. You’ll have to take her until then unless you can persuade your mother to return and take her.”

Courtney’s options were slim. She would never get Kaye to come to New York. It was obvious it was her plan all along for Courtney to be saddled with the child. Kaye wanted nothing to do with the children she did have. She would never accept responsibility for a grandchild.

“Would you like to meet Jade?”

“I suppose I must, seeing as how we’ll be spending the weekend together.”

“She’s a delightful little girl. I doubt she’ll be any trouble to you.”

“You have no idea how much trouble this entire situation already is.”

Courtney followed Ms. Vasquez to a room across the hall.

They stopped at the door. “So there would be no surprise, I’ve already told her that her aunt would be here to get her so she’s had time to digest the situation.”

“I’m certainly glad someone had warning.”

Ms. Vasquez opened the door and allowed Courtney to enter first. Sitting on a sofa across the room was a little girl with long wavy dark hair dressed in jeans and a pink T-shirt with Hello Kitty on the front. She was clutching a dingy, floppy-eared white rabbit to her chest as she nervously twisted her pink sneakers back and forth.

Ms. Vasquez sat on the edge of the sofa next to the girl. “Jade, remember I told you that you would be going to stay with your mommy’s family?”

The girl nodded and squeezed the stuffed bunny tighter.

“I would like for you to meet your aunt.” Ms. Vasquez looked up at Courtney, who was frozen in place by the door. She motioned for her to come closer.

Courtney’s feet were like two heavy stones dressed in six hundred-dollar designer pumps, but she managed to get them to move a few steps closer to the sofa.

“This is your mommy’s sister, Courtney. She’s going to take you home with her.”

The girl lowered the stuffed bunny to get a good look at the blond woman standing in front of her.

A surge of heat flooded Courtney’s body when she saw the child’s face. The long wavy dark hair that framed an olive complexion and big obsidian eyes jolted Courtney back to her own childhood. The girl was the mirror image of Marissa at the same age. The physical characteristics of the Spanish viscount were obviously handed down to yet another generation.

She bent down and extended her hand to the child. “Hello, Jade. My name’s Courtney.”

The girl’s face brightened at the gesture, and she gave her a smile that was missing one front tooth. She reached up with a small hand and clasped hold of Courtney’s fingers. She was small for her age and a bit too thin, but her eyes displayed a healthy twinkle.

Courtney’s heart beat hard in her chest. She had no time or tolerance for a child, regardless if it was her sister’s. Yet she somehow couldn’t consider for a second leaving the orphaned girl, her only niece, to flounder in a bureaucratic system that would shuffle her from home to home. Once again, Courtney cursed her mother with her thoughts.

She stood and looked at the black and white-faced clock above the sofa. “I really must be on my way, Ms. Vasquez. Is there anything else you need from me before we go?”

“There are some papers for you to sign.”

“Very well.” Courtney looked around the room. “Where are her things?”

“They’re all in here.” Jade pressed her finger into a black plastic bag next to the sofa.

Courtney narrowed her eyes. “Everything you have is in that trash bag?”

A serious expression flashed across Jade’s round face as she nodded.

“Fine.” Courtney grabbed the bag up off the floor. “Ms. Vasquez, if you will please show me the papers.” She turned for the door and was stopped in her tracks when Jade popped off the sofa and clasped onto her free hand. She looked down at the small hand and tried to ignore the burning sensation running down her spine by the touch of the little fingers clinging tightly to hers. In response, she let her hand hang loose.

No words were spoken crossing the hall back to Theresa’s desk. From her file net, she produced a set of legal forms clipped together and showed Courtney where to sign on each.

“On Monday, I’ll submit the paperwork to my supervisor of your plans, Ms. Wilhelm. We’ll need a judge to sign a court order to get,” she paused and looked at Jade, “to relieve you of your custodial duties. If you have any questions, please call me.” She pushed a business card across the desk along with copies of Jade’s paperwork to Courtney.

“Thank you for your help. Once again, I apologize for my mother’s absence and any misunderstandings.”

Courtney stuffed the paperwork in her bag and looked over at Jade sitting quietly in a chair. She was watching every move Courtney made as she held the stuffed bunny tight against her chest once again.

Courtney picked up the black plastic bag once more. “Come along, Jade. We need to go.”

Jade slipped off the chair and reached for Courtney’s hand. “Where are we going?” she asked with a tentative stare.

Courtney started for the door. “I have a meeting to get to.”

“What about me? Where will I go?”

Courtney stopped and looked down at Jade. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to take you home to Stella.”

They found their way out to the sidewalk in search of a taxi. When Courtney finally flagged one down at the end of the block, she stuffed the trash bag on the floor of the backseat and Jade in the seat next to her.

After she gave the address of her penthouse to the driver, she pulled out her BlackBerry to make a call.

“Hello, Stella? Yes, it’s me. Can you stay later today? I need you to do something extra for me this afternoon. It seems I’ll be having an unexpected guest for the weekend.” She looked down at Jade, who had moved closer to her.

“Thank you. I’ll explain when we get there.”

“Is Stella your mommy?” Jade batted her dark questioning eyes up at Courtney.

Courtney smiled. “No. Stella is my housekeeper and your babysitter for the afternoon.”

“Why can’t you stay with me?”

“I have to go back to work. I have a meeting.”

“Can I go with you?”

“No, you can’t. My office is no place for a child.”

Jade gripped the stuffed bunny tight to her chest and buried her face in the fur.

Courtney glanced out of the corner of her eye at her niece. Jade appeared to withdraw, and Courtney sensed sadness coming from the child. She thought for a moment how she felt so many years ago when her own mother left her. She reached over and patted Jade’s thin leg.

“I’ll be home in time for dinner. That’s the best I can do.”

Jade looked up with a smile. She grabbed a handful of Courtney’s suit jacket.

Her first instinct was to pull the expensive material from Jade’s grasp but stopped herself. For now, she would have to tolerate the child’s clinging.

The yellow taxi stopped in front of a gray front building on Greenwich Street in the fashionable TriBeCa neighborhood in lower Manhattan. The sign in the window at street level read V Café. Courtney slipped cash through the window to the driver and got out. She waited for Jade as she struggled to scoot across the seat. She reached up for Courtney’s hand and surprised her. Jade hopped down onto the sidewalk still gripping Courtney’s hand. She was about to close the door of the taxi when Jade screamed, “Wait!”

“Jade, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“My bag, it’s still in there.” She pointed into the open door of the vehicle.

The tension in her neck eased. “Okay, okay. I’ll get it.” She reached into the backseat and pulled out the bag.

Jade gave her a satisfied look.

“Come with me, young lady.”

The two entered the building and walked through the small lobby to the elevators. Jade’s gaze roamed over the lobby as they walked. It was apparent she had not been in a building like Courtney’s before. They stepped into the elevator, and Courtney pushed the top button. Jade looked at her reflection in the mirrored wall of the elevator as they ascended to the penthouse. Courtney continued to watch her out of the corner of her eye. In true child form, Jade made faces at her likeness. Courtney nearly laughed out loud at the girl’s antics but held back.

The door opened slowly to a small hallway with a wide door across from the elevator. Courtney stepped out and went for the door. Jade followed in silence. She unlocked the door and pushed it open. The bright sunlight of midday filled the hallway. Jade froze in the light.

“You can come in, Jade. It’s okay, this is where I live.”

Jade walked through the open door slowly. She scanned the large room as quickly as she could.

Courtney called out as she closed the door behind them, “Stella, we’re here.”

A short, stout woman of about sixty wrapped in an apron came around the corner. “Ah, Miss Courtney, you’re home,” she said with a Polish accent. When she saw Jade, she stopped in her tracks. “Well now, who do we have here?” She propped her fists on her wide hips.

“Stella, this is my,” she paused, “niece, Jade.” It sounded just as strange for Courtney to say the word as it did for Stella to hear it.

“Your niece?” The surprise on Stella’s face turned to a warm welcoming smile accentuated by round rosy cheeks as she spoke. “Jade, is it?”

Jade’s long curls bounced around her face as she nodded.

Courtney placed a hand on her small shoulder. “Jade, this is Stella, my housekeeper.”

Jade brushed a curl from her face. “Hi,” she said, looking down at her pink shoes.

Courtney cleared her throat. “Jade will be staying with me for a while. Until I can work things out.”

“Okay, Miss Courtney.”

“You can put Jade in the guest room next to the den. I think she’ll be more comfortable in there.”

Stella held out a hand. “Come with me, little one. You can help me get you settled.”

“Oh, Stella, here, do something with this.” Courtney held out the black plastic bag.

“What’s in here?” she asked as she took the bag.

“That’s mine,” Jade said emphatically.

Stella opened the bag to examine the contents. “Is this all you have?”

Jade stood silent, clutching the stuffed bunny to her chest. Her dark eyes looked up at the older woman apologetically.

“Is okay, little one. First thing, these go in the wash. We’ll just freshen them up.” She held out her hand again. Jade made a timid move to take the older woman’s thick hand, then they walked off down the hall together.

Courtney breathed a sigh of relief and dropped her bag on the leather chair near the door. She paced the wooden floor of the living room while she thought out a plan of action. She needed to track down her mother, first and foremost. Arrangements would have to be made for Jade.

Courtney decided she would drop all of this back on her mother. She had no time or tolerance to care for a child. None of this was a part of her plan, her future. All the while she was plotting how to make her mother step up and take responsibility for her granddaughter, Courtney knew in the back of her mind that Kaye would not accept any of it. She would be left once again to deal with the pieces of Kaye’s life that she chose to dump on her.

“Excuse me, Miss Courtney.”

Courtney stopped pacing. “Stella, I need your help.” She looked at her watch. “I have a meeting I must get to. Could you please stay with Jade until I get back?”

“Miss Courtney, I really must get home.”

“I’ll pay you double for today if you’ll stay and look after her.”

Stella rubbed her hands together hesitantly. “All right then, I’ll just go call my Archie and let him know I’ll be home late.”

“Thank you…I appreciate this very much.” Courtney picked up her bag. “One more thing. I don’t think Jade has had lunch yet.”

Stella shooed her out the door. “Don’t you worry none. I’ll feed the child and put her in the bath. By then, she ought to be ready for a nap. Such a little thing she is.”

She grabbed her bag and stopped at the door. “Thank you. You’ve been a big help. It won’t go unnoticed.”

“You’re welcome. Now go to your meeting.” She closed the door as Courtney left the penthouse.

**CHAPTER 3**

Courtney hailed a taxi in front of her building. She held the BlackBerry to her ear and listened to the ringtone, waiting impatiently for it to be answered at the other end.

“Hello, dear, this is a surprise.” Virginia’s voice was always smooth and sweet.

“Virginia, you won’t believe what my mother has done this time. Her irresponsibility has moved to new heights.” Courtney’s voice teetered on frantic as she held the phone between chin and shoulder while getting into a taxi.

“Courtney, dear, calm yourself. Where are you?” Virginia’s tone instantly filled with concern.

“I’m on my way back to the office.” She dropped her bag in the seat next to her and gave the driver the address. “Did you know Marissa had a child?”

Silence followed by a sigh came through the BlackBerry. “No, I didn’t. I did know she was pregnant at one time, but Kaye told me she miscarried early in the first trimester. After that, I never heard another word.”

Heat rose up the back of Courtney’s neck. “Why didn’t you tell me she was pregnant?”

“Your parents forbade it. Your mother didn’t see any reason to involve you, and quite frankly, your father wouldn’t hear of it. Marissa was still caught up in the drugs and living on the street. It was all so disheartening, and it seemed to be over before anything came of it.”

“My mother didn’t see a reason to involve me? When did my mother ever care how anything involved me?”

“Courtney, please, you’re upsetting yourself over something that happened years ago. It’s a thing of the past.”

“It may have happened years ago, but it’s hardly a thing of the past, and I have the proof staying in my penthouse.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“What I’m saying is I have Marissa’s six-year-old daughter staying in my penthouse, thanks to my deceitful, irresponsible mother.”

Again, silence on the other end.

“I’ll ask you again. You knew nothing of the child?”

“No, I didn’t, and you know I would never lie to you. I’m just as shocked as you are to find this out.”

The muscles in the back of Courtney’s neck started to relax. “I know you wouldn’t lie, but the lengths you and my father would go to, to protect me are unfathomable.”

“While that may be true, I hardly think Marissa’s child could be considered a threat to you. How did this happen? How did the child end up in your penthouse?”

“There’s no threat, merely an inconvenience for now. Once again, my mother has shed her responsibilities and expects me to pick up the pieces. What the hell do I know about children?”

“I wish I could help you, but I would have to say that you and I are in the same boat on this one. Evie and I never wanted children. They would be a complete mystery to me as this one is to you. What are your plans? What will you do with…with…”

“Her name is Jade, and I have no plans at this point other than to track my mother down and make her accept the responsibility for her granddaughter. I haven’t the time to deal with this. I have an enormous case pending, and I need to be focused. Besides, I didn’t inherit the parenting gene from either side of my family. My mother clearly didn’t have it, and my father’s answer to child rearing was to have a nanny do it.”

“Well, good luck convincing Kaye to do the right thing…if you can find her.”

“Make no mistake, I’ll find her, even if I have to send a PI to the Riviera to do it.”

“Does your father know?”

“Not yet. He won’t be back from Prague until Monday. I see no reason to bother him with this until then.”

“If I hear anything of Kaye, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks. I’m sure this will be resolved by next week.”

Courtney hung up the phone as the taxi pulled in front of her office building. Her head wasn’t filled with notes for the meeting she would be going into, but rather distracted by the child who would be her houseguest for the weekend.

A junior counsel, Deborah Marston, was waiting for Courtney in her office. “You’re back. I have the papers for the Nosheki versus Crammell case you asked for.” She held up a thick folder. “But I’m afraid we don’t have time to go through them before the meeting.”

Deborah, a New York University Law School grad, interned for Courtney as a student. Once she passed her bar exam, Courtney hired her right away. She saw in Deborah the ability to be a good attorney. Deborah lacked Courtney’s killer instinct, but she was a hard worker and well-organized. She could learn so much more working in Courtney’s shadow than she ever would with some Wall Street firm. Now, two years later, the women forged a relationship not only as boss and employee, but as friends, as well.

Courtney tossed her bag on top of her desk. “It’s all right. I assume you’ve studied the files. You can give the team the opening brief on what we’re about to embark upon with this case.”

Deborah’s eyes filled with surprise and delight. “Yes, that’s not a problem. I’m well versed on the information we have to date. Let me just say, I think we’re in for an ugly fight. Nosheki claims the board of directors has adopted a poison pill to keep them from taking their stake in the company any higher. George Crammell’s oldest son has made this his personal crusade to maintain family control of the company, even though many of the common stockholders are anxious for the acquisition to be made.”

“Has he spoken to any of the other major holders yet?”

“Yes, so far, only the two largest after himself. What we’re hearing is that they’re nervous about joining Crammell’s fight for majority control.”

“Excellent. Fear gives us something to work with.” Courtney paced the length of her office. “So has anyone bothered to ask Mr. George Crammell Jr. to name his price? Could this entire case be resolved at the negotiation table?”

“According to Mr. Crammell’s legal counsel, this is not about the money. He doesn’t like the plans Nosheki Software has for Crammell Silicon, the company his father built. It’s that simple.”

“It’s never that simple. He certainly didn’t mind taking the cash they put in front of him when they were buying up shares. The greedy little bastard sold them his invalid mother’s shares at a nice profit. Now he claims a hostile takeover by Nosheki is in the works.”

Deborah snickered and shook her head. “He created his own mess on this one.”

“Yes, and it’s about to become an expensive mess for Nosheki to clean up if they want this acquisition to be completed.” Courtney rubbed her hands together. “Shall we get busy? I think we’ll start with a letter to the SEC.”

The BlackBerry on her desk rang just as they were about to make their way to the meeting. “Deborah, go ahead. I’ll be there momentarily.” Courtney reached for the phone. “Yes, Stella, is something wrong?...Yes, if she would like some ice cream, that’s fine…No, I don’t want you to go to any trouble. I’ll pick something up for dinner…Thank you.”

Courtney set the phone on vibrate and slipped it in her pocket. Just as she was about to walk out the door for the conference room, a sleek, feminine redhead stepped in front of her. The woman was dressed in a navy blue suit with tasteful heels to match. She was all business, but her sex appeal couldn’t be contained by the corporate attire.

“I was wondering if we were still on for tomorrow night. I hadn’t heard back from you.” The sultry woman leaned against the door frame.

“Nice to see you, Suzanne, and, yes, I was going to call after this meeting.”

“Good. It’s been a while since our last get-together. I was beginning to think you were losing interest.”

“That is most certainly not the case. You know I was completely engrossed in my last acquisition and out of the country for a time.” Courtney moved in closer. “To what do I owe the pleasure of seeing you here in the office?” She ran her fingers down the length of Suzanne’s arm.

“The latest media releases on Rosewell and Clooney’s star litigator and lone female partner. I foresee the names Rosewell, Clooney, and Wilhelm over the door of this office someday. And that someday could be sooner than later.”

Courtney smiled. “Just doing my job, ma’am.”

Suzanne moved close enough to Courtney that a wisp of her red hair brushed against her cheek. “Who are you trying to kid? You love the hunt and the kill. It’s such a turn-on to see you in action in the courtroom.”

A warm burst of energy radiated through Courtney’s body. “Yes, well, I’ll show you a few maneuvers tomorrow night in private. For now, however, I must get to my meeting and prepare for the next great adventure that awaits me in the legal jungle of acquisitions.” She gave Suzanne a small peck on the cheek as she squeezed by her and headed down the hall. “I’ll call you tonight.”

By six o’clock, Courtney was out of the office, had picked up dinner, and was on her way home. She couldn’t remember the last time she left the office before seven, but she also never had anyone waiting at home for her. She made her own schedule with no consideration for anyone else. Things were different that night. Not only did she have Jade waiting for dinner, but she couldn’t keep Stella too late. She had her own family to get home to.

She almost dropped the bag of food trying to get into the penthouse. The heavy steel door was much tougher to unlock with full hands.

As soon as the door opened, Jade popped off the couch and ran to the door. “Hi, Miss Courtney.”

“Hello. I hope you’re hungry.” She made her way over to the kitchen counter. “I wasn’t sure what you would eat, so I brought home several items from the menu at Buddy’s. And I didn’t forget dessert. I got two pieces of Buddy’s world famous apple pie,” she said as she removed the containers from the bag.

Jade climbed up on a stool and watched with a hungry smile.

“You gonna spoil dat child with sweets, Miss Courtney,” Stella said, tying a scarf around her chin.

“It’s just a little pie, but only if Jade eats her dinner.” Courtney pointed a finger at Jade.

Stella said good night and closed the heavy metal door behind her as she left.

“What did you get for dinner?”

“Well, I hope you like hamburgers. I got you a burger with cheese and some sweet potato fries. If you don’t like that, I’ve got shepherd’s pie with chicken.”

“What are you having?”

“I’m having grilled salmon with sautéed green beans.”

Jade wrinkled her nose at the fish.

“So what will it be?”

“I’ll have the burger, please.”

“Excellent choice.” She put the burger and fries on a plate for Jade and handed her a napkin.

Courtney moved her plate next to Jade and sat down to eat.

“What did you do today?” Jade asked, chomping on a fry.

“Well, I had a meeting with some people about a company worth a lot of money.”

“And then what?”

“And then I returned phone calls I missed.”

“And then what?”

Courtney found the barrage of questions coming from the girl a bit trying. “Then I got dinner and came home.”

She decided to turn the tables on Jade. “Now tell me what you did while I was gone.”

“Umm, well, I helped Stella wash my clothes. She showed me how to fold a shirt,” Jade said before shoving another fry in her mouth.

“That sounds interesting.”

“No, not really. I had more fun watching the big TV.”

“What did you watch?”

“Cartoons,” Jade said emphatically.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Courtney wasn’t sure what else to say. She had used up any ability she had to maintain a dialogue with a child and finished dinner in silence.

When they were done, Courtney cleaned up, then sent Jade off to bed. She had work to do yet and no time to entertain a child. She justified her actions based on the heavy eyes Jade had developed over dinner.

Before she retired for the night, she peeked in on Jade. She was wrapped up in a ball in the middle of the bed asleep with the stuffed rabbit securely in her arms. Courtney left the door open to the room and went off to bed.

**CHAPTER4**

A loud thump brought Courtney out of a deep sleep. She peeled the satin sleep mask from her eyes and looked at the clock; it was only 7:30 Saturday morning. This was her morning to sleep in.

She paid no mind to the noise that woke her. Instead she rolled over in bed, pulling the sleep mask back down over her eyes and the covers up to her chin. Just as she was about to re-enter a state of unconsciousness, the crash of broken glass on the ceramic tile kitchen floor caused her to sit straight up.

She pulled the mask off, rubbed her eyes, and pushed the covers aside. It couldn’t be Stella, she only came during the week. Still half asleep, Courtney tripped on the Persian rug on the way out the bedroom door. She stumbled in the direction of the kitchen and found Jade standing on a stool in an adult-sized T-shirt that hung down to her skinny knees. The cabinet door was open and she held a spoon in her hand. On the floor were the remnants of a shattered jar of strawberry jam.

Jade’s eyes grew huge when she saw Courtney appear from around the corner.

“Jade,” Courtney said with surprise, “I forgot you were here. What are you doing up so early?” She stepped over the mess on the floor to help Jade off the stool.

“I was hungry, Miss Courtney.”

“You could have let me know. I would’ve made you breakfast,” Courtney said.

“It’s okay, Miss Courtney. My mama showed me how to make my own peanut butter and jelly so she didn’t have to get out of bed.”

“You don’t have to call me Miss Courtney. I’m your…aunt.” The word sounded like she was talking about someone else.

“What should I call you?”

“How about just using my name, Courtney?”

Jade nodded and picked up the stuffed bunny from the floor.

Courtney put her hands on her hips and looked down at the red sticky mess on the floor.

“I broke the jelly,” Jade said as she squeezed the bunny in her arms.

Courtney bent down and began picking up the larger pieces of the broken glass. “That’s okay. We’ll get a new jelly. I don’t think we can fix this one.”

Once she got the mess cleaned up, Courtney opened the fridge to look for something for breakfast. “What do you want to eat?”

“I like peanut butter and jelly.”

“What else do you like? I don’t have peanut butter, and the jelly, as you know, is broken.”

Jade wrinkled her nose at Courtney. “Sometimes Mama let’s me have Froot Loops.”

Courtney shook her head. “I’m afraid I don’t have that, either. I don’t suppose you like eggs?”

“Mama never had any eggs.”

“What else do you like?”

“I like noodles and cheese. You know, the kind in the blue box.”

“Umm, no noodles and cheese in a blue box.”

Jade hugged the bunny tight to her face and aimed her big, dark eyes at Courtney.

“Tell you what, we’ll go out for breakfast. And while we’re out, we’ll stop at the store and get some jam and some of those noodles and cheese in a box.”

Jade lowered the bunny and gave Courtney a big smile with a gaping hole from the missing tooth.

“Go get dressed and we’ll go downstairs to the café.”

“Okay, Courtney.” Jade ran down the hall to her room.

Courtney emerged from her room freshly showered and dressed in a white Ralph Lauren warm-up suit, neatly pressed, with a navy blue polo under the jacket. She pinned her hair back with a clip and applied light makeup to her face.

Jade’s eyes twinkled when she saw Courtney in the white suit. “You look like a famous person.”

“Thank you,” Courtney said with a smile. The smile faded when she realized what Jade was wearing. “Why are you wearing the clothes you had on yesterday?”

She was sitting on the couch hugging her bunny, and her hair was a mess of unbrushed curls.

“I like these clothes.”

Courtney rubbed her hand over the sleeve of the Hello Kitty shirt. “Let’s go find something clean for you to wear. Stella said she washed your things.”

Jade slid off the leather sofa and followed Courtney down the hall to her room.

She opened the top dresser drawer in the guest room and found nothing. She opened the second drawer and still nothing. In the third drawer, she found Jade’s clothing. She had the sum total of three T-shirts, four pairs of pants, four pairs of underwear, three pairs of socks, and a green sweatshirt all neatly folded in the drawer where Stella had placed them after they were washed. She also found the white oversized T-shirt Jade wore to bed wadded up in the drawer. In the closet, she found one well-worn petite pink parka hanging on a satin padded hanger. The only shoes she had were the pink sneakers she was wearing.

She turned to Jade, who was leaning against the unmade bed. “Is this all you have to wear?”

“That’s all the lady took. The rest is at home,” Jade said with a frown. “She wouldn’t even let me take any toys.”

Courtney was aghast over how worn and discolored the clothes were. She selected the best of the worst in the drawer and laid out a pair of blue jeans, a light gray T-shirt, the green sweatshirt, underwear, and socks on the bed.

“Okay, first thing is for you to get into the tub and we’ll wash your hair.” Courtney slipped off the jacket to her warm-up suit.

Jade peered at Courtney with reluctance but laid the bunny on the bed and walked into the bathroom without discussion.

After about an hour, Jade was finally clean, her hair fresh and neatly brushed. Courtney tied it back with one of her own clips, and Jade was wearing the clean clothes laid out for her.

“I think after breakfast you and I will do a little shopping. You could do with a few new things.”

“Are we going to the Goodwill store?” Jade asked with excitement.

“Goodwill store?”

“Yeah, that’s where me and Mama always shop.” She held up the weathered stuffed bunny. “That’s where Mama got Happy for me.”

“Happy?”

She held the grungy bunny up in front of Courtney. “Mama gave me Happy Bunny for my birthday. She named him Happy because she said the day I was born was the happiest day of her life.” Jade twirled around and clutched the toy to her face in silence.

Abhorrence turned to guilt. Courtney pushed back a lump that surfaced in her throat. Jade’s words saddened her. She didn’t get the chance to see Marissa develop into a responsible adult, much less a mother. She took a moment and cleared her throat. “There’s a nice children’s store on Fifth Avenue. We’ll start there after breakfast.”

Jade headed for the door with the bunny in tow.

“Jade, I think it would be best if you leave Happy here. I wouldn’t want you to lose him.”

Jade frowned at the suggestion.

Courtney held her hand out. “We’ll leave him here on the bed where it’s safe.”

Jade hesitated but handed the stuffed toy over.

Courtney laid the bunny on the pillow with care. “There, Happy will be waiting for you when we return. Shall we go? I’m hungry.”

The waitress seated them at a table in the window and handed Courtney a menu.

“Do you like pancakes or French toast?” Courtney asked while draping a napkin across Jade’s lap.

“I like pancakes.” Jade bounced in her booster seat. “Can I have syrup on them?”

Courtney looked over the top of the menu with a smile. “Of course you can. Pancakes are no good without butter and syrup.”

Jade flashed an impish smile.

Courtney ordered pancakes and a glass of milk for Jade and eggs Benedict with coffee for herself.

When the waitress returned with their food, Jade watched with interest as she set the plates of food on the table.

“Is there anything else I can get you ladies this morning?”

“No, thank you. I think we’re set,” Courtney said.

Jade fingered the short stack of pancakes on her plate.

“Use your fork and knife,” Courtney said.

Jade picked up the fork and poked into the pancakes.

Courtney watched as Jade struggled. She reached across the table with her own utensils to help. “Here, let me cut those up for you.” She spread the butter over the golden surface and cut the pancakes into bite-sized squares, then poured the syrup over the plate. “How’s that?”

Jade speared a piece of the pancake with her fork and smiled as she plunged the sweet bite into her mouth. A drop of syrup rolled over her lip as she chewed. Courtney reached over with her napkin and caught the sticky liquid before it had a chance to fall on Jade’s shirt.

“What are you eating?” Jade asked.

“It’s called eggs Benedict. Would you like to try it?”

Jade shrugged her narrow shoulders. “Okay.”

Courtney placed a sample of the creamy egg concoction on Jade’s plate. She looked it over carefully before putting a fork to it. Once she decided it looked like something she would like to try, she dipped a tine of her fork in the Hollandaise sauce and touched it to her tongue. Then she went for the egg, ham, and muffin.

Courtney watched intently as Jade sampled each layer. “How do you like it?”

“Um, the pancakes are better.”

“It’s good to try other things, but it’s okay to have favorites.”

When they were done with breakfast, Courtney hailed a taxi, and they were off to do some shopping.

“You didn’t bring any toys with you?” Courtney asked as they waited in traffic.

“They’re all at home. The lady wouldn’t let me take them when she came to get me,” Jade said flatly.

“What lady are you referring to?”

The taxi lurched forward in traffic, causing Jade to slide down in the seat. “I don’t know who she is. She was really fat and she walked fast.”

“It’s not nice to say someone is fat,” Courtney said while helping Jade to sit upright on the seat and tightening her seat belt.

“What should I say then?”

“Well, you could say she is a large lady or a portly woman.”

“And that’s nice?”

“It’s nicer than saying a person is fat.”

Jade’s dark eyes opened wide. “Well then, she was really large and mean. She said she wasn’t carrying anything she didn’t have to.”

“That wasn’t very considerate of her, was it?”

Jade folded her arms across her small frame. “No, I didn’t think so. She only let me have Happy because I bit her hand when she tried to take him away,” she said defiantly.

“Biting people is not good, either,” Courtney held back a giggle.

Jade held her hands in the air. “What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t leave Happy, and she was larger than me.”

Courtney folded her hands in her lap. “Perhaps you have a point. One must pick her battles carefully. Fight for what truly matters.”

Jade sat next to her in silence.

When they arrived at the address on Fifth Avenue, Courtney paid the driver and helped Jade out of the taxi. The day was bright and crisp, with only a hint of a breeze stirring the air in midtown Manhattan.

Courtney took hold of Jade’s hand as she started down the sidewalk toward The GapKids store. She did so out of necessity. It was well known how easy it was for a small child to go missing on a crowded sidewalk. The last thing she wanted was the publicity attached to a negligent custodian of a minor.

Jade’s grip was tight, and she stayed close to Courtney as they made their way into the store. She stopped just inside the door and looked around with wide eyes. So many shiny displays highlighting bright, colorful clothes for children of all ages. Jade had not seen anything like it in her short six years of life.

Courtney took a deep breath and released it slowly. “Where would you like to start?”

She looked up at Courtney. “Can I get a blue shirt?” she asked with hesitation.

“You may have any color you like. Let’s start with pants and work our way up.”

Jade kept one hand on Courtney almost the entire time they shopped. By the time they were done, she had a complete new wardrobe. Courtney made sure she had everything from socks to hats and gloves.

The sales lady handed Courtney her charge card as she wrapped the last of the clothing in tissue and passed four bags across the counter to them.

“Next stop, shoes,” Courtney said as they walked out onto Fifth Avenue.

By the time they were done, Jade had five new pairs of shoes plus fuzzy bunny slippers.

As they got into a taxi to head back to the penthouse, Courtney told herself the new wardrobe was the least she could do for Marissa’s daughter since parenting was not in her fiber.

“Courtney, can we go to my house and get my toys?”

“Your house? You mean in the Bronx?”

“Yeah. The mean lady wouldn’t let me have any. But you can get them for me, right?”

“Well, I suppose. Wouldn’t you rather have new toys? We can swing by FAO Schwarz. You can pick whatever you want.”

“But I like my toys. The ones Mama got me. Please, Courtney? Please?”

Courtney looked down at the pleading eyes. “It’s such a long way uptown,” she said weakly.

“Just one time and I’ll never ask you to go there again.” Jade was gripping Courtney’s arm.

With a heavy sigh, Courtney gave in. “All right. Just this once. Make sure you take everything you want. We won’t be going back. First, we’re going to the penthouse to drop off all these bags.”

Jade clapped her hands with excitement. “Goody, goody, goody. I’m going to take Candy Land and all my dolls and my Legos and… ”

“That will do.” Courtney patted Jade’s leg to calm her. An uneasy feeling stirred in her chest at the thought of going into Marissa’s home, the place where she spent her last days.

**CHAPTER 5**

Courtney pulled out the papers at the penthouse that Ms. Vasquez gave her, searching for the address of Marissa’s tenement. She finally found the information she was looking for and copied it onto note paper.

When they got back in the taxi waiting at the curb, Courtney handed the driver the address as she buckled Jade into her seat.

The young man turned in his seat. “Ma’am, are you sure this is the right address?”

“Yes, that’s where we need to go.”

He looked at the paper again. “But, ma’am, this is not in a part of town a woman like you would go.”

“I know perfectly well what type of area it is. Please, just drive us there,” she said with frustration.

The driver turned around and drove off without further protest.

Courtney sat in silence for the entire trip while Jade sang to herself and fidgeted in the seat next to her. She looked down at Jade and thought how nice it would be to have the kind of innocence Jade displayed despite the upheaval in her young life.

When they arrived at Marissa’s building, Courtney asked the driver to wait.

Jade was anxious to get out of the vehicle. She unbuckled her seat belt and pushed the door open before Courtney could stop her. She was home and excited to see all the things that were so familiar to her. She ran to the steps leading to the front door.

An older African-American gentleman wearing a brown sports jacket over a yellow button-up shirt and worn jeans and boots was sitting on the step with his pipe resting at the corner of his mouth. “Well, well, if it isn’t Princess Jade.” He removed the pipe and knocked it on the sole of his boot. The burnt contents in the bowl sprinkled to the sidewalk.

Jade giggled. “Hi, Willie.”

Courtney got out and looked around. She recognized nothing about the street or the impoverished buildings that lined it. This was another world within New York she was never a part of. It was hard for her to imagine her sister being a part of this life.

“Courtney, this is my friend Willie,” Jade said.

“How do you do, Mr. Willie? I’m Jade’s aunt, Courtney Wilhelm.” She offered a reluctant hand.

“It’s just Willie, young lady. Call me Willie.” He shook her hand. “I do fine. Pleasure to meet you, Miss Courtney.” He scanned her from head to toe and quickly formed his own profile of the well-dressed woman claiming to be Jade’s aunt.

“Thank you, sir. Do you live in this building?”

“For the last twenty-two years, I have,” he said with pride.

“Did you know my sister, Marissa?”

“Yes, very sad thing that happened.” He paused and lowered his head but quickly looked up with a smile. “Have to say, I didn’t think I’d be laying eyes on the little princess here ever again.” He motioned toward Jade with his head.

“Courtney brought me back to get my toys,” Jade said, bouncing up and down.

He smiled. “Well, that’s mighty nice of her.”

“Willie, who would I talk to about Marissa’s apartment?”

“That would be Tony, the superintendent. You’ll find him in the basement apartment right off the stairwell. Can’t miss it. It’s the only apartment down there.” He stood and fumbled around in his jacket pocket for his keys. “I’ll let you in with a warning, young lady. Be careful around Tony. He’s a bad one, a real mongrel.” He unlocked the door and held it open.

“Thank you. I’m sure I can handle…Tony for the short time we’re here.”

They found the apartment in the grimy basement. The name on the door read Salvato. Courtney gave the old wooden door a solid rap. When she got no response, she knocked harder with her entire fist.

This time, she got a delayed verbal response. “Yeah, yeah, I’m comin’. Keep your pants on.”

The door swung open, and the musty, bitter smell of the old building mixed with garlic poured from the apartment. A man of about forty, fat and out of shape, stood in front of them, pulling on suspenders. He was unshaven and mostly bald. What hair remained on his head was in disarray. He wore a white T-shirt stained at the armpits, a gold chain and Italian horn hanging from his neck, and black slacks. It was clear he had been sleeping. Once he was able to focus, he took Courtney in with his eyes. He recognized Jade right away and sneered at her.

Jade grabbed Courtney’s hand and hid behind her legs.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Salvato? Are you the superintendent of this building?” Courtney asked.

“Yeah, that would be me. Who wants to know?”

“My name is Courtney Wilhelm. My sister, Marissa, was a tenant of yours. This is her daughter Jade.”

His bushy, black eyebrows narrowed. “Yeah, I remember.”

“I realize some time has passed, but I believe there are still some things belonging to Jade that were accidentally left in the apartment. Would it be possible for us to take a look?”

“You serious? I doubt there’s anything left.”

“May I please have just a few minutes to look around?”

“I know my toys are there. That’s where the large lady left them,” Jade added from around Courtney.

He shot another angry glare at Jade. “Look, lady, that apartment is being cleaned up after your pig of a sister trashed it,” he said as he was about to end the conversation by slamming the door in their face.

Heat rolled up the back of Courtney’s neck. She hated playing down to this man, especially the way he spoke of Marissa, but she knew how to manipulate his type. She pulled a folded bill from her bag and held it up so he could see the denomination. “We won’t take up much of your time,” she said with a quaint smile.

His eyes grew big and he ran his giant paw of a hand over his bristled jaw. “Well, seeing as how I just happen to be on my way up to the third floor, I think I could unlock the door, but only for a few minutes.” He grabbed the bill from Courtney and stuffed it in his pants pocket. “Wait here.” He slammed the door to the apartment and moments later emerged wearing shoes and carrying a large ring of keys. “We have to take the stairs. The elevator is out of order.”

“We always had to take the stairs ’cause the elevator never worked,” Jade said.

“Smart-ass kid.” He growled in a low tone.

Courtney put her finger to her lips and squeezed Jade’s hand gently to quiet her.

They followed the overweight building manager at a safe distance as he huffed and puffed his way up to the third floor and down the hall to the back of the building. The same musty odor filled the floor and worsened when it mixed with the stench coming from a garbage chute with a broken door.

Courtney’s disgust grew with each step she took. Her disbelief deepened, and guilt flourished seeing firsthand Marissa’s descent from the Park Avenue penthouse they called home as children to the decrepit tenement building she occupied as an adult.

Jade, however, seemed right at home walking through the dirty hall littered with fast food wrappings and newspapers. It was the only life she had known until six weeks earlier.

The burly man unlocked the door to the apartment next to the fire escape. “You got five minutes.”

Courtney gave the door a push, but before she could take a step, Jade bolted past her and into the vacant apartment. She took a deep breath and followed.

The apartment was mostly empty, and trash was everywhere. The walls were in need of fresh paint and the window a good scrubbing. An old red sofa occupied the space under a window that overlooked an alley. A table was all that was left in the kitchen. Its top was marred with scratches and ringed stains. In one bedroom, a mattress and boxed springs were propped against the wall opposite an old dresser with a mirror so dirty it looked fogged. What remained of the furniture wasn’t worth salvaging.

Courtney walked slowly toward the bedroom. It was Marissa’s room. She stood in the middle of the floor, closed her eyes, and took a slow deep breath. For a brief moment, she tried to imagine Marissa in this place. She opened her eyes and scanned the room. Something tucked in the bottom corner of the mirror frame caught her eye. She reached for the exposed edge of the dangling paper. When she held it up, to her surprise, it was a faded old photograph of her and Marissa.

She knew exactly where the photo was from. Her father had taken them to visit a friend of his for a weekend on Cape Cod. Courtney guessed she was about fifteen at the time and Marissa eight. They looked so happy together on the beach with their arms wrapped tightly around each other and laughing. Tears forced pressure at the corners of her eyes. She had forgotten the good side of Marissa and the time in their lives when they truly felt like sisters.

“God, Marissa, how did it all go so wrong?” she asked, quietly choking back the tears that threatened to pour out. She was the only one who loved Marissa then. Jade could be added to that short list now.

“Oh, no, they’re all gone,” Jade cried.

Her voice startled Courtney. She carefully placed the tattered photo in her bag on her way to find Jade.

In the small room behind the kitchen, Courtney found Jade on her knees in the tiny closet staring down at an empty storage container.

“Jade? What’s the matter?”

“My toys, they’re all gone. I put them here in my box just like Mama always told me to do.” Anger filled her voice. “It’s all the fat lady’s fault.” She began to cry.

Courtney didn’t feel the need to correct her choice of words this time. The sadness of the situation Jade had been thrust into by her mother’s death was more than any six-year-old should have to go through. If she wanted this to be the fat lady’s fault, then so be it.

She squatted next to Jade and put a hand on her back. “Everything will be all right. We’ll get new toys, and we’ll make sure no one can take them away.”

Jade pushed Courtney away and swatted at her arm. “But Mama got me those ones. I’ll never get any more from Mama,” she said through frustrated tears.

Courtney was surprised at Jade’s defiance. What have I gotten myself into, she wondered, as she watched Jade’s tantrum over the missing toys. She tried several times to console her with a touch, but each time, Jade pushed her away.

When Jade finally managed to calm herself, she sobbed, “I want my mama.”

Courtney wanted to cry, as well, but fought the urge. “I know, I know.” She paused. “You know what, though? I think I know just the toys your mama would want to buy for you to replace the others, and I know right where to get them.”

Jade sniffed back her tears and wiped her nose with her sleeve. “You do?” She looked at Courtney. “Really?”

Courtney pulled a tissue from her bag and wiped Jade’s tears. “Yes, really. If we leave right now, we can get to the store in plenty of time.” She needed to get them out of the apartment. The sadness was overwhelming. She had taken in enough of Marissa’s world to understand what it was like.

She stood and offered her hand to Jade. Jade hopped up eagerly and accepted Courtney’s hand.

Courtney tightened her grip as they passed Salvato on their way down the hall. He was standing in a doorway flashing money and talking intimately with a woman who looked haggard for her age. Courtney tried to thank him as they started down the stairs, but he waved her off. He was baiting the girl for sex, no doubt, and using her money to do it, she thought.

Once they were out of the building, Courtney allowed Jade to give Willie a goodbye hug and thanked him for his kindness. She hurried Jade into the waiting taxi, and they headed back toward the New York most familiar to her.

They got out at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-eighth Street. The giant silver sign on the front of the building reflected the afternoon sunlight.

“This is FAO Schwarz. Your mama and I shopped here when we were children,” Courtney said as they walked across the plaza.

“What will we buy in here?” Jade asked, her gaze bouncing from person to person as they made their way through the crowd.

“Anything you want. We’ll get dolls, games, puzzles, books, and anything else you like.”

Jade was like a deer in headlights when they entered the store. Never in her young life had she seen such a place. It was a giant toy box filled with everything kids loved. Courtney released her hand. “You had better get shopping, young lady. This is a big place and there’s a lot to see.”

Jade gave Courtney a huge grin. “Oh, boy! Can we see the dolls?”

“Certainly. We’ll start there and work our way around.” Courtney motioned for a sales associate and explained their mission. The associate gladly followed from point to point in the store as the two stocked up on the latest in everything a six-year-old could want to play with.

They carried as much as they could in bags, and Courtney arranged to have the rest delivered. When it was all said and done, the final tally was obscene, but Courtney felt it was the best way she knew how to stand in for Marissa. She was able to provide for Jade something no one else in her life could or would.

On the way home, Courtney dug into her bag in search of the cell phone that was ringing. When she finally found it at the bottom, it had stopped. The display read one missed call from Suzanne Dempsey.

“I completely forgot,” Courtney said out loud. She looked at Jade and thought for a minute. Her decision was to keep the date, provided she could find someone to watch Jade for a few hours. Virginia would never do it. She was even less of a nurturer than Courtney. Then it hit her—Stella. She would call Stella and offer double what she normally paid her per hour. With eleven grandchildren, she was certainly trustworthy, and a retired husband meant they could always use the extra money.

Jade watched as Courtney made the call and lined up her plans for the evening.

“Courtney, why can’t you stay home with me tonight? I thought you would play with some of my new toys.”

“I have a social engagement with a business acquaintance tonight that I really must keep.”

Jade looked at her with a furrowed brow. It was clear by her expression that she didn’t understand the big words.

“I have a friend from work that I planned to take to dinner. The rest of your toys will arrive tomorrow and you’ll have all day to try them out.”

Jade’s face softened.

“Stella will be staying with you again this evening. She’s going to stop at the store for us and get the jam and the noodles and cheese in a box. She’s also going to make a nice dinner for you.”

“I guess that’s okay.” Jade crossed her arms.

Courtney almost laughed. “Thank you for being so understanding. I won’t be out late.” She patted Jade’s leg. “Now what do you say we get lunch?”

“Yeah,” Jade said with a smile.

By the time they finally walked through the door of the penthouse that afternoon, Jade could hardly hold on to the single bag she was carrying.

“I have to check my phone messages. I’ll leave you to unload the bags. Can you do that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jade said in a groggy voice.

Courtney watched Jade make her way down the hall with her toys while she dug through her bag in search of her cell phone. Jade had occupied the better part of her day, and she needed to check on her own business.

When she was done, she went down the hall to check on Jade. She pushed the door open and found her asleep on the bed, her arms wrapped tight around Happy Bunny. The new toys made it out of their bags and to the floor before Jade climbed onto the bed and went to sleep. She was completely exhausted. Courtney covered her with a blanket and closed the door halfway as she left the room.

**CHAPTER6**

Courtney walked through the heavy wooden doors of Tao. Suzanne suggested Asian-fusion. Tao was the place, with its chic, modern décor and expansive menu of the finest in Chinese, Japanese, and Thai cuisine. A true four-star dining experience.

“Good evening, madam. Welcome to Tao. May I help you?” the man at the front desk asked.

“Good evening. I have a reservation. The name is Wilhelm.” Courtney scanned the crowd quickly for Suzanne.

“Yes, ma’am, I have a reservation for two. You requested a booth.”

“Yes, something out of the way, quiet.”

“Yes, ma’am, if you will follow me, I’ll show you to your table.”

Courtney didn’t have to wait long for Suzanne. Shortly after she was seated and the waiter filled her water glass, Suzanne appeared.

She was lovely as always. Her red hair was loose and draped over her bare shoulders. She wore a strapless cocktail dress of black silk with small pink cherry blossoms printed over the top.

“Well, hello, stranger,” she said, standing in front of Courtney.

“Hello yourself.” Courtney stood and wrapped her arm around Suzanne’s tiny waist and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “You look fabulous.”

Suzanne slid in next to her. “You’d better say so. I bought this dress specifically for tonight.” She patted Courtney’s knee under the table.

“How could I not notice? You’re the most beautiful woman in this establishment.” Courtney knew Suzanne relished flirtatious compliments.

“You’re looking particularly luscious yourself.” She entwined her arm with Courtney’s. “You know I’ve missed our evenings together. It’s been months since I’ve had my hands on this extraordinary body of yours.” She gave Courtney’s arm a squeeze.

“Yes, well, business has been very good and the clients have demanded my full attention of late.”

“And I’m demanding your full attention tonight,” Suzanne said with a deviant smile and a twinkle in her blue eyes. “I do hope you’ll consider staying the entire night with me this time, instead of getting up and running off in the middle of the night.”

“I’d consider that, but we’ll have to go back to my place tonight.”

Suzanne gave her a curious smile. “Really? You usually prefer my place.”

The waiter interrupted their conversation for a drink order and to recite the menu specials of the evening. When he was done, they sent him off to the bar for champagne.

“So what gives? Are you becoming a homebody all of a sudden?”

Courtney gave a small laugh. “Not quite. I…I have an unexpected guest at the penthouse for the weekend. My sister’s daughter is waiting to be…” Courtney paused with her explanation. “You see, my mother is in Sardinia, and as you know, my half sister passed away a few months ago, and…” She paused again. Courtney found herself stumbling to explain Jade.

“Your sister’s daughter is staying with you?” Suzanne asked.

“Yes, she is. You see, my mother was to take her, but she’s out of the country at the moment, and Jade, my sister’s daughter, is staying in my penthouse until Monday when other arrangements can be made.”

Suzanne looked at her with concern but said nothing.

“Really, she’s no problem and will be on the other end of the penthouse.”

“How old is your niece?”

“She’s six.”

Again Suzanne gave her a look of concern.

Courtney took Suzanne’s hand. “I can assure you we’ll have complete privacy.”

Suzanne’s face softened and she smiled. “How can I pass up a night in that grand luxurious bed of yours?” She touched Courtney’s cheek. “And to have that wonderful body of yours against my own.”

Courtney felt an explosion deep inside. Suzanne was definitely a sexual charge. She had it all—the looks, brains, personality, common sense, and executive position. Yet one night at a time was all she ever wanted or expected with Suzanne. She never felt the urge to merge, as it were, with her. The vision of setting up housekeeping with her, or for that matter with anyone, didn’t occur to Courtney.

When dinner was over, the two women grabbed a taxi and headed to Courtney’s penthouse. Quite a bit of time had passed since they last shared a bed together. Courtney filled her long nights alone in hotels with images of Suzanne’s naked body. The anticipation thickened as the taxi got closer to their destination.

In the elevator on the way up, Suzanne pressed her hips into Courtney and held her against the mirrored wall. She gazed into her eyes and kissed her with urgency. Courtney responded with equal insatiable energy. When the door clanked open at the top floor, the two women moved in unison out into the hall. Courtney put the key in the lock and pushed the heavy door open. The squeal of the hinges interrupted the quiet of the penthouse interior. The low volume of voices coming from the television was the only noise to be heard.

“Ah, Miss Courtney, you’re home.” Stella pushed herself up from the leather sofa.

“Yes, Stella, I’m home for the night.” Courtney removed her jacket. “How was the evening?”

“Everything was fine. The little one ate a good dinner and went off to bed with no fuss.”

Courtney pulled her wallet out and handed Stella several large bills. “Thank you for coming on such short notice. I appreciate all your help with Jade.”

Stella smiled as she folded the bills and stuffed them in her purse. “You need someone to help who knows children. I’m an expert.” She slipped her jacket on. “The new clothes are put away, and the toys are all organized in the bedroom.”

“Thank you again.”

She stopped just short of the door. “Oh, and the clothes that came with Jade are in a bag in the laundry room. She wouldn’t give up the pink sneakers, though. The little thing was ready to fight me tooth and nail over them.”

“That’s okay. If she feels more secure with them, that’s fine.”

“Okay then, I’ll go home to my Archie. You ladies have a good night. I’ll be back Monday at my usual time.” Stella closed the door behind her.

Courtney took Suzanne’s jacket and hung it in the closet along with her own. “Can I get you a drink?”

“No, thank you.” Suzanne wrapped her arms around Courtney’s waist. “What I would like is to get you naked.”

Courtney brushed her lips over Suzanne’s neck. “Sounds to me like a splendid idea,” she said. “I need to check on Jade first. Then I promise you’ll have my undivided attention.”

Suzanne rolled her bottom lip under to pout. “I’ll be waiting for you in the bedroom.” She brushed her fingertips over Courtney’s bottom as she walked past her. “Don’t be long.”

“I’ll be right there.” Courtney walked quietly to Jade’s room and peered into the half-open door.

Jade was sound asleep in the middle of the bed. Wrapped tight in the comforter and hugging Happy Bunny, she was the picture of peace.

Satisfied that Jade would be no distraction to the plans for the evening, Courtney stepped softly along the hardwood floor of the hall to the master suite. She pushed the door open and stepped in to find Suzanne already in bed. Silky red curls glowing in candlelight caressed ivory shoulders that graced the Italian sheets covering the curvaceous naked body of her lover. The picturesque scene in her bed brought a smile to her face.

“Get that damn suit off and get in bed, Counselor,” she demanded with a wicked smile.

Courtney closed the door and stepped out of her Ferragamo pumps. She slipped off her shirt and dropped it on the chaise lounge on her way to the bed. “You PR types are always telling people where to go and how to act.”

Suzanne draped her arms around Courtney’s neck. “That’s my specialty, and I do get maximum performance when I call the shots,” she said and kissed her with urgency.

Courtney struggled to get out of the rest of her clothes while her lips were attached to Suzanne’s.

Suzanne’s nimble fingers removed Courtney’s bra and found her breasts in no time.

“That feels so good. It really has been too long,” she whispered to Suzanne.

“Yes, it has.” She covered a nipple with her mouth and pulled Courtney under the sheets.

Courtney was beginning to feel the heat that always built deep inside of her when she was with Suzanne. She let her hands roam freely over Suzanne’s long, limber body. Her mouth found the nape of Suzanne’s neck. She was enjoying the feel of a woman’s body next to her own.

The two women were so engrossed in each other that they didn’t hear the door open or notice the light that streamed in from the hall.

A pathetic little voice at the foot of the bed said, “Courtney, I can’t sleep.”

Courtney’s head popped up immediately from Suzanne’s breasts. “Jade! Please go back to bed.”

“But I can’t sleep.”

Courtney held the sheet tight to her torso and looked down at Jade. She looked so small clinging to her bunny. “What’s wrong? Why can’t you sleep?”

“Because I don’t feel…” She paused. “…good.” She barely got the words out of her mouth. She made a retching noise that was followed by the explosive expulsion of the spaghetti dinner Stella made earlier in the evening.

Suzanne shrieked as she crashed into the pillows with the covers pulled over her head.

“Jade! My Persian rug!” Courtney grabbed the robe next to the bed and threw it on. “Oh, my God! My twenty thousand-dollar Persian rug. It’s ruined.”

Jade stood quietly in front of the red mess with her hand over her mouth. Pieces of spaghetti stuck to the front of her tomato-stained pajama top. Her face was pale, and moisture beaded on her forehead. Jade looked so pitiful, Courtney couldn’t bring herself to scold her. She gently wiped Jade’s forehead and mouth with a tissue. “Let’s go back to your room and get you cleaned up.” She took Jade by the hand and left the room.

“Courtney!” Suzanne’s head popped up from the sheets. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back. I’ll clean her up and put her back to bed,” she said in a low tone.

Courtney sat Jade on a stool next to the sink in the bathroom. She wet a washcloth and wiped her face. Jade was still pale, but her eyes appeared a bit brighter. “Are you feeling better now?”

“I think so,” Jade said, all the while gripping Happy Bunny under her arm.

“You’re not going to throw up again, are you?” Courtney asked with apprehension.

“I think it’s all gone.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. It’s all gone to the middle of my hand-woven Persian rug,” Courtney mumbled.

“I’m sorry, Courtney. Are you mad at me?” Jade lowered her head.

Guilt rose inside Courtney. With a finger, she lifted Jade’s chin and looked into her big dark eyes. “No, I’m not mad at you. Don’t think that for one second. When you’re sick, sometimes things happen that you can’t control. I just want you to feel better.”

Jade wiped her nose on the sleeve of her pajamas. “I think I feel better now.”

“Okay. Do you think you’ll be able to go back to sleep?”

“I think so. I’ll try.”

Courtney took her hand. “All right then, let’s put you back to bed.” She got a clean T-shirt out of the dresser and changed Jade’s dirty top before she put her into bed. “Are you sure you’re better?”

Jade yawned. “Yeah, my tummy stopped hurting.”

“Good. Now try to go to sleep. I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.”

“Okay.” Jade hugged her bunny tight. “Courtney, who was that other lady in your bedroom?”

Surprise grabbed her by the throat. “Umm, that’s a friend who came to spend the night.”

“Oh. I had a sleepover once. Mama let my friend Jody spend the night, but that was a long time ago.”

“That’s nice. Go to sleep.” Courtney dimmed the light in the bathroom and left the door open in case something else happened. She was still trying to recover from Jade’s question about Suzanne.

She returned to the bedroom with a bucket of water and towels from the kitchen. She would try to clean the bulk of the mess out of her rug. The rest would require professional cleaning.

“Suzanne, I’m so sorry for the interruption…” She stopped and looked around the room.

The covers were bunched up at the foot of the bed and Suzanne’s clothes were gone. “Suzanne?” Courtney called out.

There was no answer.

She checked the bathroom, not there. She went to the living room and checked the closet. Suzanne’s jacket was gone.

Courtney took a deep breath and released it slowly. “She could’ve at least said goodbye.”

She closed the closet door and returned to the bedroom to deal with the mess on her rug. When she was done cleaning what she could, she checked on Jade one more time. She was sound asleep with Happy Bunny. The color had returned to her cheeks, and she looked peaceful once again.

When Courtney got back to her room, she straightened the covers and slipped into bed alone this time. She sent Suzanne an apologetic text and waited for a reply, but none came. Eventually, Courtney drifted off to sleep in disappointment.

**CHAPTER 7**

On Monday morning, Courtney arrived early at the office. She surprised Deborah, who was always in by 6:30, when she walked in. Courtney had a full schedule that day, including a trip uptown to see Ms. Vasquez again.

She tried repeatedly on Sunday to reach her mother, who was still reported by Jacque to be in a remote location in the Mediterranean and unable to be reached by phone. She didn’t stop with Kaye’s annoying valet, however. She shot off several e-mails to her, as well. Unfortunately, Kaye didn’t respond to any of the communications Courtney sent. She needed to discuss Jade’s long-term arrangements with Kaye, especially since her mother was still the next of kin, and Jade was her official responsibility.

Courtney continued to roll over in her mind her options for Jade just as she had done the entire day on Sunday. Periodically, when she emerged from her study in the penthouse, she found Jade playing with her new toys in her room. She was for all intents and purposes a quiet girl, keeping mostly to herself. In many ways, Jade reminded Courtney of herself as a child. Being raised by a nanny, Courtney often was left to entertain herself and was constantly reminded to play quietly because her father was working down the hall.

Jade seemed to be experiencing a similar situation with a mother who was sick. Living in a world surrounded by adults could be a lonely place for a child who didn’t use her imagination. Courtney viewed it as a survival technique. She used it often growing up.

She certainly could relate to the kind of life Jade was subject to. Courtney also told herself as much as she sympathized with Jade, she was not a good choice for guardian. Her life was focused on her career. The firm relied heavily on her expertise in litigation to keep the flow of high-profile corporate clients coming through the doors. She couldn’t let up, not if she ever expected to see her name appear over the door with Rosewell and Clooney. Caring for a child required too much time and proved to be a distraction, as was the case with many of the other female attorneys Courtney knew. They did their jobs well, but it was not uncommon for them to take a day off unexpectedly for a sick child. That was not Courtney’s style. She was too driven by ambition and ego to even take a day off when she wasn’t feeling good.

I’ve got to let the Vasquez woman place her with a family that’s child-oriented, she thought. Eventually, Kaye will have to come back to the States and deal with this. When she finds out Jade is in foster care, her return might be expedited.

Mora poked her head in the office door. “Ms. Wilhelm, a Mr. Dodson from the Pelham Group is on the phone.”

Deborah popped up from her chair at the table in the back of the room. “Do you want me to get that?”

“No, thank you. I’ll take it. I’m sure Billy is calling to set the tone for this legal skirmish,” Courtney said.

“Sounds like you know this guy.”

Courtney sighed. “Yes, he used to work here. Typical man, everything was a competition with him. You know, who could climb higher, faster.”

Deborah laughed. “I think I know who won that one.”

“Yes, well, you could say stepping on his own dick didn’t help his cause with the firm. He got involved with one of Rosewell’s daughters, and when she found out he was also sleeping with a secretary from the architecture firm downstairs, she had Daddy drop the hammer on him.”

“Is that an acceptable reason to fire someone?” Deborah looked confused.

“No, but making one of the principals look like an unprepared fool in court is.”

“Ah, brilliant move.”

Courtney reached for the phone. “Good morning, Billy. How are you?” She gave an evil grin.

“It’s Bill. Let’s try to keep this professional, Courtney, shall we?”

“Yes, we most certainly can keep this professional…Bill. What can I do for you today?”

“I hear you want to try to settle the Crammell case at the bargaining table.”

“Well, that would save both clients an enormous amount of money. However, neither of our firms would be happy about that. But if negotiation is what Mr. Crammell wants, I’m sure my client will sit down and talk.”

“Crammell is not interested in settling. What he wants is for Nosheki to allow the company to grow as he had planned. After all, when he sold them a chunk of his stock, it was in good faith that his vision was shared. He needed capital to take Crammell Silicon to the next level, and your client agreed to remain a silent partner.”

“Is that what Crammell told you? Let me ask you this, do you have documentation to back that up?”

The other end of the line was silent.

“I didn’t think so. Face it, Bill. Nosheki is now the major shareholder of Crammell Silicon, and with the blessing of the board of directors, my client is free to make any decisions he wishes, including a merger.”

“It’s not that simple, Courtney.”

“Fine. Send me the documents so we can see just how complicated it is. Oh, but if your client has a change of heart and wants to join us in negotiations, my client is willing to listen.”

“Tell Nosheki not to hold their collective breaths,” he said with his usual sarcasm, then hung up.

Courtney placed the receiver back on the base calmly with a triumphant smile.

“You never let them think for one minute that they have the upper hand, do you?” Deborah asked with amazement.

Courtney put her hands on her hips. “Of course not and especially not the men. I’m not to be taken lightly, and if they don’t know it, they will quickly learn it.”

Deborah shook her head with a smile and went back to work.

Around ten, Courtney gathered her things and headed for the door and the ride uptown.

“Ms. Wilhelm, don’t forget your father is arriving at JFK at three,” Mora said as Courtney passed her desk.

“Thank you for reminding me. With everything going on, I forgot. Will you order a car to pick him up at the airport?” Courtney slipped her jacket on. “Make it a limo, please.”

“Yes, Ms. Wilhelm.” Mora picked up the phone as she looked up the number for the transportation service.

In the taxi headed uptown, Courtney made a call to Virginia. She was looking for some verification that what she was about to do was the right thing for Jade.

“Good morning, dear. This is a nice surprise.”

“Good morning, Virginia. Are you busy?”

“Never too busy to talk with you. Is everything all right? Did you hear from Kaye?”

“I’m not sure, and no, not a word.”

“This is so like Kaye. She had an air of irresponsibility about her when your father first introduced her, and she hasn’t changed in all these years.”

“Yes, well, my mother’s time is up on this one. I’m on my way to Children’s Services to make other arrangements for Jade.”

“Other arrangements? But aren’t you keeping her until Kaye returns?”

“I can’t keep her. I don’t have the time or the temperament to take on a child. The weekend was trying enough. She needs to be with someone that knows children, that understands them.”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

“I’m going to have Ms. Vasquez place her back in foster care until my mother returns to claim her. After all, I didn’t even know she existed until three days ago. As for a connection to Marissa, that was severed years ago by the drugs.”

Virginia remained silent for a moment, then asked, “Are you sure this is the right decision for all involved? Maybe you should wait and talk to your father. He’ll be home in a few hours.”

“Why wait? As much as I love my father, we all know he was not the model parent, either. It was fortunate for him to be able to pay someone else to do it. I would imagine he would tell me Jade is not my responsibility, and if Kaye wants her, she should come and get her.”

“Possibly, but don’t you think you’re being a bit harsh? If putting that child back into the foster system is your way of sending a message to your mother, I’d have to tell you I don’t agree.”

“You think I should keep her until Kaye decides to return and claim her? She’ll have completed her post-doctorate work by then. That’s assuming my mother ever returns. Hell, she was in New York less than twenty-four hours for Marissa’s burial. Before that, who can remember when she was last in the U.S. for any length of time.” The excitement rose in Courtney’s voice as she spoke.

“Calm yourself, dear. I know Kaye has once again saddled you with her personal business. But there’s more to consider this time than feeling as if your mother is dumping on you.”

Courtney listened intently to Virginia’s appeal.

“What about Jade? Do you really think the foster system is the best thing for her in the long run?”

“I think she would be better with a family that has children and keeps normal hours. Besides, I don’t foresee her in foster care for very long. Once my mother knows I’m not keeping Jade, she’ll be forced to make arrangements for her. She’s the legal guardian.”

“Yes, but think of how Jade must feel. She just lost her mother.” Virginia redirected her argument. “She’s had a few days to adjust to you. Now she’ll be thrown into a strange home with strange people.”

“What should I do? I can’t care for her. I have clients and a job to worry about. I don’t keep regular hours, and just like you, I know nothing about children.”

“I don’t envy your position. You’re right, caring for a child is a full-time job in itself. I can’t help but have some sympathy for the little thing. She’s the innocent party in all this. I do know this much—children need stability and security. Foster care can be a lonely, frightening place for someone used to having family around.”

The taxi pulled up in front of Children’s Services.

“Thank you for listening to me. I just want to do what’s right for everyone.”

“I know you do.”

“I’ve got to go. Thanks.” Courtney hung up and got out of the taxi. She was so engrossed in her own thoughts, she almost forgot to pay the driver.

Inside the lobby, she found Theresa Vasquez at the front desk.

“Good morning, Ms. Wilhelm.”

“Good morning, Ms. Vasquez. I hope I’m not too early.” Courtney offered her hand.

Theresa accepted the handshake. “Not at all. Let’s go to my desk so we can talk. I received a phone call this morning that changes things for Jade.” She escorted Courtney past the security guards.

Courtney sat in the old chair next to Theresa’s desk, hoping the call was from her mother. Possibly all the hounding she did finally spurred Kaye to take care of her business.

“So tell me about this call, Ms. Vasquez.”

Theresa sat at her desk and folded her hands. “I talked to a Mr. Goldberg this morning. He identified himself as an attorney representing Kaye Blanchard-Wilhelm.”

“Yes, I know him. He’s been my mother’s stateside attorney for years.”

“He informed me that your mother no longer wishes to continue the temporary custody of Jade that she granted you last week.”

Relief washed over Courtney. “Finally, my mother is accepting her responsibility.”

Theresa winced. “I’m afraid that’s not exactly what was offered.”

Courtney’s face went blank.

“I’m sure Mr. Goldberg will call you himself, but before anything can be made official, I have to complete the paperwork.”

“What arrangements is Mr. Goldberg working on?”

Theresa handed over the top sheet from the new file on her desk. “Your mother wants to relinquish all rights to your niece. She’s giving you full and permanent custody of Jade.”

The sheet of paper slipped from Courtney’s hand and fell to the floor.

Theresa reached down and picked it up.

“I’m sorry.” Courtney tried to make light of the incident. “You caught me off-guard. I wasn’t expecting to hear that.”

Theresa set the paper back on top of the file. “That’s quite all right. I realize the dilemma you’re facing.”

“Yes, my goal was to place Jade but only long enough for my mother to return and take custody of her.”

Theresa looked down at the file.

“You must think terrible of me. Really, I’m only trying to do what’s best for Jade. I’m not the right person to be her legal guardian. I have a demanding job, I don’t keep regular hours, and I frequently travel for work. Quite frankly, I’m almost never home.”

Theresa gave her a curt smile. “I’m sure your life is busy. I hope you understand my position. I have a child that, not by any choice or fault of her own, is without a family and a home. My job is to see that she’s given a safe environment in which to live and her needs are provided for.”

“I can most certainly see to it that her needs are taken care of by paying for her monthly expenses.”

“It doesn’t work that way. If your intention is to relinquish your rights to the child, then the state will take custody of her, and she’ll be provided for by Children’s Services.”

From the look on Courtney’s face, Theresa wasn’t sure she understood exactly what she was talking about.

“Do you understand? If you give up your rights to Jade, you no longer have visitation privileges and you are no longer financially responsible for her.”

Family law was never Courtney’s strong suit, but she remembered enough from law school to know that what she would give up she would not get back. “Yes, I understand.” At that moment, Virginia’s words rang in her ears. *What about Jade? Think of how Jade must feel.*

“Is there no other family to take Jade?” Theresa asked.

“No, there’s not. My mother has been estranged from her family in Savannah, Georgia, since before I was born. I’ve never met any of them. It’s either me or Kaye Blanchard.” Courtney ran her fingers through her hair in frustration. “And it looks like it’ll have to be me.”

Theresa looked Courtney in the eyes. “Are you sure you’re up to this? Jade will need medical care, she’ll have to be enrolled in school, she’ll need a chance to get out and play with other children. There’s so much at stake here.”

“Yes, I know, but I just can’t leave my sister’s child to be thrown into the system when she has someone she can depend on and who can provide for her adequately.”

The tension in Theresa’s face loosened. “Very well. I’ll contact Mr. Goldberg and draw up the rest of the papers needed for permanent custody. Of course, it will all have to go back to the judge for approval.”

“Yes, of course.” Courtney sat wringing her hands as so many thoughts clouded her mind at once. She would need a nanny, possibly a live-in. She would have to enroll Jade in school. The penthouse—was it big enough for a sudden growth in occupants? She would have to explain things to her father; he would not be happy with any of it.

Theresa returned with the papers. She and Courtney discussed the legalities of their transfer of guardianship of Jade. In true attorney form, Courtney treated the transaction as all business.

When they wrapped things up, the two women shook hands.

“I’ll be in touch in a few days. Of course I’ll need to know your plans for Jade’s education by then. The new school year has already started. That puts her behind the other children.”

“Of course. Thank you.” Courtney saw herself out.

In the taxi back to the office, she pulled out her BlackBerry and called Virginia.

“How did it go?”

“You won’t believe what my mother has done this time.”

Virginia heard the tension in her voice. “What is it, dear? Tell me.”

“She relinquished all responsibility of Jade and turned her over to me.”

“On a positive note, that may have been the most responsible thing Kaye could’ve done for her. Think of it this way—if Kaye had accepted responsibility for Jade, what kind of life would she have? The same as she gave Marissa?”

“You’re exactly right. She would be dragged all over Europe at my mother’s whims. That was no life for Marissa. It certainly won’t be Jade’s life now.”

“So am I to assume you’re keeping her?”

“I was set on putting her into foster care, hoping it would force Kaye to take her, but she reversed the plan on me.” Courtney paused and took a deep breath. “Now I have a six-year-old living with me, and I haven’t the faintest idea what to do with her from here.”

“I’m so proud of you. You did the right thing. That little girl will now have a chance at a good life with you to guide her.”

“I hope you’re right because I don’t have a damn clue what I’m doing.”

“You’ll work through it, I’m sure of it. When do we get to meet the littlest Wilhelm?”

“I’ll let you know. Gotta go. I’m back at the office.”

“I want to hear what your father has to say.”

“We’ll talk later.” Courtney crossed the sidewalk and into her office building. She worked on putting her game face on in the elevator on the way to her office. She had to take control of the Crammell case. She had relied too much on Deborah already. It was her case and she needed to sink her teeth into it.

Courtney rounded the corner and passed Mora’s desk. “Is Deborah in her office?”

“No, she’s in yours.” Mora got up from her desk with a stack of papers and followed Courtney into her office.

Deborah was sitting at the table in the back of Courtney’s office. Neat stacks of files covered the oak table top. “Courtney, I’m so glad you’re back. Mr. Dodson called again.”

“Tell me Crammell is ready to negotiate,” Courtney said, peeling off her suit jacket.

“I wish I could tell you just that.” Deborah folded her arms across her chest. “I will say Dodson has one overly inflated ego.”

“What did he want?”

“Nothing really. Said he needed to talk to you directly. No offense to me, but his business was with the head counsel on the case. I told him I would give you his message, and he said, ‘Thanks, babe.’” Deborah dropped her arms and paced the floor. “Thanks, babe,” she repeated, “like I’m some twenty-something first-year law student.”

Courtney half smiled. “Asshole. Make no mistake, Billy Dodson has no respect for women. We have to force him to respect us, at least in a professional capacity. It’s better if we make him look like an incompetent boob in court.”

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do.” Deborah stopped pacing and sat back down at the table.

“He knows this case is a no-win for him. Crammell is grasping at straws to keep control of the company. At best, they’re hoping to get this thing to the appellate court to set precedence by having the decision overturned. Not going to happen as long as this case is in my hands.”

Deborah smiled. “I can’t wait to see the smirk fall from his face when the court rules against him.”

“Let’s get to work and make it happen.”

**CHAPTER 8**

By four o’clock, Courtney had a good bit of her research and strategy laid out. A quiet afternoon in the office helped her progress. This was just the beginning of the planning for the fight. She loved all of it. She was made for the legal system.

The ring of the BlackBerry interrupted Courtney’s concentration as she scrolled through a Google search. “This is Courtney.”

“Hello, my lovely daughter,” said the baritone voice wrapped in a German accent.

“Papa, so good to hear your voice. Are you home?” Courtney turned away from the computer screen.

“Yes, my dear girl. The driver just left me. It’s so good to be back.”

“How was the conference?”

“Extraordinary. I will tell you all about it over dinner, if you will join me.”

“I would love to…”

“Splendid, I made a reservation for seven at Per Se.”

“The French restaurant on Columbus Circle?”

“Yes, I thought it a fitting homecoming.”

“Papa, I would love to have dinner with you, but…”

“What could be more important than dining with your dear papa?”

Courtney sank in her chair. “You’re right. Nothing is more important.”

“Good. I shall see you promptly at seven.”

“Yes, Papa. Seven.” Courtney rubbed her eyes and released a giant sigh after hanging up.

“Something wrong, Court?” Deborah asked, hearing the stress in Courtney’s voice.

“I’d like to say no, but I have a little problem at home that my father doesn’t know anything about…yet.” Courtney pushed her hair back off her face. “You see, my half sister passed away recently.”

“I remember you mentioning that,” Deborah said.

“Yes, well, there’s more to Marissa’s passing than I knew until a few days ago. She had a child I never knew about.” Courtney walked to the window and peered out over the traffic below. “Now I’ve been given custody of my six-year-old niece,” she laughed, “and I know nothing about raising children.”

Deborah listened intently.

“I have to tell my father about this, and I fear his reaction will not be a good one.” She turned to face Deborah with her hands on her hips. “And I have no babysitter for tonight.”

“Who’s keeping your niece now?”

“She’s with my housekeeper. I managed to talk her into staying with her for the day.” She sat at the table with Deborah. “The woman drives a hard bargain. I’m paying her double while she stays with Jade.”

Deborah tapped the palm of her hand with a pencil while she thought. “You know, Christie and I could watch Jade for you while you go to dinner.”

“I couldn’t. I mean, I’m sure you must have plans. It would be such an imposition.”

“No, not at all. We watch my sister’s kids on occasion. I’m sure Jade couldn’t be any more rambunctious than two little boys.”

Courtney took a moment to consider Deborah’s offer. “Are you sure this is not interrupting any plans? Maybe you should call Christie first.”

“She’ll be all right with it. I can’t call right now anyway, she’s teaching at the university. Just drop Jade at our place on the way to dinner, and we’ll entertain her with pizza and Disney movies while you visit with your father.”

The weight on Courtney’s shoulders was lifted. “Deborah, I can’t thank you and Christie enough. I won’t forget your generosity. This goes above and beyond.”

“Just remember my good deed when it comes time for a raise,” Deborah said with a sheepish smile. “Christie’s talking about a new kitchen for our town house.”

“So noted, with gratitude.”

Courtney finished up the research she was working on and was on her way home by five o’clock. Once again, it was odd for her to be finished for the day so early. Normally, she would work until six, freshen up in her bathroom at the office, then meet her father for dinner. Once dinner was over, she would head for the penthouse and pick up where she left off in her home office for a few more hours before calling it a day.

She found herself in a taxi at five o’clock on her way home and thinking about everything happening with Jade. She would have to get her cleaned up before dropping her at Deborah’s. She found it distracting, as well as exhausting.

The next day would be more of the same. She had to find a school for Jade. Theresa Vasquez made it a priority. Her first thought was to make an appointment with the headmistress of the Mount Pleasant School, the same school she and Marissa attended as children. Since Jade was a legacy and Courtney made regular donations via the alumni club, the school would give her top priority as a candidate.

Courtney walked through the door of the penthouse and dropped her bag in the leather chair. The openness of the big room was quiet. “Hello? Anyone home?”

From the French doors that opened to the large balcony, Jade came running to greet her with Happy Bunny tucked under one arm. “Hi, Courtney,” she said, flashing a grin.

“Hello, how was your day?”

“Mostly good. Stella and me walked down to the store, and a really tall man stepped on my foot.” She pointed down to her left foot.

Courtney put her hands on her hips. “Well, I do hope he apologized for such a serious offense.”

“He never did!” Jade said with a serious face. “He took his bag and left.”

Courtney knelt down so she was eye to eye with Jade and brushed back the curls sticking to her cheek. “When you’re a bit taller, I’m sure those people won’t make the mistake of stepping on your feet. The foot okay then?”

Jade nodded.

“Good.”

Stella stepped in from the balcony and closed the doors behind her. “Ah, you’re home, Miss Courtney. I’ll just be on my way now.”

“Thank you for staying with Jade today.”

“She’s a darling. No trouble.”

“Stella, there’ve been some changes in my plans. I’ll need someone to stay with Jade during the day for the rest of the week. Would you be available?”

Stella gave her a warm smile. “Certainly, I can stay with the little one. May I ask, what are the changes?”

“I’ll explain tomorrow, and thank you for agreeing to keep her. I’ll pay you double for the week.”

Stella nodded as she tied a scarf around her head. “I’ll be here in the morning, same time.”

“Thank you. Have a safe trip home.”

The stocky woman waved on her way out the door.

Jade stood in the middle of the room staring at Courtney. She took in every word she spoke and watched her as she moved from living room to kitchen.

“Jade, come over here so we can have a talk.”

Jade clutched the bunny to her chest and hid her face in the bunny’s fur as she walked toward the kitchen.

Courtney lifted her up onto a stool at the island counter. “I want you to know what I did today.”

Jade peered over the bunny’s head.

“I saw Ms. Vasquez today. We talked about where you were going to live until you grow up.”

Jade wiped her nose with her sleeve and listened intently.

“You know your mama isn’t coming back, right?” she asked with caution.

Jade nodded slowly. The sadness in her dark eyes gave Courtney a heavy feeling in her chest.

“Did you know that you have a grandmother?”

“Uh-huh. She came to our house a couple of times and brought food.”

Courtney was taken aback by Jade’s statement. “Is that right? Do you remember when?”

“It was when Mama was really, really sick. Her hair all came out, and Grandmother, that’s what she told me to call her, was there to get us stuff.”

Courtney tried to hold in the shock. She allowed the attorney in her to take over to find out more. “And did Grandmother stay with you?”

“No, she said it was better for her to stay at the Ritz place.”

“That figures,” Courtney said under her breath.

“She had some helpers come and stay with Mama till she got better. They were real nice to us.”

“Did Grandmother take you anywhere?”

“Once she walked me to the playground near our building. It was when Mama’s tummy hurt real bad and she threw up a whole bunch.” Jade relaxed and set the stuffed bunny in her lap. “The helpers made her better. When we got home, Mama was asleep and not throwing up anymore.”

Courtney was hearing about a side to her mother she would never have believed existed, except that it was Jade telling the story, and that gave it full credibility.

“Did your mama ever get better? I mean, did she feel good enough to take you to the playground?”

“Oh, yes. Mama got better and took me to the playground and the school, and Grandmother didn’t have to bring us stuff anymore ’cause we could go to the store on our own.”

“What did Grandmother do when your mama was better?”

“She went back to her house. She told me she had friends that needed her and they lived far away.”

“Did Grandmother come back to see you after that?”

“No, but I talked to her on the phone once, and she sent Mama envelopes sometimes.”

“Do you know what was in the envelopes?”

“Mama said it was a little something so we could eat.”

“Wow, Grandmother was very nice.”

Jade nodded.

Courtney was bewildered by Jade’s story. Why didn’t Kaye tell her about Marissa? It was the drug use she had to walk away from, not Marissa. If she had known Marissa was sick, she would have been by her side from start to finish just as she had when they were kids.

She put her own questions aside for now to tell Jade what she needed to tell her.

“I’m glad you know Grandmother. You know that she’s my mother, too, right?”

Jade nodded again.

“Ms. Vasquez talked to Grandmother, and they decided that since Grandmother lives so far away, it would be better for you to live here with me and let me take care of you. What do you think about that?”

Jade cocked her head to the side. “I guess that’s okay.”

Courtney moved around the counter and sat on the stool next to Jade. “You miss your mama, don’t you?”

Jade lowered her head and quietly said, “Yes.”

“It’s okay to be sad about your mama. I’m sad about your mama, too.”

Jade looked up at Courtney. “You are?”

“Yes. I didn’t know she was sick, and I didn’t get to see her before she died. That makes me sad.”

A tear escaped the corner of Jade’s eye.

Something inside Courtney responded to the sight of the tear. She wrapped her arms around Jade and drew her close. The girl’s sadness made the air around them seem thick. Courtney wanted to cry with Jade, but she fought it off. When Jade’s tears subsided, Courtney loosened her hold and mopped up the tears with a kitchen towel.

“All right, young lady, this is a new beginning for us. You have to bear with me, I’ve never taken care of anyone before.”

Jade hugged Happy Bunny tight. “I will.” She paused for a moment and her face grew serious. “Courtney, when will I be grown up?”

“Hmm, good question. Why don’t we shoot for when you’re ready to start college?”

“That’s a long time.”

“I know it seems like it is, but you’ll be there before you know it. In the meantime, you have a lot of things to do.”

“Like what?”

“Like Ms. Vasquez told me I have to find a school for you.”

“Can’t I go back to my old school?”

“I’m afraid not. You live too far away now.” Courtney rested her hands on Jade’s small shoulders. “Don’t you worry. I’m going to get you into a good school so you can get caught up with the rest of the first-graders.”

“But I won’t know anybody.”

“I’m sure you’ll make new friends.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. The kids will all want to be your friend. You’ll see.” Courtney looked at the clock. She needed to get a move on. When her father said promptly at seven, he meant it. “Jade, there’s one more thing. I have to go out tonight for a little while. My father has invited me to dinner.”

“Can I come?”

Courtney squirmed in her seat. “No, not this time. My father doesn’t know you’re here, and I have to tell him about you first because he doesn’t like surprises.”

Jade appeared to be satisfied by the explanation. “What am I going to have for dinner?”

“I hope you like pizza.”

Jade’s face lit up. “Oh, yes. I love sausage pizza.”

“Good. I’ve arranged for you to stay with Deborah and Christie. Deborah works for me, and they’re both very nice ladies. They’ve offered to have you over for pizza and a movie while I’m gone.”

Jade pressed Happy to her cheek. “Okay. If I have to.”

“I promise you’ll have a good time, and I won’t be long.”

Courtney sent Jade to her room for a clean shirt and shoes. She helped her brush her hair, then got herself ready for dinner.

When they arrived at Deborah’s town house, Christie opened the door before Jade had the chance to ring the bell. “Hey, girls! Come on in. Nice to see you,” She opened the door all the way.

“Nice to see you, too, Christie.” Courtney gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

The tall, slender blonde bent down to look at Jade. “And who is this gorgeous little creature with the big brown eyes?” Christie asked.

“I’m Jade,” she said with smile.

Christie offered a hand to Jade. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Jade. My name’s Christie.” Just then, Deborah walked up behind her. “And this is Deborah,” she said, grabbing her partner by the hand to bring her to the front.

“Hello, Jade. Courtney told me all about you,” she said and patted Jade on the back.

Jade smiled while holding tight to Happy.

“No worries, Court, she’ll be fine here.” Deborah winked.

“I’m sure she will. It’s you two I worry about.” Courtney laughed. She knelt down to talk to Jade. “I’m going to meet my father now. You do as Deborah and Christie tell you, okay?”

“I will, I promise.” Jade’s eyes swelled with sadness.

Her expression made Courtney’s heart heavy as she stood to go. “Thank you again, ladies, for helping out at the last minute. I won’t be late.”

“You’re welcome. Take your time,” Deborah said as Courtney walked away.

In the taxi on her way to meet her father, Courtney thought more of how it never would have been right for Jade to be placed in foster care. The look she gave Courtney as she left her with two well-known friends for a few hours was telling.

Jade needed stability and someone she could depend on. She was beginning to think Virginia was right. The most responsible thing Kaye could have done for her only granddaughter was to give her to Courtney.

**CHAPTER 9**

Courtney’s next hurdle was her father. Dr. Wilhelm would be shocked to hear about the events of the past several days, but she would convince him it was the best thing for Jade and that was what motivated her to take on the raising of Marissa’s child.

As she got out of the taxi at 10 Columbus Circle, it began to rain. The weather fit her mood. The real storm would come when she told her father about Jade.

She greeted him with a hug and a kiss and joined him at the table he reserved.

“You look wonderful, my child.”

“Thank you, Papa. I’m glad you’re home. I’m always a little nervous when you’re overseas.”

Dr. Wilhelm chuckled. “I’m an old, experienced traveler. You have nothing to worry about when I’m away.” He pulled out a chair for her.

“Maybe not, but I’m still more comfortable when I know you’re here.” She sat at the table.

“I read the article in the *Journal* you left for me. Quite impressive. You always give me reason to be proud.”

“Thank you.” His words of praise created a wave of good feeling that washed over her.

“That firm needs to have the name Wilhelm added to its title,” he said with conviction.

“All in due time. I’ve already climbed higher than anyone has in such a short time. I rather enjoy my role as a managing partner…for now,” she said with a wink.

He held up a finger as he opened the menu. “Your time is very near, my dear. I can feel it. You’ve won every big case you’ve taken. How can they ignore that?”

“I hope they don’t. I know Rosewell is considering retirement. I would relish the opportunity to take on his position.”

“Keep your eye on the prize, my dear. You’re very close. Now let’s move on to a lighter subject, like dinner,” he said, thumbing through the menu.

As they were served dessert, Courtney grew quiet. Dinner was coming to an end soon, and she knew she had to tell him about Jade.

“My daughter grows silent with her dessert. Do you not like the blueberry compote?”

Courtney put her spoon aside. “It’s delicious. I’ve enjoyed our meal very much.”

Dr. Wilhelm leaned forward so he could look into Courtney’s eyes. “Something’s on your mind, I can tell.” He sat back in his chair. The candlelight at the table flickered in his cool gray eyes. “Is there something I can help you with?” he asked with sincerity.

Courtney looked at her father. He was such a handsome man in his dark blue suit and his thick silver hair perfectly combed back. She tried to remember when she had ever seen his hair out of place. Gunther Wilhelm was a man of impeccable taste and style. At sixty-two, he easily could pass for a man ten years younger. He emanated perfection and expected it from those around him.

“Papa, may I ask you a question about Marissa?”

“Why would you want to bring up the dead? I mean, what’s past is past.”

“I know, but some things have come to light while you were away, and before I can tell you what’s happened, I need to clear a few things up for myself.”

Dr. Wilhelm gave a long sigh and leaned his elbows on the table. “All right, Counselor, if you must question me, proceed.”

Courtney gave him a smile of appreciation. “Thank you.” She cleared her throat and leaned toward him. “Did you know Marissa was pregnant?”

He looked down, then back up at her. “I only knew of rumors that she miscarried some years ago. I never bothered to investigate any further. The girl was out of our lives.”

“How did you hear the rumors?”

“Virginia spoke of it once. She said she heard it from Kaye. I cut her off before she could say any more. I didn’t want to hear anything your mother had to say, be it the truth or rumor.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the rumor?”

“It was years ago. You were well on your way to establishing yourself, and I didn’t want you to be swept back up into Marissa’s destructive life. A miscarriage was a blessing in disguise. A child was the last thing Marissa needed to complicate her existence.”

Courtney’s smile disintegrated into a frown. “Marissa’s life should have been better.”

“Yes, and she was given every opportunity to make something of herself.”

The back of Courtney’s neck was starting to grow hot. “I don’t want to discuss the disappointment of the past. What I do want to talk about is what Marissa left here on earth.”

Dr. Wilhelm looked puzzled. “She had nothing is my understanding.”

“Yes, you’re right. What I’m sure you don’t know is…” Courtney took a deep breath. “She did have a baby.”

Dr. Wilhelm sat silent.

“Mother was given guardianship of the girl when Marissa passed. Her name is Jade, she’s six years old, and she’s here in New York.”

He folded his hands together. “What does any of this have to do with you and me?”

“It has to do with only me. I knew nothing of Jade until I got a call last week from Children’s Services.”

“I’m not sure I understand. Kaye is here with her grandchild?”

“No, Mother is not in the country, that’s why the social worker contacted me. Mother directed the agency to have me take Jade.”

“You have legal guardianship over Kaye’s granddaughter who is here in the city, yet you know nothing about her?”

“You’re right again, however, I do know about Jade. I had to take her in.”

Dr. Wilhelm grumbled.

“I had to. She has no one, and Mother has made it clear she’s not an option.”

“No, Kaye indeed is not an option, but neither are you, Courtney. You have a career and a firm to think about. You can’t allow your mother’s problems to become yours out of guilt over the past.”

“When you meet Jade, you’ll understand why I took her.”

“What are your plans for this, this child? Where is the father? Are you not going to send her on to Kaye as you should?”

“No, I’m not. Mother relinquished custody to me. I did plan to have her placed in foster care, thinking I could force Mother to return and accept her responsibilities, but she signed away her rights before I could make arrangements. As for a father, Marissa never listed one.”

“Where is your mother?” he demanded.

Courtney sighed. “God only knows. The last I spoke with her, she was somewhere in the Mediterranean, but it doesn’t matter. She’s not coming back to the States any time soon and most definitely not for her granddaughter.”

“Kaye never does anything for anyone but herself.” Dr. Wilhelm’s voice was filled with disgust. He looked at Courtney, and his distinguished face relaxed. “But you shouldn’t be left holding up her responsibilities.”

“Jade’s not mother’s responsibility anymore. Once Judge Ritter signs the transfer of guardianship, it will be official.”

“This girl is living in your penthouse?”

“Yes, and I only have a few days to find a school for her. The social worker will need proof of enrollment when the judge signs the papers.”

“Have you contacted Mount Pleasant? Jade is a legacy. Marissa did do one good thing for the child by graduating.”

“I have an appointment with the headmistress in the morning. I have to be prepared, though. Jade may have to go elsewhere since she missed all the entry testing for this year.”

“I would look at the New Discovery School if Mount Pleasant won’t take her,” he offered. “They’re doing good things, and they can help her catch up. I’m sure what education she has is not quality.”

“Yes, I would imagine she is behind the other first-graders.”

“It disturbs me to see your life interrupted. It would be different if it was your decision to have a child of your own, but I can’t recall a time when you talked about such matters.”

“Frankly, it never was on my list of things to accomplish. Up till now, I haven’t had thoughts of raising a child.” Courtney paused to think. “Now it seems fate has intervened and handed me a little girl in need of stability and guidance. Honestly, I haven’t a clue what to do with her.”

“A good nanny will take care of that for you, at least until she’s old enough to make her own decisions.”

“There’s no question I’ll need a nanny, but I think I need to be involved extensively with Jade’s routine. Call it a bit of micromanaging, but I tend to be that way with everything I do.”

“You are thorough, my child, no question. Your success has come from your attention to detail from start to finish.”

“Thank you, I take that as a compliment.” She was thankful that her father didn’t object to her decision as she had anticipated. He didn’t like the news of Jade, but he showed her some support in her decision to try with her.

When dinner was over, Dr. Wilhelm paid the check, then walked Courtney to the curb and hailed a taxi for her. They stood together under his umbrella as he opened the taxi door.

Courtney hugged her father and kissed his cheek. “I’m so happy to have you home. Thank you for a wonderful dinner.”

“You’re welcome. I want you to let me know what’s going on with this child you’ve taken in.”

Courtney got into the taxi. “Oh, you will. As soon as I get things organized, I’ll set up a meeting for you.”

“I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into,” he said with the seriousness of a surgeon asking a patient to make a life-or-death decision regarding her health.

“I’ll be fine. You’ll see.” Courtney smiled as she closed the door and the taxi drove away.

The driver agreed to wait at the curb in front of Deborah’s town house while Courtney went to get Jade. The rain stopped momentarily. She wished she had worn her Dior boots instead of the fashionable Fendi open-toe sling backs with three-inch heels. She got out of the taxi and took small steps on the wet sidewalk, careful not to fall on her way to the door.

One knock and the door opened before Courtney could knock again.

A smiling, out-of-breath Jade was at the door. “Hi, Courtney.”

“Hello, what are you up to, little lady?” she asked curiously.

“I’m playing Go Fish with Deb and Christie,” she said as she started toward the kitchen, sliding on the hardwood floor in her socks. “Wanna play with us? It’s lots of fun.”

Courtney followed Jade to the kitchen.

“Hi, Court,” Deborah said. “Have a seat. We’ll finish this game quick. Ya know, your niece is quite the card shark.” She shook a finger at Jade.

Jade giggled from behind her cards.

“I hope she was well-behaved for you.”

“Jade was absolutely no problem,” Christie said. “It’s Deborah who misbehaves when she loses.” She wrinkled her nose and smiled at her partner.

“Deb was good, Courtney. She only lost three times,” Jade said in defense of her new friend.

“Thank you, Jade, for sticking up for me.” Deborah reached over to hug her.

“I’m sure she was a good girl,” Courtney said with a hint of sarcasm. “Jade, I think we should go. Christie and Deborah need some quiet time, and I need to get home and take these shoes off.”

“Okay,” Jade said. She helped collect all the cards scattered around the table and quickly went for Happy Bunny sitting in the chair next to her.

“How was your dinner?” Deborah asked.

“It was good. I’m always more at ease once my father returns from his trips.”

“And did you tell him about the,” she motioned with her head toward Jade, “situation you have?”

“Yes.” Courtney sat on a chair next to the refrigerator. “And to my surprise, he was more supportive than I ever would have imagined.”

“Really? Is the good doctor losing some of his conservative bite?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” Courtney snickered. “I think he trusts my judgment, and deep down, he knows he raised me to do the right thing. This is the right thing.”

“You’re one of the best judges of character I know. I gotta tell you, this little girl is very special,” Deborah said.

Courtney smiled at Jade. “She comes by that naturally. Her mama was a very special little girl once upon a time.” Courtney forced herself out of the chair. All of a sudden, she realized she was very tired. “Jade, we should go. I think it’s time we both get to bed.”

Christie finished gathering up the cards and helped Jade with her shoes and jacket.

“Thank you, both, again for letting Jade spend the evening with you. It was very generous of you and helped me tremendously.”

“It was our pleasure. She can visit anytime.” Christie smiled.

Courtney looked around the room. “You really do need a new kitchen, Deborah.”

Christie produced a gloating smile. “Thank you, Courtney. I’ve been saying the exact thing for some time now.”

“I’ll walk you to the door.” Deborah tried to ignore the comment by shuffling Courtney and Jade to the front of the town house.

“Next time we have the boys, you and Jade should join us for a picnic in the park.” Deborah reached for the doorknob.

“Sounds like fun. Good night, girls.” Courtney took Jade’s hand on the way out the door, and they hopped in the waiting taxi for the short trip home.

Jade interrupted the silent ride home. “Courtney, I was good tonight.”

“Yes, I know. Deborah said you were a very good guest.”

“I promise I’ll be good so I can stay with you.”

She was puzzled and a bit scared by Jade’s comment. “Of course you’re going to stay with me. I’m sure you’ll have some bad days. So will I. But that doesn’t mean you can’t stay with me.”

“I don’t want to go back to the place where kids with no families stay.”

She put her arm around Jade. “Don’t worry about that. You’re staying with me, and I mean that.” Courtney was stunned by the idea that Jade thought she would be sent back. Yes, she didn’t want the responsibility at first, but she couldn’t imagine Jade being anywhere else now. She had some work to do to relieve Jade of the worry.

Jade rested her head on Courtney and stayed silent the rest of the way home.

**CHAPTER 10**

Courtney walked in the front door of Mount Pleasant School with her BlackBerry to her ear, confirming and tweaking the rest of her schedule with Mora. Her appointment with the headmistress was promptly at eight. As usual, she was a few minutes early. She stopped in the hallway and hung up the phone, putting it on silent as she entered the front office.

“Good morning,” she said to the matronly woman sitting at the receptionist desk. “My name is Courtney Wilhelm. I have an eight o’clock appointment with Mrs. Sales.”

“Good morning, Miss Wilhelm,” she returned with a forced smile. The woman was pressed and curled from head to toe. Not a dark brown hair on her head was out of place, and not a wrinkle could be found in her peach floral print dress. She put her glasses on and looked Courtney over, then she proceeded to fumble through a stack of papers on her desk. “Wilhelm, Wilhelm, ah, yes, here it is.” She handed Courtney several papers stapled together. “You’ll need to fill out the top portion of the front page before you see Mrs. Sales. Do you need a pencil, dear?” she asked, frantically searching a desk drawer.

Courtney looked over the papers in her hand. “No, thank you. I have a pen.”

“Have a seat and I’ll inform Mrs. Sales you’re here.”

Courtney read the nameplate on the desk: Agnes Raymond. “Thank you, Ms. Raymond.” She found the receptionist quite odd. The school was of the highest standards in elementary education in Manhattan. Surely, it would expect nothing less from the faculty and staff. Ms. Raymond was impeccable in appearance but less than organized in work habit.

Courtney filled out the top portion of the paper with the usual information of name, address, and such; however, when it came to information on Jade, she needed to refer to the papers in her briefcase supplied by Ms. Vasquez. She had no idea when Jade’s birthday was or what school she previously attended. Suddenly, she felt ill prepared for a test she didn’t realize she had to take.

When she finished filling in the blanks, she scoured through the rest of Jade’s papers, trying to cram as much information as she could into her brain before the headmistress quizzed her.

“Miss Wilhelm? Mrs. Sales will see you now.” Ms. Raymond opened the door to the office behind her desk.

Courtney thanked the woman as she walked past her.

“Please have a seat. Mrs. Sales will join you in just a moment.”

Courtney’s gaze roamed the private office wall by wall, floor to ceiling. It was ornate in its décor. Long flowing tapestry curtains framed the two tall windows behind the desk. Still life paintings graced the walls, all originals, no doubt. The furniture was a mix of antiques from Europe and America. Opposite the desk was a large white brick fireplace with two silver candlesticks on the mantel and an antique clock between them ticking just loud enough to override the buzzing of the city outside. Courtney sat in one of the matching pair of French provincial-style armchairs in front of the desk.

Not long after she sat, the door creaked open, and a thin elegant woman with perfect makeup and short blond hair entered. She wore a dark gray sweater dress belted at the waist and black heels. A simple strand of black pearls adorned her neck along with a matching pair of pearl earrings. In her manicured hand, she held a file folder.

“Ms. Wilhelm, I’m Roberta Sales.” She offered a hand in greeting.

Courtney got up from her chair. “Good morning, Mrs. Sales. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.” She shook her hand.

Roberta’s face and neck appeared smooth and rejuvenated. Courtney suspected her youthful mask was the result of more than one surgical procedure by a Park Avenue plastic surgeon. Her hands were another matter. They did not hide her true age. Courtney guessed her to be in her late sixties, maybe seventy.

“I’m always happy to meet with our alumni.” She walked around and sat at the desk, laid the file open, and slipped on a pair of half glasses that sat low on her nose. She took her time looking over the papers. “I see you’re one of our exceptional graduates. Your accomplishments are extraordinary.” She looked up at Courtney. “Tell me, what can I do for you, Ms. Wilhelm?”

“I’m here today, Mrs. Sales, on behalf of my niece.”

“Your niece is considering Mount Pleasant?”

“Yes, but may I preface my request with some information, just so you understand the situation?”

“Certainly.”

A soft knock on the door interrupted the conversation.

“Pardon me for a moment.” She closed the file on the desk. “Yes?”

The door opened slowly, and a young woman appeared. She was small in stature, maybe five foot three inches, with shoulder-length, bone straight, chocolate brown hair tucked behind her ears. Her dress was simple—khaki slacks, white button-up blouse, and black leather slip-ons. Courtney noticed immediately the attractive woman was round in all the right places.

“Good morning, may I join you?” Her voice was sweet and feminine.

“Yes, Lauren, please have a seat.” Roberta motioned at the empty chair next to Courtney. “Ms. Wilhelm, this is Lauren McCallum. She’s our first-grade teacher and currently filling in as the acting director of admissions while our full-time director is out on maternity leave.”

Courtney held out a hand. “Hello, Ms. McCallum. I’m pleased to meet you.” As their hands came together, she locked gazes with her new acquaintance, and something jumped inside. Something she wasn’t prepared for.

“I’m pleased to meet you, too,” Lauren said with a firm grip. She too caught a rush of unexpected excitement from Courtney’s green eyes that lingered well past their handshake. She took a seat and continued to smile as if she didn’t feel it. Sitting in front of the headmistress, she was in no position to entertain fantasies of a woman she had just met.

Courtney turned her gaze toward Roberta, trying not to give any air of unrest from the introduction. She was quick to remind herself that she was there on business. The goal was to get Jade into Mount Pleasant, not the cute teacher sitting next to her.

“Now, Ms. Wilhelm, you have background information?” Roberta propped her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on the backs of her folded hands.

Courtney cleared her throat. “Yes.” She looked at Lauren for a split second. “My younger sister recently passed away.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Lauren said.

“Thank you,” Courtney said with a curt smile. “Marissa was also an alumna of Mount Pleasant.” She looked at Roberta.

She returned an expression void of empathy.

“With Marissa’s passing, I’ve been given guardianship of her six-year-old daughter, Jade, and it’s my goal to supply her with the best education possible.”

Roberta extended a bony hand in silence for the papers Courtney was holding.

She surrendered them immediately and continued. “This was all so unexpected, but we’re working through the adjustments.”

Roberta looked over the top of her glasses. “Tell me, do we know where the father is?”

“No, Mrs. Sales, I don’t. My sister was a single parent. To the best of my knowledge, Jade never knew her father.”

Roberta looked back over the papers with a frown. “Your sister lived in East Tremont in the Bronx?”

“Yes, ma’am. She was estranged from the family for some time.”

“And your niece attended a public school…in Tremont?”

“Yes. Despite the cancer, Marissa was able to see to it that Jade completed kindergarten.”

Roberta continued to rustle through the papers. “Ms. Wilhelm, do you have any more information on your niece?”

“Yes, ma’am, I have the papers the social worker gave me. Jade’s history and medical records are incomplete, but it’s all the documentation that was available.” She dug the papers out of her briefcase.

“May I see them?” Roberta sat up straight in her seat and pursed her lips.

Lauren listened to the exchange between the two women. Distress formed along Courtney’s brow as Roberta’s went cold. She wanted to do something to ease the stress on Courtney’s attractive face, but it just got worse.

“Ms. Wilhelm, can your niece read?”

“I don’t know,” Courtney said with surprise.

“Can she write her name, as well as simple words?”

“I don’t know that, either. I’ve only had Jade for a few days. I’ve hardly had time to get to know her.” She had no idea what a six-year-old was academically capable of.

The annoyance in Roberta’s voice was apparent. She removed her glasses and tossed them on the open folder. “Ms. Wilhelm, I don’t see how we can consider your niece for admission next year. She doesn’t have any of the proper preschool requirements. Even as a legacy, which she clearly is, it would be highly irregular for admissions to give favor to any student without having the minimum educational requirements.”

Courtney leaned forward in her seat. “I don’t believe I’ve made my case clear to you. I’m under a court-ordered schedule. I’m not here to talk about next year. I must have Jade enrolled in school by Friday when I go in front of the judge for final approval of guardianship.”

Roberta’s Botoxed forehead tensed. “Let me get this straight. You’re here to ask to have your niece enrolled in a school year that has already begun? And without the proper requirements or entrance testing?”

“Allow me to remind you if you don’t already know. I feel this is a small request to grant in light of the years of monetary support my father, Dr. Gunther Wilhelm, and I have provided to this school. I would be happy to submit Jade to any tests you deem necessary for the privilege of late enrollment.”

“We appreciate your support, really we do, but, Ms. Wilhelm, we do not have late enrollment. It simply cannot be done. Our student roster is set months in advance.”

“It was my hope that since I’m making my request under special circumstances, the admissions board might make an exception in this case.” Courtney knew she was up against a rock and a hard place with Roberta. She could argue a case in front of the toughest judge on the bench with ease, but she had no experience or case law to refer to when making a case with the headmistress. She told herself she should have done her research and been better prepared to deal with Roberta Sales.

Lauren had heard enough. Then a thought flashed into her head. She opened the binder she brought into the meeting and began fanning through the pages. She stopped when she landed on the section she was looking for. “Excuse me, Mrs. Sales. I think I may have a solution to Ms. Wilhelm’s problem, and it should keep us within the admissions policy and procedure.”

Roberta reacted with wide eyes to Lauren’s interjection. “What could we possibly do that wouldn’t violate every policy we have?”

“I think Ms. Wilhelm’s niece, Jade, could possibly qualify for the Neuman Scholarship.”

“The Neuman Scholarship? Even so, she would have to wait until next year.”

“Maybe not. I have two left.” She hesitated.

“Why may I ask do you have two left? They should have all been awarded!”

“Yes, ma’am, they should have, but of the eight students that applied, only four had passing test scores.”

“Pardon me,” Courtney interrupted. “Could you please tell me what the Neuman Scholarship is?”

“The Neuman Scholarship Program was established by Michael and Louise Neuman, in memory of their son Benjamin, who passed away while attending Mount Pleasant,” Lauren said.

“Michael Neuman, the celebrity divorce attorney?” Courtney asked.

“Yes. You know him?”

Courtney nodded. “Law school classmate of mine.”

“Because Ben was adopted, the Neumans set the scholarship up to benefit underprivileged children. They wanted to give kids the chance at an education that would otherwise be financially unavailable to them. We have six scholarships available each year.”

“That’s a very noble and worthwhile gesture, but Jade is not underprivileged.” Courtney took offense at the suggestion.

“Technically, she’s no longer in that category now that she’s in your care.” Lauren attempted to smooth her ruffled feathers. “However, she was raised in East Tremont and attended a public school. On paper, she would qualify for the scholarship.”

“This is highly irregular, Ms. McCallum. Even if the scholarship is available, the child has missed the testing period. Admission for this year is closed.” Roberta’s hands tensed to the point that she crumpled the papers she was holding and didn’t even realize it.

“As acting director of admissions, I could call for a special set of tests to determine if Jade is eligible for enrollment under the scholarship.”

“How am I to explain this to the parents of the other students that followed the rules? I’m sure there will be scandal.”

“Honestly, Mrs. Sales, I think most of the parents will understand given the circumstances, and if she scores well on the tests, there should be no cause for discourse. And since there are still two openings with the scholarship, nothing is being taken away from students who went through regular enrollment.”

“Really, this is most unnerving.”

“Before we proceed, I’ll conference with the admissions committee for a recommendation on this scenario.” Lauren was pleased with her solution.

Roberta’s hands relaxed. “I think that would be best. The committee can own the responsibility of admitting a student outside of proper procedure.” She closed the folder and handed it to Lauren. “I’m placing this matter in your hands as the acting director of admissions. It will be your responsibility to see to it that this request of Ms. Wilhelm’s is processed through the admissions committee…without venturing too far from the rules set forth by our board of directors. Understood?”

Lauren smiled. “Yes. We shall adhere to the Neuman Scholarship requirements as written.”

Roberta folded her hands in front of her. “Now, Ms. Wilhelm, if you have nothing else for me, you and Ms. McCallum are free to regroup in her office while she figures out how to make this late admission work without breaking every rule in the school policy book.” She shot a look of disapproval at Lauren.

“I believe we’re finished for today. Thank you for seeing me.”

“I wish you luck with your niece’s education. Thank you for coming.”

Lauren’s hand was quick to reach the doorknob. “If you will come with me, Ms. Wilhelm, we’ll start by filling out the scholarship papers and contacting the other members of the admissions committee.”

The two women walked the length of the hallway in silence. Once they were in the cramped office Lauren occupied, she closed the door. “I didn’t want to talk in the hall. The walls have been known to have ears around here at times.”

“Thank you for going out of your way to help my niece. She really is a good kid, and I simply want to do the best I can to get her a proper education.”

Lauren smiled. “You’re welcome, and please call me Lauren.”

“Right. The conversation in the other office was a bit stuffy. I would appreciate it if you would call me Courtney.”

“Very good, Courtney. Let’s get to work, shall we? I have the paperwork here for you to fill out.” She grabbed a printed packet from a shelf and opened it to the necessary forms. “While you’re working on that, I’ll call the other committee members.”

Courtney found the tiny office and the company of Lauren McCallum comfortable, unlike the meeting they came from.

“We’re all set.” Lauren hung up the phone. The admissions committee consisted of four people—a child psychologist, an early childhood counselor, an administrator for the board of directors, and Lauren. “I have a conference call scheduled for noon. I should have an answer for you this afternoon.”

“What kind of decision can I expect at this stage?”

“I’m hoping to be able to tell you that the committee is willing to proceed with a late entry based on the remaining scholarships and that we can provide a condensed but comprehensive set of tests for Jade.”

“What is the normal testing procedure for admissions?”

“It’s a set of eight sections over two days. The candidate would take an age-appropriate written exam. There’s a practical hands-on test where the child is asked to complete a set of tasks. Of course, there’s an IQ test, which I think is outdated. The candidate is required to score a 105 or higher. There are also evaluations by several therapists and counselors.”

“Jade is only six. Isn’t that rather extensive for someone who has the attention span of about ten minutes?” Courtney joked.

Lauren laughed. “Personally, I think the entire process is over the top. The reason I stepped in when Amy went out on maternity was to gather research for my dissertation. I’m working on a PhD in education. I think we miss the boat with many children who have great potential by being so rigid and formal with the admissions process. I want to make it better.”

“That’s very interesting. Do you have plans once you’re done?” Again Courtney was impressed. This intelligent woman was very attractive.

“I would like to take over as superintendent of a school system that is progressive in its teaching techniques and curriculum. Each child has the potential to do great things if only her educational experience could be molded better to her needs.” Lauren’s voice filled with excitement as she talked.

“Sounds great and ambitious.”

“Yes, but not impossible.” She gave Courtney a wink.

“Do you have kids of your own?” Courtney asked.

“No, not yet. The time might be right once my life slows down.”

Courtney wanted to know more but didn’t want to seem as if she were prying. Instead she finished with the packet in silence and handed it back.

“I’ll call you as soon as I have an answer, and hopefully, we can get Miss Jade in here for a round of tests soon.”

“Thank you again for everything you’ve done.”

Lauren touched her arm. “I think I know how important this is to you. I’ll do what I can to help Jade get the education you want for her.”

Courtney looked down at the hand on her wrist. The warm feeling that radiated up her arm was so distracting, she almost missed what Lauren was saying.

“I appreciate your efforts. There’s so much I have to adjust to having a child in the house now. I’m beginning to believe I should feel overwhelmed,” Courtney said on her way to the door.

“It’ll catch up with you.”

“I’m sure it will. I’m thankful she’s beyond the age of two a.m. feedings.”

“Yes, you do have that in your favor.” Lauren held the door open. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

“Very good. Thanks.”

Courtney started down the hallway to the front door, her wrist still tingling from Lauren’s fingers. The mix of excitement and comfort made her think back to the only other person in her life who had given her that feeling.

She met Amanda her sophomore year in Psych 101. In an auditorium filled to the rafters, she happened to take a seat that first day of class next to a perky ponytailed blonde from San Francisco. Courtney was drawn by a smile that caused the woman’s whole face to light up. Their romance started with the exchange of glances and the sharing of a candy bar. Over the next three years, they would share everything from snacks to a one-bedroom apartment as upperclassmen. Courtney’s life felt whole with Amanda back then.

It had been many years since she and Amanda parted ways, but the feelings she harbored remained vivid. If her father had known just how close she was to following Amanda into the Peace Corps after graduating Princeton, he surely would have taken insane measures to keep her from, in his opinion, acting impulsively like her mother and ruining her life.

Amanda’s wide-eyed ideas of making a difference in the world were in direct conflict with her father’s. In the end, she sacrificed the love of her life to avoid facing his disappointment. Courtney recalled the brokenhearted loneliness she carried out of the Bentley Hotel and down a busy east Sixty-second Street the day she left Amanda. Part of her was suddenly missing. She vowed she would never give anyone that much control over her heart again.

Her first year in law school was the most difficult year of her life, but thanks to a good therapist, she kept her life moving forward. Eventually, her energy was redirected, and she poured it all into her studies. The barren hole inside her was filled by the study of law, something she believed would never leave her emotionally vulnerable by uncertainty.

How odd, she thought as she made her way down the hall, that an innocuous touch by a stranger could bring old feelings of such a personal nature to the surface. She gave the front door a shove along with the ghosts from the past. She wanted both out of her way.

Courtney walked for about six blocks in the Manhattan sunshine before stopping to hail a taxi. She needed the time to gather herself before going into the office. The feelings Lauren conjured left her emotionally exposed. It wasn’t a mood she wanted to take into work with her.

**CHAPTER11**

Lauren called as promised that afternoon. The admissions committee was willing, under the circumstances, to allow Jade to take a set of comprehensive tests as Lauren had suggested.

Jade would have only one opportunity, the next morning at nine. If she scored well, she would be permitted enrollment as a Neuman Scholar. Courtney continued to struggle with the idea of Jade being considered underprivileged when she could easily write the school a check right then for all eight years at Mount Pleasant. However, she knew it was a game she would have to play, at least for the first year, if Jade was to become a student at the school.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and went to the window. Looking out onto the harried street below, her fingers caressed the spot where Lauren touched her. When she realized what she was doing, she dropped her hand and gulped a mouthful of coffee.

She turned to her desk and set the cup down. “You’re being ridiculous,” she said out loud. She picked up the latest research on the Crammell case and read the first paragraph twice with a frown. It made no sense to her because she continued to be distracted by her thoughts.

“Was it something I wrote?” Deborah asked from the open door.

“What? Oh, no. I was thinking of something else, sorry.”

She took a step into the office. “You look a little tired. Everything okay?”

“Yes, fine.” Courtney dropped the papers back on her desk and took a seat. “I’m sure everything will settle down after Friday.” She melted back into the soft leather of the chair. “The school has agreed to test Jade for late admission. I have no idea where she is academically. The whole thing is a crap shoot, and she’s caught in the middle.”

“How hard can a test for a six-year-old be? I mean, aside from playing, they don’t have many other skills.”

“The headmistress asked me if she could read and write. I didn’t know. I’m beginning to think this is a mistake, and all I’m going to do is make this girl’s life a mess.”

“Whoa, wait a minute.” Deborah leaned down on the desk. “You are the most intelligent woman I know. You litigate multimillion-dollar deals with some real hard-ass male chauvinists. There’s not an attorney dumb enough to walk into a courtroom and call you babe or honey. They’d have their balls handed to them in a plain brown paper bag, and they know that. A small girl should be a breeze for the mighty Ms. Courtney Wilhelm, P.C.”

Courtney chuckled. “Maybe so, but the headmistress has no balls and doesn’t scare easily. Unfortunately, she has what I want—a first-rate education for Jade.”

“Jade has her work cut out for her then. She seems to be a bright little thing and very independent.”

“Yes, she is that.” Courtney smiled a little. She noticed each day how much Jade was like Marissa.

“Speaking of balls, what’s next in the Crammell versus Nosheki case?”

Courtney released a long breath. “We’ve got a lot of ground to cover. The meeting with Crammell and the Pelham Group is a few days away. Nosheki has asked us to try to negotiate a settlement out of court. They don’t want the media continuing to make them out to be the big bad wolf. They’ve had enough bad press lately with Crammell running his mouth.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking? Crammell is trying to force a huge settlement by dragging Nosheki through the media mud?”

“Exactly. He’s a son of a bitch. He doesn’t give a rat’s ass about his father’s vision. It’s all about how deep he can line his pockets.”

“I’ve said it before, greedy bastard.” Deborah shook her head. “I have a conference call in ten, but I’ll check with Doug when I’m done. He’s got research looking into the old man’s will for us. They just want to be sure there’s no monkey business within the family that might have Junior on the warpath.”

“Good. We’ve got to look at this from every angle. Something just doesn’t sit right about this case, and I can’t put my finger on it yet.”

The room turned quiet when Deborah left. Mora would be leaving soon for the day, as well. Courtney sat alone in her office thinking she probably should be heading home, too. She wanted to tell Jade about school. She was also curious about her reading and writing skills. They would break out the books that night and she would find out just what Jade was capable of.

Courtney was about to pack her briefcase when a tap on the door caught her attention. She looked up and found Suzanne in the doorway. Her lovely curls were tied back, and she was sporting the diamond earrings Courtney gave her for her birthday last year. She looked smart in a black suit and dark green blouse.

A smile crossed Courtney’s lips. “Well, this is a nice surprise.” She got up and walked around the desk. “Come in and close the door.”

“I only have a few minutes, Courtney.” Suzanne sounded serious, not sexy or flirty the way she normally spoke to her when they were alone.

“I thought you would never speak to me again after what happened Saturday night. I’m sorry for the little mishap on the rug.”

“I’ve already forgotten about it.” She avoided the chair in front of Courtney. “Court, I didn’t text you or call you back because I needed some time to think about things.”

“What things? Look, I promise you my situation is under control with Jade. I should’ve rescheduled our date so I had time to work out babysitting.”

“Yes, and you see that’s a problem for me.”

“Let me make it up to you.” Courtney tried to wrap her arms around Suzanne’s waist, but she turned away.

“Clearly your priorities are changing now that you have your...niece living with you. The dynamics of our relationship are changing, too.”

Courtney folded her arms and leaned back on her desk. “Go on.”

Suzanne started to pace. “We had a nice easy relationship. I admit it was casual, but we both wanted it that way. I mean, we were never officially girlfriends. Being free to come and go at will is very important to me.” She paused and looked at Courtney. “You don’t have that anymore, and I’m afraid that as time goes on, you’ll want to bring more permanence into your life, you know, someone to add stability and support to your efforts in raising the girl.”

“She has a name, Jade, and you’re right, our relationship has always been free of commitment. But you’re wrong, too. I don’t plan to change a thing about the way I live my life. Yes, I do have to provide for Jade, and I have to be available for her needs. But I’m not looking to settle down with a partner now because I have a child to take care of if that’s what’s got you so distressed.”

“Whether that’s your goal or not, I just wanted to tell you, I’m not interested. I enjoy being around adults and partaking in adult functions.” She held her hand up and examined her nails. “I purposely avoid those dreary family gatherings in the Hamptons because of the children my sisters insist on producing.”

Suzanne’s comment was eye-opening. The selfishness was overwhelming.

“My idea of a night out is a private box at Lincoln Center for *La Bohème*, not front row for some elementary school play.”

Now she was bordering on being cruel.

The earrings, private boxes for the opera, and countless dinners at four-star restaurants all over Manhattan were just a few of the many extravagant things Courtney bestowed upon her. She was beginning to feel a bit used.

“Suzanne, when did you become such a narcissist?”

She planted both hands on her hips. “There’s no need for name calling. I wanted to be congenial about this, but you leave me no choice but to be straightforward with you. I think our time together has run out. We’re at a point where you have new priorities now, and I’m in need of something new, too. I don’t think we should see each other anymore.” Her cheeks were flushed red like her hair.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Courtney’s voice was calm.

“I think it’s best for both of us. Stop now so we’re free to move on without regret.”

“Fine with me. I wouldn’t want you to feel beholden to me under any circumstances.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you understand,” she said with a sigh of relief. “Domestic partnership is just not a path I care to walk…even with you.”

“Yes, well, I’m perfectly capable of walking my own path, my way.”

Suzanne looped her arms around Courtney’s neck and gave her a short squeeze. “Don’t think I haven’t enjoyed our time together. You really do know how to treat a lady.” She stepped away. “Good luck with your new family,” she said as she backed up and opened the door, disappearing into the hallway.

Courtney scratched her head and blew a loud puff of air with a chuckle. Her non-girlfriend just broke up with her because of a six-year-old. When did Suzanne become so shallow? Was she always that way? Why didn’t she notice it in the three years they had been seeing each other?

She shook it off as she packed her briefcase. She would miss Suzanne’s perfect body, but she really did have more important things to think about. Getting Jade into school and the appearance before the judge on Friday were two of them.

**CHAPTER12**

At the end of the day, Lauren sat back in her chair looking up at the ceiling in her office and feeling very pleased with herself. Getting the committee to give Jade a chance at late admission was a major accomplishment. A bonus accompanied her feat in that she would have the opportunity to see Courtney Wilhelm at least one more time. She spun around in her chair and recalled the light that flickered in her green eyes when they met. It was filled with sweetness and intelligence.

She stopped and opened Jade’s file again. The address on the application told her Courtney was in the TriBeCa neighborhood in lower Manhattan. Very nice. She also knew her employer. She turned to the laptop and opened the Web browser. First she GoogledRosewell and Clooney LLC and clicked on Our Attorneys. In alphabetical order, a picture and brief bio was displayed for each. Lauren scrolled to the bottom and found Courtney. The portrait was cute. Nothing fancy, it was a simple headshot in a business suit. Still, the green eyes drew her in. The bio was even more intriguing. Graduate of Princeton, Harvard Law, and the very impressive president of the *Harvard Law Review*.

She then Googled Courtney. The number of entries that displayed was incredible. Links to articles, case reviews, and press releases were all there. Courtney Wilhelm’s professional persona was all over the Web. Her name was attached to a number of industry giants and high-profile business litigations.

“My, but you are quite the power player, Ms. Wilhelm.” Lauren propped her chin up with her hand. “And so far out of my league. What am I thinking?”

The one part of Courtney’s life she was looking for, she didn’t find—a romantic link to someone, anyone. There was no listing of a marriage or divorce, nothing on the society gossip blogs about who she was dating or seen around town with. She wasn’t linked to anyone. The few photos that were out there featured her father as her escort at society events. Lauren especially liked the photos of Courtney in an evening gown. Her body was made for a form-fitting, strapless dress.

She tapped a finger on the desk. “Are you just that private, or is there more to the story that a person like you wants to keep out of the limelight?” She closed the browser and sighed. She decided to put the attractive attorney out of her mind. They came from two different worlds.

It was time to stop daydreaming and get busy putting together a set of tests for the next day.

Dr. Aboreo, the psychiatrist in charge of overseeing the design of the admissions testing, demanded an IQ test. He insisted Jade take it or he would not sign off on the comprehensive version Lauren was working on. In her opinion, Dr. Aboreo needed to retire. At seventy-eight, he was out of touch with the world of today’s child. In fact, he was pretty much out of touch with the world, period. He still used a typewriter to do all his written correspondence, had no cell phone, and drank too much.

The board of directors didn’t force any of the old boys out at Mount Pleasant. They were given unofficial tenure that allowed them to stay well past their usefulness to the students and the school.

Lauren decided when she found the right superintendent position, there would be no place within her system for these people to hide. If they weren’t contemporary, she had no use for them and they would have to go.

The blaring of Madonna’s “Like A Virgin” coming from her cell phone interrupted the quiet of the small office.

Lauren opened the phone with a smile. “Hola, sis. What’s up?”

“Hola yourself, brat. Are you busy tonight?” Her older sister Janine’s voice bubbled with excitement.

“I guess my answer would have to be yes. I have some admissions work to do, and it has to be ready first thing in the morning. Why?”

“That’s too bad. The girls here at work are going out for drinks tonight, and it just so happens we have a cute new employee that I think you would like to meet. She’s your age, athletic, and available.”

“Hmm, sounds tempting, but I really have to get this done. Can I get a rain check?”

“Sure. There’s no guarantee she’ll be available if you wait. Did I mention she’s well educated?” she added, trying to bait her sister.

“That’s nice, but I’ll take my chances.”

“Did anyone ever tell you, you work too much?”

“Only the entire family and about three-quarters of everybody else I know.”

“Lu, that really should be a serious clue for you…get a life.”

“I have a life, and it suits me well.”

“When was the last time you had a date?”

“I don’t remember.”

“I do. You haven’t been out with anyone since you and Macy broke up.”

“That’s not true…I...I…”

“It is true, and you know it.”

“The doctorate program has kept me busy.”

“You’re a chalk-wielding educational maniac who has course planning and administration on the brain.”

“Guilty as charged. Listen, J, I’ve gotta go. I’ll call you this weekend. We’ll have dinner out somewhere.”

“Okay,” she said with a sigh. “Are you sure I can’t lure you out? Even with a beautiful girl?”

“Sorry, not tonight. Hug the kids for me, okay?”

“All right. Enjoy your admissions thingy. Love you, bye.”

“Bye.” Lauren hung up the phone and continued to smile. Her sister’s intentions were good, but Lauren had someone else on her mind and a lot of work to get done before she saw her again.

Lauren grabbed the three binders she would need to work from home and out the door she went. She decided to take a taxi. It would be easier than her usual subway ride home with all the extra baggage she had with her.

She was sure Courtney Wilhelm always took a taxi. She didn’t look like the type to ride the subway. She also didn’t look the type to date women, but Lauren couldn’t let go of the connection they made with the first introduction. Something was there, she was sure of it.

She hopped into the taxi that stopped for her in front of the school and piled the binders in the seat next to her. She so rarely used any other transportation besides the subway or her bike on a nice day. The ride would be short to her West Eighty-third Street co-op. The rent-controlled, one-bedroom, one-bath apartment she sublet from an acquaintance she met through a fellow member of the New York Elementary Teachers Association was perfect. The price was right, and she loved being in the heart of Manhattan.

Lauren couldn’t keep Courtney from hovering in her thoughts as she stood in front of her building and watched the taxi drive away. Lower Manhattan seemed like another world away from the Upper West Side, though it was only seven miles that separated them. She hurried up the four steps to the large glass panel doors and put her key in the lock. With a click, she was in for the evening.

**CHAPTER13**

After dinner, Courtney found Jade sitting on the floor in her room playing with a princess doll. She lovingly stroked the long golden locks of the doll’s hair with a small brush. Happy Bunny, of course, was lying across her lap. Her attachment to the stuffed animal was such that it was never far from her.

“Jade, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure. I was just brushing Princess Cynthia’s hair.”

“She looks very nice. You’ve done a good job of taking care of her.”

“Thanks.”

“What I want to tell you is that I have to get you into school soon. The judge has told me that if you want to stay with me, I have to make sure you get an education.”

“So I can grow up and be smart like you, right?”

“Right.” Courtney couldn’t hold back the smile. “So here’s the deal. Tomorrow morning, I’m going to take you to a very nice school where your mama and I went when we were your age. While we’re there, some very nice people are going to ask you some questions and have you play a few games with them.”

“They want to see how smart I am, right?”

“Something like that, yes.” Courtney shifted. “I want you to do your best and be on your best behavior for these people. They’re going to do their best to help you get you into school. Okay?”

“Okay. I’m not a dummy like Raymond, my mama told me that.”

“Who’s Raymond?”

“He used to live down the hall from us. He couldn’t even write his name, and his mama never sent him to school.”

“That’s too bad for Raymond. Did your mama teach you to write your name?”

“She sure did, and my address in case I ever got lost I could tell a policeman where I live.”

Courtney was impressed. “Do you think you could show me?”

Jade sprang up from the floor and got her drawing board with a pad of paper. She sat back down next to Courtney and pulled a marker from the pencil case. With concentration and purpose, Jade started with her name. It was a bit shaky like a six-year-old’s handwriting can be, but it was clearly readable. Next she wrote the address of the apartment in the Bronx, including the city and ZIP code.

When Courtney thought she was done, Jade surprised her with another name and a phone number.

Courtney tilted her head. “Who is Elsie Bridges?”

“She lived across the hall from me and Mama. We didn’t have a phone, but Elsie did, and she told Mama we could use it anytime we needed to. Mama taught me the number so I could give it to the policeman.”

“That’s very good. Your mama taught you some very valuable things.”

“Will you teach me how to write your name so I can give it to the policeman if I get lost?”

“I certainly will and my phone number and our address, too.”

Jade smiled big. “That’ll be good.”

Courtney removed the sheet of paper Jade wrote on and set it aside. On the new piece, she wrote her name, address of the penthouse, and her cell number so Jade could practice. “Do you need me to help you?”

“I don’t think so.” She spelled her name out loud. The phone number was a breeze for the girl. The address, however, was a little harder. Courtney had to help her pronounce Greenwich.

“You go away for a while, and I’ll tell you when I’m ready to show you.”

“Okay. I’ll be in my study if you need me.” Courtney left Jade sitting on the floor in her room with marker in hand. The same concentration covered her face as she worked to make each letter of Courtney’s name the same size. Before Courtney left the room, she picked up the sheet of paper Jade had written her information on and took it with her.

She sat at her desk and looked over the handwriting. The effort to make all the letters the same size and in a straight line was painstaking. She folded the paper and put it in the top drawer.

The sound of Mrs. Sales’s galling voice rang in her ears. She had proof that Jade could read and write. And she did it well for a child of six.

Courtney worked on emptying her inbox from her office e-mail account when Jade came through the door waving a sheet of paper.

“I did it. I did it. Look, I can write everything you showed me.”

Courtney laid the paper on her desk and studied it briefly. Jade had completed her task with precision. The blue letters of her name were shaky but the same size and in a straight line. “Do you remember how to pronounce the street name?”

“It’s Gren-ich,” she said proudly.

“That’s right. We live on Greenwich Street. What city are we in?”

Jade rolled her eyes. “New York City, everybody knows that.”

“Okay, just checking.” She laughed. “I think it’s time for you to go to bed. You have an important day tomorrow, and I don’t want you to be grumpy with the nice people at the school.”

“Okay. Can I wear the jungle pajamas, the ones with the lions and tigers?”

“They’re your clothes. You may wear whichever you like.”

Jade ran out of the room with a giggle.

“Don’t forget to brush your teeth.” Courtney shook her head. She wished she had the energy Jade displayed. Having a child in the house was exhausting.

Courtney gave Jade about fifteen minutes to complete her tasks before she went to check on Jade’s progress. When she stuck her head in the door, Jade was on the bed, covers thrown to the side, and a book laid open in front of her. As always, Happy Bunny was in her lap.

“Did you brush your teeth?”

“Yes, and look.” She opened her mouth as wide as she possibly could get it. “I got a tooth growing.”

“You *have* a tooth, not *got* a tooth. Let me see.” She sat on the side of the bed and steadied the chin with her thumb. Sure enough, the front tooth that was missing was showing the tip of a new one starting to fill the gap. “You’re right. You do have a tooth coming in.”

Jade’s face lit up with the confirmation. Then she rolled her tongue in her mouth. “You know what? I think I got, I mean, I think I have more loose.”

“Which one?” Courtney smiled as she steadied her chin again.

She flicked the other top front tooth and the two on the bottom with her tongue. “Did ya see ’em move?”

Courtney raised her eyebrows. “I did. Looks like you’re going to be keeping the tooth fairy busy soon.”

Jade’s brow furrowed. “What’s the tooth fairy?”

“You don’t know the tooth fairy?”

Jade shook her head.

“Well, when little girls and boys lose a tooth, they place it under their pillow when they go to bed. While they sleep, the tooth fairy comes and collects it. And in return for the tooth, the fairy leaves money.”

Jade’s eyes were big. “How much does the fairy leave?”

“Oh, usually a dollar.”

“Wow! And I get to keep it?”

“Of course you do.”

“If I save all my teeth and put them under the pillow at one time, how much will I get?”

Courtney smiled. “Let’s say, for instance, if you put all the teeth that are loose now under your pillow when they fall out, you’ll get three dollars.”

“Gosh, that’s a lot of money.”

“Yes, it is. What would you do with it?”

Jade contemplated the idea. “Well, if Mama were still here, I’d give it to her so she could buy us stuff. So I guess I would give the money to you so you can buy us stuff.”

Courtney’s heart fell in her chest. She didn’t expect such thoughtfulness from a six-year-old. “That’s a wonderful gesture,” she said with a soft voice, running her hand over Jade’s curls. Bit by bit, she was beginning to piece together the life Marissa and Jade had alone.

Courtney swallowed hard and picked up the book Jade had in front of her. “What are you reading?” She looked at the open pages. “*Where The Wild Things Are*. I like this one. I read this when I was little.”

“I like the pictures.”

“Did your mama read books with you?”

“All the time. Mama was sick in bed a lot, but she said that reading books with me made her feel better.”

Courtney swallowed hard again. This time, she almost choked on the lump. “Your mama loved books when she was young, too. I took her to the library every week.”

“Will you read some to me? Please.”

“All right, but first you have to be tucked in so you can go to sleep.”

Jade flipped the covers over and pulled Happy up so the stuffed bunny was resting on her chest. Courtney straightened the covers around girl and bunny, then opened the book to the first page.

Somewhere around page fourteen, she noticed Jade’s eyes were closed for the night. She got up slowly and turned off the lamp on the nightstand. She returned the book to its shelf and turned the night light on in the bathroom. Before she left the room, Courtney turned to look at Jade one more time. She was relaxed and peaceful with Happy in her arms. She made a mental note on her way down the hall to find a pediatric dentist in the morning.

Courtney went back to her desk and sat staring at the wall. For years, she put Marissa out of her mind. It was necessary. She had to go on with her life despite the fact that Marissa’s was spinning out of control. The only way she could do it was to let go completely. Had she known about the pregnancy, she could have kept them from living hand to mouth. She didn’t understand why her mother left them to live that way.

Too many unanswered questions, and the only one with any information was a six-year-old. She needed to let go and leave the past alone. Nothing could be done about it now. She had to concentrate on the future, something she had a direct effect over. The only thing she could do for Marissa now was to keep her memory alive in a positive light for Jade.

She turned the lights out and moved to the bedroom.

When she was done in the bathroom, she reached for the lotion on the nightstand. As she spread a dollop of the coconut-scented cream over her arm, she again stopped at the spot where Lauren had touched her. She remembered the feeling that rushed through her at that moment.

At work, she squashed the fantasies and the memories, but in the privacy of her own bedroom, her mind was free to run with the romantic interludes she had about a woman she just met. She would see her in the morning. Would she feel the rush again? What was it about her? How was it she had awakened the emotions and memories of a young love that was extinguished years ago?

An enormous amount of change had come about in less than a week. She was confident it was just her emotions trying to catch up to all the events of the last few days. The one good thing about it, the distraction buffered the dumping she took by Suzanne earlier in the day.

Courtney turned out the light and pulled the covers up tight. She was mentally exhausted from all of it and suddenly feeling a little lonely. Sleep was the perfect escape from the day.

**CHAPTER14**

Jade sat in a wooden chair next to Ms. Raymond’s desk. Every time she moved, the old wood of the chair creaked and moaned. Courtney, sitting on the other side of her, patted her leg to stop her from fidgeting.

“Courtney, will you be in the room with me when they ask me questions?”

“I don’t know. Do you want me in there with you?”

Agnes interrupted the conversation. “Generally, it’s school policy that parents not be present. Dr. Aboreo believes it hinders the child’s performance.”

Jade wiggled her rain boots around the legs of the chair, causing it to creak louder.

Ms. Raymond shot her a look of annoyance. “However, the entire proceedings may be viewed through the observation window if you wish, Ms. Wilhelm.”

“Thank you.” Courtney looked down at Jade with a smile. “But if Jade wants me in the room, that’s where I’ll be to observe the testing.”

Ms. Raymond glared over the top of her glasses at them. She let go a quiet huff and returned to the envelopes she was stuffing.

The door of the front office popped open, and Lauren appeared. She was wearing a brown suit with a light blue blouse and brown heels. Courtney thought she looked lovely. Her simple style was very different from the women who usually caught her eye.

Lauren’s face lifted when she saw Courtney and Jade.

“I’m so glad you’re here early,” she said to them. “I have a few things I’d like to go over with you before the rest of the evaluators are ready to start.” She turned to Jade. “You must be Miss Jade Wilhelm, the one we’re all here today to see.” She extended a hand as she knelt down. “My name is Lauren McCallum. I teach first grade.”

Jade couldn’t hold back the grin. “That’s me. I’m Jade, and this is Courtney.”

“Yes, we’ve met.” She winked at Courtney. “I like your pink rain boots. Very chic.”

Jade’s cheeks looked as though she would pop from the size of her grin. “Courtney let me pick ’em out all by myself.”

“You did a very good job. Are you ready to talk to some really nice people and play some games with us?”

“I think so.” She looked up at Courtney for confirmation.

“It’s okay. Ms. McCallum is here to help.” She patted Jade’s shoulder.

“You’re gonna be there, too, right, Courtney?”

Courtney looked at Lauren.

“Well, usually, the parents wait in the next room. That way, you can focus on the games and the tests.”

Jade looked up at Courtney with a frown.

Lauren took her hand. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there with you the whole time, and Courtney will be right outside the door if we need her. Okay?”

Jade’s frown relaxed. Lauren’s touch made her feel comfortable. “’kay. I can do it.”

“Good. I think you’ll have fun with everything we’re going to do this morning.”

Lauren stood. “I wanted to fill you in on the itinerary for the testing.” She shuffled the papers she brought in with her. “First I’ll conduct the IQ test. I find it completely unnecessary, but our director insisted on it.”

Courtney nodded as she listened.

“Next will be the early childhood counselor. After that, we’ll do the practical testing and finish with basic logic and reasoning.”

Courtney didn’t know what to say. She had no idea getting a six-year-old into school would require such elaborate measures.

Lauren smiled at Courtney’s blank stare. “I’ll see to it that she gets plenty of breaks. Kids tend to become overwhelmed quickly or in some cases just plain bored.”

“Breaks would be good. And I’ll be allowed to observe the entire time?”

“If you like, yes. The room next door has a false mirror.”

“Very good.” Courtney got up out of her chair. “Well, young lady, I think it’s time to get you started on the road to a good education,” she said to Jade.

Jade poked out her bottom lip. “I guess so. What if I don’t like it here?”

She hadn’t thought about that. Her only mind-set was to get Jade enrolled in a school she knew would provide an exceptional education. “We’ll worry about that when or if it happens.”

“Okay.” She hopped out of the rickety old chair and took Courtney’s hand.

They followed Lauren down the hall. At the door, Courtney brushed back a loose curl from Jade’s face. “Do your best, okay?”

Jade twitched her nose. “Okay.”

“Good luck.”

Lauren opened the door and let Jade in. “I’ll come check on you in a little while.” She touched Courtney on the shoulder. “Honestly, I think she’s going to do fine. I see her joining my class without question.”

“Thank you, Lauren. You’ve been a tremendous help when you didn’t really have to be. I appreciate it, and Jade doesn’t know it yet, but she will, too.”

“See you later,” she said as she disappeared behind the door.

After Lauren was gone, her touch lingered on Courtney’s shoulder. She found it odd that this woman could leave a sensation on her flesh so easily. First her arm and now her shoulder. Something inside her was making suggestions about Lauren she wasn’t prepared for. Sure she was without a dinner date at the moment, but she wasn’t looking for her next conquest, either. This was not her usual “ask a beautiful, successful woman to dinner” opportunity.

Suzanne was easy. They made eye contact in the hall at the office and later introduced in a meeting. Before Suzanne left that day, Courtney had asked her to dinner. From there, it developed into a relationship of convenience. She wasn’t attached to Suzanne but was satisfied with the arrangement between them. Courtney was sure Suzanne was seeing other people, but she didn’t have enough interest to investigate. If Suzanne was dating around, she was very discreet about it, and that was all Courtney was concerned with. As for Courtney, she didn’t have the time or patience to try juggling several women at once.

It was the art and science of the acquisition that got her attention first. Anyone she was involved with took second place to her career. Right away, she recognized Lauren deserved better. She wouldn’t be the type to accept the kind of relationship Courtney was used to being a part of. She wouldn’t be like Suzanne.

Lost in thought, she took a seat in the room next to where Jade was being tested. She could see the activity through the mirrored window. Courtney noticed an older woman with wiry gray hair sitting off to the side, taking notes as she observed. Lauren sat across from Jade at a small table. Jade looked calm and attentive as they worked.

Lauren was lovely. Her smile was full of life. Her exuberance for her work was evident in her interactions with Jade. When she pushed her hair back behind her ear, Courtney had an unexpected rush of warmth flood her chest.

She looked away from the room to make her head stop. Things were under control with Jade, so she pulled her BlackBerry out of her bag. She’d get some work done while she waited. Mora had several appointments lined up for interviews with nannies later in the day, and Deborah was holding down the fort until she got back.

“She’s doing fine,” Lauren said, entering the room.

Courtney looked at her watch. An hour had gone by. “I must have lost track of time.”

“She’s in with the child life therapist now. I asked if she needed to take a break to go to the bathroom or get a drink and she said no thank you. Very polite little one.”

“Yes, my sister did her best while she was able.” Courtney gave her a nervous smile.

“You should be proud of them.” Lauren sat next to Courtney. “How are you doing with the sudden onset of parenthood?”

“So far, so good, even though I was completely unprepared for all of this.”

“I don’t think anyone is ever truly prepared for children.”

“You might be right.”

The silence that grew in the room was most uncomfortable.

“I think I’ll get back in there. I have Ms. Greene doing the observation notes for me. Dr. Aboreo has always trusted her opinions, but I still want to keep a close watch on this.”

“Any idea how much longer the testing will take?”

“I would think we should have it all wrapped up in about ninety minutes or so.”

“Very good. Thank you.” Courtney went back to her BlackBerry.

Lauren closed the door behind her and stopped before going back into the testing room. She wiped her bangs off her forehead and emptied her lungs with one big breath. Courtney Wilhelm made her feel like mush on the inside. Those green eyes could go from intense to soft and warm in a blink. Her mouth moved gracefully as she spoke, and the way the corners of her rich pink lips curled when she smiled added heat to the attraction.

What am I doing, she thought. I’m supposed to be administering an admissions test, and all I can think about is the woman in the next room. I have to get my head back into this.

She took a deep breath and returned to the room.

Courtney looked up from time to time at what was going on with Jade. At one point, she was working a puzzle and laughing. Courtney hoped she wasn’t just being silly and that she was having fun with the instructor.

She was reading through some paperwork she brought with her when the door flew open and Jade darted into the chair next to her.

“All done,” she said slightly out of breath.

“Is that right? How do you think you did?”

She swung her feet back and forth and shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know, but me and Lauren had fun.”

“It’s *Lauren and I* had fun. Good, I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“She did an outstanding job,” Lauren said from the doorway. “And I expect that she’ll be joining my first-grade class very soon.” She took a seat on the other side of Courtney. “I have to write a report, then I’ll send everything over to Dr. Aboreo for his signature.”

“She did well on all the tests?”

“Yes, she did. In fact, she did better than well on the IQ test.”

“What was her score?”

“She got a 128. That puts her in the above-average category. Dr Aboreo will be thrilled.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that’s quite high, isn’t it?”

Lauren grinned. “Yes, it is. She’ll have no trouble being admitted.”

“The other tests?”

“She did just as well. She got the giggles while we were working on the puzzles, but I think it was because they were too easy for her.”

“I saw that.”

“I did puzzles like those before,” Jade spoke up, “with Mama. Those were the kinda things she liked.”

“Your mama was one great teacher, you know that?”

Jade nodded with wide eyes.

Lauren rubbed her hands on her slacks. “I think you’re done for the day, Miss Jade.” She patted the girl’s hand. “You did a good job. I’m very proud of you.”

Jade’s face beamed.

“I’ll call you this afternoon with the final decision and instructions,” Lauren said as she got up and headed for the door.

“Very good. I think this calls for a celebratory lunch. What do you think, Jade?”

“Can Lauren come?”

The two women looked at each other and froze. Finally, Lauren broke the silence.

“That’s very kind of you to ask, Jade, thank you. But I have work to get done right away so you can start school as soon as possible.”

“Maybe you’ll eat with us some other time.”

Courtney gave Lauren a sheepish grin.

“Yes, maybe another time,” Lauren said with a wink to Courtney.

“Thank you, Lauren.” She turned to Jade. “Come on, we’ll grab lunch, then I have to get to the office for a meeting.”

Courtney followed as Jade happily skipped to the front door. Along the way, she enjoyed the lingering feeling she got just by being in Lauren’s presence. It was warm and comfortable, just like the feeling she got that first day in class sitting next to Amanda. Suddenly, comfort turned to uneasiness by the comparison.

She popped open the umbrella outside the door and pulled the hood of Jade’s rain jacket over her head before taking her by the hand and hailing a taxi from the curb.

“I think we’ll eat close to home today,” Courtney said, pulling the seat belt across Jade’s torso.

“Can we have French fries?” Jade asked.

“Well, since you worked hard, I suppose a few wouldn’t hurt.” She directed the driver to a café near the penthouse.

Jade flashed a rosy grin.

“I like Lauren, don’t you, Courtney?”

“Yes, I think she’s nice.”

“I think she likes you, too.”

Courtney was stunned by the comment. “Wha…what makes you say that?”

“’Cause she smiles at you a lot even when you’re not looking.”

Courtney was quick to regroup. “Maybe she’s just a happy person that smiles a great deal.” She redirected the conversation. “I would imagine she’s a very good teacher. Do you think you’ll like being in first grade?”

“Uh-huh. And I already have a friend at school.”

“You do? Who is it?”

“It’s Lauren,” Jade said emphatically.

“Oh, yes. You know, when you start school, you can’t call her by her first name, at least not at school.”

“What will I call her?”

“She’ll let you know. Probably something like Miss Lauren or Miss McCallum.”

“Okay.” She reached over to take hold of Courtney’s sleeve. “Can we invite Lauren over for dinner sometime?”

Courtney didn’t know how to take Jade’s insistence with the topic of Lauren. She decided it had more to do with Lauren’s show of interest in getting Jade into school and the morning of testing. She would eventually lose interest and move on to her next topic. Courtney hoped it would be soon.

“Let’s take one step at a time. First you have to start school, then we have to hire a nanny.”

“What’s a nanny?”

“Someone to help me take care of you.”

“Stella does that, and she lets me make my own peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.”

“Is that right? Stella doesn’t have the time. She’s only helping us until I can find someone full time.”

Jade wrinkled her nose and remained silent.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure whoever I hire will be just as nice as Stella, but maybe younger so she can keep up with you.”

“Yeah!” Jade agreed. The tension in her round face eased.

Courtney wondered what was in Jade’s thoughts. A new family, home, school, lifestyle, and now a nanny. It had to be overwhelming for one so young. Add losing the only person she ever knew as family, and suddenly, the world was a very scary place.

Somehow she seemed to take everything as it came. Courtney hoped that it would all soon settle down and Jade would find some stability in her new life. She also hoped that she would find normalcy again in her once perfectly organized life.

**CHAPTER15**

Courtney strode into the courtroom of Judge Ritter at nine a.m. Friday as ordered. Confidence uplifted her as it always did when she was in a court of law. She accomplished all the goals set for the legalization of guardianship on Jade Wilhelm. Jade was admitted into Mount Pleasant School as a Neuman Scholarship recipient. It took a few days, but she found an acceptable nanny to stay with Jade after school and as needed on weekends and evenings. Demi, the young woman she hired, was trying to make it as an artist and did most of her painting in the late evening. The afternoon start time was a welcome benefit to the job.

“Good morning, Ms. Wilhelm.”

Courtney turned to greet Theresa Vasquez. “Good morning, Ms. Vasquez. Nice to see you this morning.”

“I trust by the smile on your face that everything is in order.”

“Yes, indeed it is. Jade is enrolled in a very good school. I think the judge will be pleased.”

Theresa sat at the table. “Excellent, this shouldn’t take long then.” She opened her briefcase and removed a set of files. “So tell me, how are you adjusting to the new role as parent?”

Courtney smiled again. “So far, it’s been good. The first few days were a challenge, but we worked things out.”

“I’m very happy to hear that. That poor child has had a time of it. It’ll be good for her to have real stability and the chance to just be a normal kid for a change.”

Courtney’s expression turned serious. “Ms. Vasquez, you said you’d been following Marissa’s case for some time. May I ask why?”

Theresa sat silent for a moment. “I suppose you should know everything. I was first given Marissa’s case when she was brought into the emergency room for an overdose. She was doing heroin with a few others in an abandoned building when she went unresponsive. Of course, the police were involved. They found an infant in a shopping cart rigged as a crib.”

“The infant was Jade?”

“Yes. She was immediately turned over to Children’s Services. We held her at the crisis nursery, hoping to find family that would take her. Unfortunately, your sister told us there was no family. I had no choice but to put Jade into foster care pending Marissa’s completion of rehab.”

“Did she not tell you about our mother?”

“Eventually, she did mention a mother but said she didn’t live in the country and had no idea where she was.”

Courtney frowned. “Yes, that would be our mother.”

“The entire incident really scared your sister. She was determined to get Jade back, and she was willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish that goal.”

“I assume she succeeded in her efforts.”

“Yes. It took some time, but she managed to pull herself together.”

Courtney folded her hands on the table with a satisfied smile.

“It’s sad that it took something as awful as HIV to get her to make a change in her life. Having a child should have been the factor that made the difference.”

Courtney turned quickly in her seat at hearing Theresa say HIV. Her mind raced. Was Jade HIV positive? What else did she not know about Marissa and Jade? Courtney was about to put the brakes on the entire proceeding, but as was her nature, she needed more information.

“Ms. Vasquez, what are you talking about?”

Theresa’s face was serious. “All of this really is a complete surprise to you, isn’t it?”

“Yes. As I told you, I’ve had no contact with Marissa in almost seven years.”

Theresa squared herself in the chair. “Before we go any further, let me say, Jade is not HIV positive. She was tested as a precaution. Marissa contracted the disease after the birth.”

“That’s a relief.” Courtney took a breath. “Do you know, was Marissa using while she was pregnant?”

“She told me as soon as she found out, she quit. It wasn’t easy. She got into rehab right away. By the grace of God and prenatal care from the free clinic, the baby turned out just fine.”

“Jade’s a very healthy kid in many ways.” Courtney covered her mouth with her hands and wiped them down her face. “How did it all go so wrong? I mean, she was finally clean and had a new baby to look after.”

“Marissa hit a very low point in her life after Jade was born. She was living on the street with a newborn. It’s a very threatening place, and with an infant, it makes it that much more of a hopeless situation. She went back to using, only this time, instead of getting the clean needles from the clinic, she shared used ones.”

“Why?”

“Fear that someone would recognize her and turn her in, knowing she had a baby and was using again.”

Courtney covered her mouth. “Oh, my God,” she exclaimed in a whisper.

Theresa put a hand on Courtney’s shoulder. “Please, Ms. Wilhelm, don’t blame yourself. You couldn’t have known what was happening. There were a lot of hard decisions to be made with Marissa’s life, and we all had to make them. She literally hit rock bottom before she made her way back up. Unfortunately, there’s a price to pay when someone chooses a path of self-destruction.”

Courtney got up and walked across the room. “I was told she died of cancer. Was that a lie, Ms. Vasquez? Did my mother cover that up, too?”

“No, that’s true. She was on the list for financial assistance from the AIDS Drug Assistance Program for the HIV treatment, but it came too late. She developed non-Hodgkin lymphoma that eventually spread to her liver.” Theresa’s gaze followed Courtney while she paced. “I had a feeling she wasn’t telling me everything, so I forced Marissa’s hand when the lymphoma diagnosis came down. I told her if she didn’t find someone to help her, I would have to place Jade back in foster care. She was in no shape to keep up with a two-year-old. That’s when she got in contact with your mother.”

“Four years and she didn’t tell me. My mother never muttered a word. It would’ve made all the difference.” Courtney’s jaw clenched and she swallowed hard.

“Ms. Wilhelm, I tell you all this because I feel you need to know since you’ll soon be the legal guardian of Marissa’s surviving child. But I tell you this, too, because I feel you’re a strong woman and you need to know…for yourself.”

Courtney looked at Theresa with sadness in her eyes. “Thank you. I appreciate your frankness and honesty about Marissa’s life. I wanted to know all along. I loved her, but the drugs were not only affecting her existence, they were also affecting mine. I couldn’t help her, and it was eating me from the inside.” She turned away from Theresa. Tears welled in Courtney’s eyes that she didn’t want her to see. Kaye had done plenty in the past to give Courtney reason to never speak to her again, but this was completely unforgivable.

“Are you all right? Judge Ritter will be here any minute. If you’d like, I could ask for a brief postponement.”

“No. I want this wrapped up for Jade’s sake. She needs to know that everything has been finalized and that there’s no threat of her being sent elsewhere.” Courtney retrieved a handkerchief from her bag and dabbed at the outer corners of her eyes. She regained her composure by reminding herself that she was in a courtroom. It was the one place on earth where her confidence never wavered.

In a matter of minutes, Judge Ritter made his entrance into the small room of family court. He was a tall slender man in his fifties with a full head of wavy gray hair and thick framed glasses. Courtney knew of him only through word of mouth and had no feel for how he approached his decisions. The one thing she did know was that she had everything in order as requested by Children’s Services.

Courtney presented the essential paperwork Deborah helped her put together. The judge looked at each page carefully. What seemed like an eternity was only a matter of minutes before he looked up at the two women sitting at the table in front of him.

“Ms. Vasquez, have you looked over the papers from Ms. Wilhelm?”

Theresa stood to address him. “Yes, your honor, I have. Ms. Wilhelm sent me copies yesterday.”

“And is Children’s Services satisfied with the arrangements made by Ms. Wilhelm?”

“Yes, your honor. We find them more than adequate. Ms. Wilhelm has taken the needs of her minor niece to heart and has convinced us that she can and will provide a loving and safe environment for the child.”

He looked up at Courtney with a blank expression. “Yes, I see that Ms. Wilhelm is capable of providing a stable financial home for the child. Tell me, Ms. Wilhelm, you’re not married and have no children of your own, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, that is correct.” Courtney folded her hands on the table.

“Your job must demand a great deal of your time as a partner of a law firm. I’m familiar with Rosewell and Clooney. Most of your clients are high-profile. How do you plan to adjust your schedule so that you’re available to supervise,” he paused and looked at the papers, “your niece, Jade?” He looked up at her with anticipation.

Courtney stood. “Your honor, while it’s true I have no real-life experience with children, in the short time that Jade has been with me, I feel that we have made a connection, and I’m building a rapport with her. I’ve hired a nanny to be with her after school and when I’m out of town. I also have a housekeeper with quite a large family who had been something of a mentor for me during this adjustment.”

He returned his gaze to the papers. His lack of facial expression gave no clue as to whether the answer she gave was satisfactory or not.

Courtney sat back down and wondered if she should have said more. She was an expert at answering a judge’s questions as they pertained to her client’s case at hand, but this was different. This time, she was the client. The judge managed to shake her confidence slightly when he asked a question of a personal nature.

Theresa sat silent at the table with her hands in her lap. She gave Courtney a thumbs-up out of the sight of Judge Ritter.

“Ms. Wilhelm, may I ask why your mother has relinquished her rights as guardian of her granddaughter?”

Courtney was slow to get to her feet. “Your honor, my mother doesn’t reside in the United States. The lifestyle she lives is not conducive to the proper raising of a child. Out of concern for Jade’s well-being, she initiated the passing of guardianship to me through her attorney here in the U.S.” Courtney embellished on the truth. Why? She had no answer.

“And where is your mother now?”

“I spoke with her last week. She was, and I quote, ‘Somewhere in Sardinia on a fabulous yacht.’” Her voice bordered on sarcasm.

“Hmm” was all he said. Picking up a pen, he began to write in silence.

Finally, he looked up at the women in front of him. He took off his glasses and laid them to the side. “Ms. Wilhelm, in the absence of a living or known parent and due to the formal transfer request made by Kaye Blanchard-Wilhelm, the maternal grandmother, I am granting you sole legal guardianship of your niece Jade Athena Wilhelm.” He gathered up the papers and handed them off to the court clerk. “You may pick up the final papers from the clerk’s office.”

Courtney smiled with relief. “Thank you, your honor.”

He turned to Theresa. “Ms. Vasquez, thank you for all your hard work in seeing this case through. As always, your professionalism is most appreciated by this court.”

Theresa tried to suppress her smile. “You’re welcome, your honor. May I say, this decision will make a tremendous difference in the life of this little girl.”

“I hope so, Ms. Vasquez.” He looked over at Courtney. “I hope so.” With that, he slammed his gavel to its block and adjourned the court.

Courtney walked with Theresa into the hall. “I’d like to apologize for the way we started off. I wasn’t prepared for any of this when I walked into your office, but now here we are, and I’m the legal guardian of a child, my niece.” The thought and the word no longer brought her discomfort.

“No apology necessary. Taking on a child so unexpectedly is a huge step. Judge Ritter asked my opinion of your situation, and without hesitation, I assured him that placing Jade with you was the right thing to do.”

“I can understand his uncertainty. A single female that works too much might give cause to question one’s ability to parent.”

“Yes. I’ve known Harlan a lot of years and brought many cases into his courtroom. He’s an old-fashioned man with old-fashioned values, but he recognizes the world around him is changing. More often than not, children are being raised in a single-parent home now. His first concern has always been with the children, and he knows you can provide Jade with safety and stability.”

“I’ll do my best to see to it she’s well provided for. I just hope I get the day-to-day part of the job right.”

“I think you and Jade will reap a happy and satisfying life together. You’ll have rough spots, but I’m confident you’re the right one to help her grow into the kind of young woman her mother would be proud of.”

“Thank you, Ms. Vasquez, for everything. Jade and I have a long road ahead of us.”

Theresa shook her hand. “If I can be of any further help to you and Jade, please feel free to call me. You have my number.”

Courtney walked out of the family courts building and hailed a taxi. Filled with the satisfaction of yet another court appearance gone smooth, she also identified a stream of happiness that ran concurrently through her. She was surprised by her own attitude. Not more than fourteen days earlier, she was a single, successful woman living for the challenge of the legal cases brought before her. She was free to come and go at will and often indulged in self-satisfying behaviors. Now she couldn’t wait to get home that evening and tell Jade that everything was official and her future would be secure.

Many things had changed over the course of the last two months. Courtney lost a sister forever but gained a niece from the tragedy. Jade had already begun to change her life in regard to how she had to think and organize her calendar. She might even learn to like peanut butter and jelly.

The ring from her BlackBerry brought her back down to earth. It was Deborah.

“Hello?”

“Courtney, when are you coming to the office?”

“I’m on my way now, why? What’s going on?”

“Mr. Rosewell wants to talk to you ASAP. Did you see the *Journal* this morning?”

“No, I haven’t opened the paper yet. I just got out of court. What’s going on?”

“Crammell has pulled another trick out of his bag, and he’s waving it at the media. Nosheki is really not going to like this one. He’s talking dual-class shares.”

“Oh, God! How? The board can’t revalue the stock.”

“Crammell claims his father has class B stocks, and that would give him majority voting power. He plans to petition the court to have them withdrawn from the trust. He claims it was his father’s intent for him to have control of the voting power of the stocks when he took over day-to-day operations of the company.”

“Are we investigating this yet? Those stocks can’t just appear from nowhere.” Courtney rubbed her forehead. “We need to step things up. Tell research we need to know everything about those class B’s and where Junior stands in Senior’s posthumous wishes.” She paused. “I can’t believe this, class B stocks. Such an antiquated system. What a disaster. The loss he could cause in shareholder value could be devastating.”

“Mr. Rosewell is more concerned about the devastation of the loss of Nosheki as a client.”

“I’ll be there shortly. I’ll handle Frank. See you soon.”

“Thanks, Court.”

She slipped the BlackBerry back in her bag. “Crammell is really starting to irritate me. It’s time to put an end to this nonsense and get this deal completed.”

She crossed her arms and sat back in the seat of the taxi. This was nothing more than diversionary tactics from what she was sure was a money grab by a disgruntled family member who was about to lose his meal ticket.

She reached into her bag and pulled out the paper with the list Lauren e-mailed to her of school supplies that Jade would need. She stopped and thought about Lauren’s blue eyes, and for a moment, the aggravation of Nosheki versus Crammell disappeared from the backseat of the taxi.

**CHAPTER16**

On Monday morning, Courtney stumbled into the kitchen in search of more coffee. She fed Jade and got her ready for school. She then managed to get herself ready for work, all in a timely fashion.

She lifted the coffeepot and filled her mug. Jade was in her room brushing her teeth and doing her last-minute preparations for her first day of school. The plan was to escort Jade to Mount Pleasant, then go to the office for a meeting with her research team.

If she was lucky, she would catch a glimpse of Lauren at the school. A most satisfying way to start her week, she thought while she sipped from the mug.

“Look, Courtney, my other tooth fell out when I brushed my teeth.” Jade held her hand out to show her.

Courtney bent down to look. “You sure did lose one. Let me look in your mouth.”

Jade opened wide.

She now had a space on the lowers to match the upper.

“Can I leave it under my pillow tonight for the tooth fairy?”

“I think that’s a good idea.” She got a cup from the cabinet. “Let’s put it in here until tonight.”

Jade dropped the tooth in the cup. “Are you sure the tooth fairy will leave a whole dollar?”

“I’m certain she’ll come through for you. I’ll e-mail her myself today so she’ll be sure to put you on her list of visits tonight.”

“Okay.” Satisfied with the answer, Jade announced, “I’m ready.” She dropped her backpack on the floor and placed her hands on her hips.

Courtney allowed her to pick out her clothes for the first day of school. She went with a yellow button-up shirt and denim skirt with sunflowers embroidered on the front.

“Let me look you over.” Courtney walked around her and inspected everything from hair to shoes. She knelt down and tied the laces of the new white sneakers Jade had on. “I think you’re right, you look ready for your first day. I must say, you look fabulous.”

Jade’s face lit up at Courtney’s approval.

“I’ll get my shoes and my bags, and we’ll get going,” she said on her way down the hall.

A few minutes later, Courtney found her way back to the kitchen, an empty mug in one hand and a briefcase in the other. “Are you ready to go?”

“No, not yet. I have to have my lunch.” Jade folded her arms and held her ground.

“Oh, I almost forgot. We went to all that trouble last night to make the perfect lunch.” Courtney put the mug in the sink and went to the refrigerator to retrieve a brown paper bag. “Let’s put this in your backpack,” she said, unzipping the front pouch.

Jade watched closely.

With the brown bag secured in the pouch, she asked, “Now are you ready to go?”

Jade picked up the backpack. “Uh-huh. I’m ready.”

“Good. I think we both have a full day ahead of us,” Courtney said on the way out the door.

The taxi pulled up to the steps leading to the front door of the school. Jade froze in the seat as she watched a stream of children of all sizes, ages, and ethnicities give last-minute hugs to parents or nannies as they filed in the door to start their day.

“Jade, are you coming?” Courtney was standing on the walk outside the taxi.

Jade just looked at her with all seriousness and gripped the handle on the door tight.

“Don’t be scared. You’re just like all the other children you see. It’ll be okay.”

Jade still didn’t budge.

“Good morning, Miss Jade. I’m so glad you could make it today for my class.” Lauren walked up and stood next to Courtney.

The sound of Lauren’s voice broke the spell Jade was under. “Hi, Lauren,” she said with a big smile.

“How are you today?”

Jade climbed out of the taxi. “I’m ready for my first day of school. Courtney let me pick out my clothes, and my tooth fell out this morning,” she said, her voice filled with excitement.

“I’d say you’ve had a busy morning already. You look very nice. I have some fun things for the class to do today that I wouldn’t want you to miss.” Lauren looked at Courtney and winked.

Courtney mouthed, “Thank you.”

Lauren returned a gratifying nod.

Courtney bent down to face Jade. “Can I have a hug before you run off to class?”

“Sure.” Jade wrapped her arms around Courtney’s neck and squeezed hard.

“You be a good girl and do as…” She stood and looked at Lauren. “What would you like for Jade to call you?”

“Here at school, the other kids call me Miss Lauren.”

“So you be a good girl and do as Miss Lauren tells you.”

“Okay.” Jade grabbed Lauren’s hand and started for the door.

“Don’t forget, Demi, your new nanny, will be here at four to get you.”

Lauren gave her a small wave. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine.”

“Thanks.” Courtney waved back and watched until the doors closed behind them. She couldn’t help but notice how well Lauren’s tan slacks fit her curves. The graceful way in which she moved accentuated her femininity. Every time she looked at Lauren, she found herself more attracted to her than she wanted to admit.

She shook off her daydream and got back in the taxi.

It would be a very busy day at the office. She managed to reassure Frank Rosewell on Friday that she had the Nosheki case under control. The truth was, she still didn’t know for sure if Crammell had class B stocks or how he got them.

The unequal voting power of the super stocks could devalue the company and ruin the Nosheki deal. She had worked too long and too hard to let this slip away. Her ego mandated that she get the deal done at all costs. There was no losing or quitting for her.

**CHAPTER17**

The phone in Courtney’s pocket rang, breaking her concentration. She answered as soon as she saw the caller ID.

“Hello?”

“Courtney, it’s Demi.”

“Yes, Demi, what can I do for you?”

“I’m not going to be able to pick Jade up from school this afternoon. My mom just called. My grandmother had another heart attack and is in the hospital. She’s very sick.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that. Of course, you need to be with your family.”

“Thanks for understanding. I’ll call about the rest of the week as soon as I know more.”

“Very well. Thank you for letting me know.”

Courtney hung up. She was in a bind. Stella was off until Wednesday, and she had no one else to call.

She walked down the hall to Deborah’s office. “I have a little problem,” she said as she entered the room.

Deborah looked up from the computer screen. “What can I do to help?”

“Nothing at the moment. I have to get Jade from school this afternoon. I just got a call from my new nanny. She’s already called in, and she hasn’t even started yet. She’s in the middle of a family crisis and can’t work today.”

“That’s too bad. I’d call Christie, but she’s out of town for a conference of some sort.”

“I guess I’m going to have to get used to these kinds of disruptions. Jade is my responsibility.”

“On the bright side, you may get to see the teacher that’s got your attention.”

Courtney looked surprised. “What’re you talking about?”

Deborah laughed. “Don’t look so surprised. I saw how your face lit up this morning when you talked about how good she was with Jade. I gotta say, it’s so unlike you.”

“She’s an interesting woman. What’s wrong with being impressed by someone with intelligence and character?”

Deborah held up her hands. “Not a thing wrong with it, I’ve got one of my own. I’m just not used to seeing you, dare I say, almost gush over a woman.”

“I’m not gushing over anyone.” Courtney crossed her arms. “I’m simply trying to adjust to everything and everyone that’s new to me.”

“Uh-huh.” Deborah looked skeptical. “I suspect you’ll be making an adjustment with the school teacher sooner than later.”

“That’s not an appropriate comment to make.”

“Sorry, sorry, didn’t mean to offend you.” Deborah shuffled some papers on her desk.

“No offense taken. I am attracted to her, I’ll admit that. I just don’t know what to do with this one.” Courtney took a seat in front of the desk.

“What do you mean?” Deborah stopped moving papers and focused on her boss and friend.

“You know how Suzanne and I were. Everything was very casual. No commitment and no expectations beyond the evening.”

“Yeah, but I always got the impression that was more Suzanne than you. I mean, it seemed to work for you, but maybe she was just someone to occupy your time and your bed until the one that could occupy your heart came around.”

“You should have been a psychologist,” Courtney said with a smirk.

“Not my style. I have no patience for spending all day listening to other people’s problems.”

Courtney looked toward the window. “I had my shot at that one great love years ago, and I walked away from it out of fear.”

“Who’s to say that a person only gets one shot at something like that? If you keep your eyes open, life may surprise you and give you a second chance.”

“I don’t have time for that. I have a six-year-old to keep up with and a law firm to stay one step ahead of.”

“Suit yourself, but I think you should at least keep your options open on this one. The teacher might surprise you.”

Courtney got up and moved for the door. “She already has. You know, you can help while I run and get Jade. Research is sending up a packet of info on Crammell Silicon stock. Take a look through it, and if you see anything out of the ordinary, courier it over to me tonight.”

“That I can do.”

“Thanks, Deborah.”

“No problem. Sometimes a person just needs an ear.”

“I meant for taking care of the paperwork.”

“Oh, you’re welcome for that, too.” She grinned.

Courtney waved her off as she left the room.

She had some time before she had to leave to get Jade. The documentation for the acquisition was very close to being completed but had to be put on hold. It was just so damned irritating that Crammell’s son was in the way.

“Ms. Wilhelm, you have a phone call,” Mora said through the intercom.

“Who is it, Mora?”

“Your father, on line one.”

“Thank you.”

She counted to ten before picking up the receiver. “Hello, Papa.”

“Hello, my dear. Am I interrupting?”

“No, just laboring over this case I’m working on. What’s happening with you?”

“Three surgeries today, and I must say I am done. I called to find out if you picked up the Sevruga caviar from that little gourmet shop near your place.”

“Yes, I did. I also got some of the foiegras with truffles you like.”

“Splendid. You got the wild caviar, not the farmed, correct?”

Courtney rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

“That’s excellent. Will you be able to make it over for the cocktail party?”

“No, I won’t, sorry. I have a late meeting with the Pelham Group, and I have no idea how long it’ll take. I’ll get the caviar over to you in the morning so you’ll have it for the party.”

“Very well, dear. You know I’ll miss you.”

“Yes, I know you will. When do you think you’ll have time to meet Jade?”

There was silence on the other end.

“You do know that I finalized the guardianship on Friday?”

“Yes, I know, and I’m sure you know I feel this is a mistake,” he said in an even tone.

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I did what I thought was right. Jade needed a home and someone to take care of her. She needs family. You’ll agree, I’m the best one to take on that responsibility.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind that you’re the best responsible party. However, it’s Kaye’s grandchild.”

“Yes, and my niece. There’s no sense in arguing over this. The judge made it official Friday. When you feel you’re ready to meet Jade with an open mind, let me know.”

“You’re right, what’s done is done. You’re my daughter, and I trust your judgment. For now, though, I think I shall wait to meet this child.”

“That’s your decision. I’ll be by tomorrow with the caviar. I love you.”

“I love you, too, dear. Bye now.”

Courtney hung up. Her heart filled with disappointment over her father’s stubborn attitude. He couldn’t let go of the past, even when it meant looking into the eyes of the future. Jade had nothing to do with the black eye Kaye gave to the good doctor’s reputation. He didn’t tolerate mistakes, he was too in control. His ex-wife, however, he considered his one great mistake, and she couldn’t be controlled.

She turned to the computer on her desk. She didn’t have time to worry about her father’s reaction to Jade. There was a very wealthy client who needed her to focus on his problem, and he was willing to pay her firm a hefty sum of money to get him past the legal blockade that kept him from his goals.

By three forty-five, Courtney was rushing to finish reading through the stack of case briefs research sent up.

With no more time to spare, she switched off her computer and grabbed her bags on the way out the door. One quick stop by Deborah’s office, and she would be on her way to Mount Pleasant School.

Courtney leaned in the door. “I’m leaving now, Deb.”

She looked up from the book she was reading. “Okay, I’ll let you know if I find anything unusual with the stock reports.”

“You’re the best. Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, and good luck.”

Courtney narrowed her eyes. “With what?”

“The teacher, silly. Good luck with the teacher.”

“For Christ’s sake, Deborah. I’m going to pick up Jade, not the teacher.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” She shot her a devious grin.

Courtney didn’t have time to banter. “You can stop playing matchmaker anytime now.” She darted out of the office in an effort to get uptown in time to meet Jade by four o’clock.

The taxi driver gave it his best effort to snake through traffic in Manhattan to get Courtney to the school on time. The four o’clock mark, however, was missed by fifteen minutes despite the effort.

When she got out of the taxi, a few children with nannies and parents lingered around the front of the building in conversation. She looked around for Jade, but she was nowhere to be found. Courtney stopped to ask a security guard where the children waited to be picked up. The woman pointed her to the first room to the right inside the building.

She hurried up the stairs and into the room, but Jade was not there. Ms. Raymond was sitting with a boy who looked to be about Jade’s age. The towheaded child was fidgety sitting on a small sofa and pulling at the strings of his backpack.

“You must be looking for Jade,” Ms. Raymond said.

“Yes, I’m a little late. My nanny canceled on me at the last minute.” She wondered why she felt the need to explain herself to the school secretary.

“I believe she’s with Ms. McCallum in her classroom.”

“Which one would that be?”

“Halfway down the hall, make a right. She’s in the last room on the right facing the courtyard.”

“Thank you, Ms. Raymond.”

She made no further reply. Instead she snobbishly turned away, signifying she was done with the conversation.

Courtney brushed it off and followed the directions to the classroom. When she found it, she opened the door slowly and stuck her head in. Jade was sitting at a table near the window coloring, and Lauren was next to her doing paperwork.

“Hi, girls,” Courtney said cheerfully.

Jade’s head whipped around. “Hi, Courtney.” She was full of excitement.

“Hi, kiddo.” She turned her attention to Lauren. “Sorry I’m late. The nanny had a family emergency, and I had to fill in at the last minute.”

“That’s fine. You do know there’s a number to call when a child will be picked up late?” Lauren’s voice was flat.

“No, I didn’t. I must admit, I was extremely busy over the weekend, and I didn’t get a chance to read the handbook. I planned to do it tonight.”

Lauren picked up Jade’s backpack. “Jade, will you go sit with Ms. Raymond in the waiting room up front? I’d like to talk to your aunt for a minute.”

“Sure, Miss Lauren.” Jade closed her coloring book, and Lauren helped her put her backpack on.

Courtney watched with curiosity.

Once Jade was gone, Lauren walked over to her desk. “Courtney, if you had read the handbook, you would have known that proper lunches are provided by the school as part of the tuition. There was no need to supply Jade with…” She reached into her desk and pulled out a brown paper bag. “A lunch.” She tossed the bag onto the desk in front of Courtney. “No matter how sophisticated your palate may be, the palate of a six-year-old would not find this edible.” She sat on the corner of the desk and crossed her arms.

“I may not be the greatest lunch lady in town, but that is exactly what Jade asked me to prepare.” She was offended at the tone Lauren was taking with her. She was not one of her first-graders and wasn’t about to be spoken to as such.

“I highly doubt what’s in that bag is exactly what Jade requested for lunch.”

Courtney picked up the bag and opened it. When she saw the contents, she swallowed hard and looked up regretfully at Lauren.

Lauren fought to hide her amusement with Courtney’s expression.

“Perhaps you’re right. Even I know Russian Sevruga caviar and duck foiegras with black truffles is not a meal for a six-year-old,” she said deflated and closed the bag. “And by the same token, peanut butter and jelly, Goldfish crackers, and apple wedges would not be the proper fare to serve at a cocktail party for a group of stodgy old doctors.”

Lauren couldn’t hold it in any longer. The laughter rolled out of her.

At first, her laughter angered Courtney. She wasn’t used to being laughed at, but when she realized the levity of the situation, she too burst into giggles. Lauren’s full smile was so delightful and genuine.

“Please tell me you kept this in a refrigerator. There’s over a thousand dollars worth of Russian caviar and French duck liver in here.”

Lauren subdued the chuckles. “Yes, of course, I refrigerated it. I may spend my days with children, but I recognize fine expensive gourmet foods when I see them.”

“Thank God. I must have grabbed the wrong bag this morning. How careless of me. What did Jade have for lunch?”

“I sent her to the cafeteria with the other children. They had chicken strips with macaroni and cheese, a fruit cup, and milk, an age-appropriate meal.”

“Thank you for taking care of her.”

“It all turned out fine. If you look online, you’ll find the menu for the month. Oh, and read the parent handbook, please.”

“Yes, I will, most definitely.” Courtney set her bag on a student desk and laughed. “I can’t even begin to describe my father’s reaction had I given him a bag of Goldfish crackers and peanut butter and jelly instead of the caviar he’s expecting.”

Lauren flashed another bright even smile. “I’m sure you could’ve talked your way around it, Counselor.”

Courtney scratched her head. “I suppose so but not without an enormous amount of apologizing to go with it. He’s a very particular man.”

“With exquisite taste, no doubt.”

“Yes, true.”

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room as the two women stood face to face.

“Lauren,” Courtney started slowly, “would you like to meet for coffee or a drink sometime?” A hot flash shot down Courtney’s back when she realized what she had just asked. Even more distressing, she wondered from where inside of her the invitation came from.

Surprise grabbed at Lauren’s tongue. She blushed lightly. “Why, Ms. Wilhelm, are you asking me out?” She was afraid her mouth was moving, but nothing was coming out.

The glow on her face was beautiful.

Courtney’s mouth dried up instantly, but she held her confidence as if she were in court. “I’m…I’m sorry if I’ve offended you, but yes, I’d like to get to know you better.”

“No offense taken, and I’m flattered by the invitation.”

Courtney was sure this was where she would be rejected.

“The answer is yes,” she said with a nod, her hands shaking. “I think I’d like to get to know you better, too.” She picked up a pen and wrote on a Post-It note and held it out for Courtney. “Here’s my personal cell number. Call me, we’ll compare calendars.”

Courtney put the yellow sticky note in her pocket. “Thank you. I’ll do that.”

Again there was an uneasy pause in the conversation.

“Well, I’d better get Jade home. Thanks again for catching my faux pas. I’ll be reading the handbook right after dinner.”

“Good. There’ll be a quiz that follows,” Lauren said tongue in cheek.

“I’m sure of that.” Courtney picked up her bag. “I’ll call you,” she said on her way out the door.

Courtney walked slowly down the hall as she relived the conversation she just had. The entire approach was impromptu and so unlike her, but then Lauren was not like any of the women she had dated in recent years. Again Amanda popped into her thoughts. Lauren continued to remind her of a long-ago love. A relationship that left her wounded and emotionally vulnerable at its end, but the only thing that mattered to her in its prime. She didn’t want that feeling again in her life. There were too many other things that needed her now—the firm, Jade, her father. She just didn’t have the energy to spare on the highs and lows of a relationship like that again.

Yet she asked this woman out and admitted she wanted to get to know her better. There was a driving force behind the attraction that was at work of its own will. She could put a stop to it, she told herself, but she questioned whether she really wanted to.

She found Jade in the waiting room with Ms. Raymond and the towheaded boy. The children were playing with a pocket video game while Ms. Raymond thumbed through a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine.

“Jade, let’s go home, shall we?”

“Okay.” She hopped off the sofa and picked up her backpack.

“How was your day?” Courtney held the door for her.

“It was good. Miss Lauren is fun, and so is her helper Kayla.”

“Kayla?”

“Yeah, she walks around the room and makes sure our answers are right. She sings, too.”

“Is that right?”

“Uh-huh. She’s real good and smart.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Yeah, she’s got long hair and wears big hoops in her ears.”

Courtney wasn’t sure why those two particular attributes stood out to Jade, but she was more interested in getting them a taxi home than dissecting Jade’s thought process right then. All things and people related to Lauren would have to wait for another time. She had a busy night ahead of her. There was dinner and homework for Jade. Once that was done, she had homework of her own to dive into.

Somewhere along West Tenth Street, between Seventh Avenue South and Hudson Street, a wave of exhaustion suddenly rushed over her. She yawned and wiped gently at the corners of her eyes. This was most unusual for her. She normally didn’t feel this way until about nine or so in the evening.

During the ride to the penthouse, Jade sang to herself while doing hand gestures for the songs. She was full of energy as she performed “I’m A Little Teapot.”

The ring from the BlackBerry in Courtney’s pocket intruded on the ride.

“Hello?”

“Hello, dear. Are you busy?”

“I know you won’t believe this, Virginia, but I’m on my way home.”

“What? Are you ill?”

Courtney laughed. “No, nothing like that. The nanny I hired called in with a family emergency. I had to leave the office early today to get Jade from school.”

“Oh, I see, new responsibilities.”

“To what do I owe this call?”

“I just wanted to let you know Evie had a fainting episode at work last night.”

“Oh, no, is she all right?”

“I think so. She’s at home resting today. I’m taking her to the doctor tomorrow. I’ve tried to tell her she’s working too hard at her age.”

“I hope everything will be fine. Please let me know what happens.”

“I will. Thank you, dear. So how are you doing? Your father told me you won’t be attending the cocktail party.”

“No, I won’t. I have a late meeting with the Pelham Group, and I’m sure to be in no mood to be social when it’s over.”

“That’s too bad. I was hoping you and Suzanne would be there to help liven things up.”

“I’ve been so busy with everything, I haven’t told you. Suzanne and I stopped seeing each other last week. She couldn’t take the competition from my new responsibilities and thought it would be better if we called it quits since my priorities have changed.”

“I’m sorry. You two were together for a while. I thought maybe she would be the one you might settle with.”

Courtney snickered. “Suzanne? No way. Not her style, or so she tells me. She and I had a relationship of convenience. I think I told you that before. She’s all about Suzanne. If you fit with her plans and have the image, she’s good. Otherwise, she doesn’t have the time for you. Simply put, my time was up.”

“You’ll do just fine finding another one.”

“I’m not worried. Frankly, I’m not sure I have time for dating right now.” She looked down at Jade in the seat next to her. “But I did something I’m not sure I should have.”

“What’s that, dear?”

“I invited someone I just met out for a drink.”

“That’s wonderful. Getting back out there is best. No reason to wait.”

“This may not be the right person for me to be seeing. She’s, well…”

“She’s what?”

“She’s Jade’s teacher,” Courtney whispered, hoping Jade wouldn’t hear.

“Did you say Jade’s teacher?”

She covered her eyes with her hand. “Yes, that’s exactly what I said.”

“I see nothing wrong in that.”

“Don’t you think it could be a little awkward?”

“For whom?”

“For everyone involved.” Courtney pushed her hair behind her ear.

“She said yes, correct?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Well then, she mustn’t think it awkward at all.”

“I suppose you’re right. I just have my reservations.” Courtney took a deep breath. “She reminds me of Amanda. Or more to the point, she reminds me of how it was with Amanda. That scares me.”

“I remember how hurt you were back then, but you’re older and wiser now. And you’re free to make your decisions based on your own agenda, not your father’s.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. I have to let go of the fear of the past. I’m in full control of my life now.”

“You are indeed. Anyway, you’re just having a drink. Relax and enjoy the company.”

“Yes, I will. You always know what to say.”

“I wish there was something I could say that would get you to come to the party.”

“I really can’t. Besides, my father and I seem to be at odds at the moment. He’s a brilliant man, and I love him, but he can be so stubborn and set in his ways sometimes.”

“You’ll get no argument on that one from me. What has he done this time?”

“I asked him to have dinner with us, and he refused. I know all too well how he feels about my mother and her wrongdoings, but I’m trying to turn one of them into something good, and he won’t make the effort to try to see my side of things.” Courtney fingered Jade’s wavy dark hair while she looked out the window at the people standing on the street corner.

“That’s your father without a doubt. Give him some time. I’ve known your father for many years, and he can be a reasonable man, it just takes some time.”

“I know, but he can’t control everything. You’d think he’d know that by now.”

“Let me have a word with him. I might be able to talk some sense into him sooner than later.”

“Have at it. Any and all help is appreciated.”

“All right, my dear. If you change your mind about the party, give me a call. Oh, and good luck with your lady friend.”

“Thanks. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Why won’t your dad eat dinner with you?” Jade asked. Her big, dark eyes watched Courtney’s face.

“Well, I had a disagreement with him, and now he needs some time to think about why he’s mad.”

“Why is he mad?”

Courtney thought before she spoke. “He wants me to do things the way he tells me to do them, and I said no. Adults can make their own decisions.”

“But not kids, right?”

“You get to make some decisions but not all.”

“Like where I go to school. You get to pick that.”

“Right.” Courtney was relieved that Jade bought into the explanation and didn’t ask her about Lauren. Just as the taxi stopped at the curb in front of her building, Courtney wondered what she expected to come of her invitation to Lauren. She was playing with fire. Lauren was nothing like Suzanne. She was sure she would demand much more from her, and she wasn’t certain she was willing to comply.

She opened the front door and let Jade into the building. She watched her happily bounce down the hall toward the elevator with the backpack strapped to her back. “Come on, Courtney, I pushed the button.”

Courtney followed her onto the elevator with a smile. “Miss Lauren told me about lunch today.”

“Yeah, it was the wrong bag, but it was okay. I got to eat like in a restaurant, and Miss Lauren said that’s how we would have lunch every day.”

“I didn’t know that because I didn’t do my homework. It’s very important that you get your homework done so you don’t make a mistake like I did.”

“You have homework, too?”

“Yes, the school gave me a book to read with all the rules, and I didn’t read it before your first day. That’s what Miss Lauren wanted to talk to me about. So now I have to read the book tonight.”

“Is Miss Lauren gonna ask you questions when you’re done?”

“I don’t know, but I can tell you I’m going to be prepared if she does.”

“Me too,” Jade said with resolve.

After dinner, Jade sat on the floor in Courtney’s home office with a pad of paper in her lap practicing her letters. Happy Bunny was next to her as always.

Courtney watched her closely as she tried to read through the school handbook. The book was very boring, she thought, and that was something considering she spent her days reading case law and briefs.

She rubbed her eyes and opened her date book to mark the school holidays on her calendar. There she found Lauren’s Post-It note stuck to the inside cover. She laid it on the desk and examined the handwriting. It was delicate but controlled. For a teacher, it would be expected that her penmanship would be above average.

Courtney reached for her BlackBerry and entered the number into her contact list. The note she stuck in the address book under M.

“Courtney, I’m done.” Jade stood and presented the pad.

She looked over all the letters before giving her approval. “You did a very good job. Your mama would be very proud.”

Jade wiped her nose with her sleeve and smiled. “It was easy. I didn’t tell Miss Lauren or Kayla, but Mama already taught me how to write my letters, and I can do numbers, too.”

“I’m very proud of you. Your mama gave you a good head start for school.”

“Yeah. She said I could be a doctor or president or anything I wanted if I did good in school.”

“She was exactly right. That’s why I wanted you to be in Miss Lauren’s class because I want you to grow up to be whatever you want to be.”

Jade let out a yawn and nodded in agreement.

“Now, young lady, I think it’s time you got ready for bed.”

Jade closed the cover on her pad. “Okay, I’ll wait for you in bed.”

“Okay, I’ll be there to tuck you and Happy in for the night.”

She picked up the stuffed rabbit from the floor and left the room with the pad under her arm and Happy clutched to her chest.

Courtney tossed the handbook on the desk. She had read all she could for one night. She knew more than she did before she started, and that was good enough for now.

The image of Lauren laughing filled her head. She was so cute. Cute was not an adjective she usually used to describe a woman she was attracted to, but that’s what she was—cute. She was also genuine, intelligent, and full of life. She was conscious of other people. Courtney could tell by the way she talked about the kids. Again she reflected back to her college days.

She reached for the bottom desk drawer and pulled it open slowly as if something would jump out at her. The only thing inside was a picture frame containing a photo of a very young Courtney and her first love Amanda. They fit together perfectly with their arms around each other and smiling for the camera. She stared down at the two faces so in love all those years ago.

It wasn’t Amanda she hung on to as much as it was the love they shared. She eventually got over Amanda after some time and therapy. Amanda was living in San Francisco now with a woman she met while in the Peace Corps and their two children. She met them for coffee once when she was there on business. She decided she was happy for them. They were a lot alike and seemed to fit well together.

Fear clenched down on her, knowing that Lauren could raise the old feelings so easily in her. Her efforts to control her emotions were a direct behavior learned from her father. It angered her that they wouldn’t stop. She closed the drawer and got up to tuck Jade in for the night.

**CHAPTER18**

Courtney stormed into her office and threw her folders down on the desk. “Damn you, Billy. Damn you.” She brushed back her bangs with the palm of her hand and paced the length of the room.

Deborah wasn’t far behind her. She watched from the door as her boss let out her frustrations over a meeting canceled at the last minute.

“Dodson’s not answering his cell. I’ll call the office first thing in the morning and get to the bottom of this,” Deborah said.

“Thank you, no. I’ll call him myself. I’ve got plenty to say to him and enough fire to breathe at him, it’s sure to scorch him through the phone. Mr. Nosheki was furious. You know he came all the way from San Jose to make a personal appeal to Crammell?”

Deborah took a seat in front of the desk. “Yes, I know. And I think it would have worked if they’d gotten together.”

“Dodson thinks by stalling it’ll throw us off-balance. They’re working Nosheki up for more money, I just know it. And Dodson, that asshole, he just wants to make me look bad by pulling these unprofessional stunts.” Courtney continued to pace.

“Court, sit down and take a deep breath. We can regroup on this and work up a strategy to get this deal done despite Dodson’s pranks.”

“I can’t sit right now. This is personal. Billy’s made it that way. This isn’t about the best interest of his client. This is about taking me down a notch. He’s always despised me for the success I’ve had here. Hell, he probably blames me for his firing. As if I had anything to do with that jerk getting caught cheating on Rosewell’s daughter.” Courtney was really worked up.

“Are you sure this isn’t just his incompetence bleeding through? Maybe they realized they weren’t ready to come to the table and make a deal. Or maybe Crammell himself pulled the plug on the meeting. I think we all know he’s something of a buffoon himself.”

Courtney stopped. “God, men! Do they really think we’re stupid? They never make anything easy or clean unless there’s something in it for them.”

Deborah giggled. “You make a good point, Ms. Steinem.”

“Funny,” she said, laughing at the comparison. “I think Billy knows he’s no match for me in any arena. He just happens to have something our client wants, and he’s going to use it to maximize his own personal gain.” She sat at her desk. “We have a client to protect. If this is a ploy to get more money out of Nosheki, it’s our job to see that it doesn’t happen.”

“Now you’re talking.”

“Nosheki is in town for two more days. We have to try to arrange a meeting before he goes.”

“Right.”

Courtney tapped a pen on the folders she threw on the desk. “Who else do we know in the Pelham Group?”

“Hard to say. The firm is so ridiculously heavy with associates, and they’ll take on anything. They’re just one climber after another.”

“Do we not have any of the partners in our professional social circles?”

“Not to my knowledge. They’re based in London. I imagine that’s where they are.”

“Great.” Courtney tossed the pen down. “We’re stuck dealing with Billy the idiot.”

“Looks that way.”

Courtney wiped her eyes. “Why don’t we call it a night? We can start on this again in the morning. Rosewell is taking Nosheki to breakfast, which gives us some time in the morning to try to get Billy to talk to us.”

“Very good.” Deborah forced herself out of the chair. “I don’t mind telling you, after this, I may need a vacation. I thought after the Switzerland deal, I needed time off. I definitely need some R and R on a beach somewhere.”

“You’ve been a real trouper, and I very much appreciate all the hard work.”

“Thanks.” Deborah moved slowly. “I say I need time on a beach, but Christie would kill me if I spent money on anything other than a total refurb of that damn kitchen right now.”

“Ah, the bliss of cohabitation,” Courtney said with a smirk.

“Yeah, right. See you in the morning.”

After Deborah left, Courtney gathered her things and headed for home. Since she was now free for the evening, she could see Jade and check her homework before bed. Her real desires lay in falling face first onto the bed, but she had to tend to her added responsibilities at home first. It was actually fun to watch Jade do her homework. She worked so hard to make her letters neat and orderly. She reminded her of herself.

She decided to walk a few blocks, then grab a taxi. While she walked, she did something she couldn’t remember doing before; she paid more attention to the other people walking with her. They were all so focused on where they were going. She wondered if they too were going home to a child, a family, or if they were simply on the move to get to their next task or appointment.

She remembered her father’s party but decided to stick to her decision not to show. Normally, she would abide by his requests as long as they didn’t interfere with her business. This was the first time in how long she couldn’t remember that she didn’t grant him his wish. She needed support from him now, not his continued petulant child act when it came to Kaye’s sins. She wanted the past to be just that—the past. He wasn’t making it easy to do that.

She hopped in the taxi at East Forty-second Street and Park Avenue. Watching the hard surfaces of the city buildings roll by as she headed south, she thought of Lauren. She revisited the teacher’s smile in her mind; a warm sensation oozed through her. The warmth melted away all the stress of the day, and she relaxed in the seat. If the thought of Lauren’s smile could do this for her, she wondered what a deeper involvement might bring.

She was already feeling threads of attachment to Lauren, even though their contact thus far had been limited. Deborah was right—this was so unlike her.

**CHAPTER19**

Courtney sat in her office watching the rain roll down the window in streams. The day was gray and uncomfortable in the Big Apple. She generally didn’t notice the weather while she was in the office, but with Demi taking Jade into the damp subway to get home from school, she was concerned she would catch a cold, or worse, chicken pox.

Jade had been in school for several days, and she was doing spectacular, as Lauren had predicted she would. She was catching up with the other children her age and showing signs of excelling in the class.

Courtney purposely put off calling Lauren. It was partly work that was keeping her tied up and partly her own attempt to control the situation. She needed some time to let her emotions cool. That would help her keep everything where she could handle it. Whatever this was going to be between them would be on her schedule.

“When are you going to call that teacher?” Deborah asked.

“What?”

“The teacher. When are you going to ask her out?”

“You of all people know there’s no time for socializing. I’ll worry about that once we get this acquisition back on track.”

“Case shmace. You were daydreaming out that window, and I have a feeling it was all about that woman.”

Courtney shook her head. “Sometimes I think you have a one-track mind.”

“Not true.” Deborah took a seat. “I just want you to find some happiness.”

“I am happy. I would be happier if this acquisition were done. I really didn’t want to have to litigate this one.”

“There has to be something more to make you happy than the judicial system. When was the last time you had a vacation with someone you really enjoyed being with?”

Courtney remembered right away, her senior year at Princeton, spring break. She and Amanda took off for Hawaii on a whim. They spent the entire week on the beach at a villa on the Kona Coast of the Big Island. The villa name was Peace of Heaven. They decided it was just that. Courtney could have stayed forever, just the two of them. The trip was well worth the tongue lashing she got from her father for what he considered irresponsible behavior when they returned.

“I don’t need to have someone to be accountable to, to be happy.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“Look, I’ll work on it at my own pace. If I think the teacher, as you call her, might be worth getting to know, I’ll invite her for a drink or something.”

“All right, not another word from me. Now that you’re free of Suzanne, I thought maybe you might be interested in someone with more substance. Someone that might care about you for who you are, not what you are.”

“I didn’t realize my relationship was so transparent.”

“You and I spend a lot of time in the office together, and we do from time to time socialize. I probably have a better perspective than anyone. Not to mention, I know something of Suzanne. I just think you would enjoy a relationship you could rely on.”

Courtney let Deborah’s words soak in. “I’ll think about it.”

“I can’t ask for anything more than that.” She looked at her watch. “I need to get going. I have a contract to deliver. I wish all our cases were as easy as the Nottingham deal.”

“That would be ideal. Give those ladies my best. It was a pleasure doing business with them.”

Courtney was left alone in her office. She turned once again to the window. The rain had slowed and was now only dotting the glass. She wondered if she should call Demi and remind her to take an umbrella. She laughed at herself for thinking like an overprotective adult. Jade would be fine. She had her rain boots, which she adored, and the rain jacket to match. She would be just fine getting home in the wet weather.

She turned back to her computer to continue working but stopped and flipped open the date book on her desk. The sticky note with Lauren’s number was in front of her. She reached for the phone on her desk, then stopped and pulled the BlackBerry from her pocket.

She hesitated, then found the number in her contact list and placed the call.

“Hello?”

“Lauren? It’s Courtney Wilhelm, how are you?”

“Hi, Courtney. I’m doing great. I’m glad you called.”

“You are? Did Jade do something? Is everything okay?”

Lauren laughed. “No, nothing like that. It’s nice to hear from you. I was afraid maybe you had second thoughts about getting together.” Lauren’s hands began to shake.

“Second thoughts? No, no. I’ve been rather busy with a complicated case and wanted to wait to call you when I knew I’d have time.”

“Good, so you have some free time?”

“With my schedule, free time doesn’t exist, but I can make the time to meet you. Would you be available tomorrow evening?”

“I have a teachers meeting after school. We’re usually out by six. Would that work?”

“Yes, I can do that. Would you like to meet for coffee or something a bit more adult?”

“Something a lot more adult would be perfect. Unless you’ve been to one of our teachers meetings, the only way to recover is with adult beverages,” Lauren joked.

Courtney laughed. “I get what you’re saying. There’s a small restaurant by the name of Bellamy’s that’s nice. The bar is to the back of the building, so it’s private. It’s on the casual side and quiet, and it’s not far from the school.”

“Sounds good. I’m a casual girl. I could be there by six thirty.”

“Very good. I’ll text you the address of the restaurant and meet you at the bar.”

“Great.”

A pregnant pause slipped into the conversation.

Courtney broke the silence. “Since we have our calendars coordinated now, I won’t keep you.”

“It was great to hear from you. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening.”

“Yeah, me too. Have a good evening.”

“Thanks, you too.”

Courtney hung up and twirled around in her chair like a teenager. A flood of excitement filled her head. She wanted to giggle.

She stopped and took a deep breath. Letting it out slowly, she regained her composure and sat smiling. A date, she had a real date with a nice, pretty girl. It was turning out to be a nice day despite the rain outside.

She turned back around and faced the computer. For now, she had to focus on what she was doing and get back to work.

**CHAPTER20**

Courtney managed to keep her cool all day. She didn’t say anything to Deborah about her phone call or meeting with Lauren that evening. She was all business, even though her insides were jumping. She was looking forward to seeing Lauren. The thought of her smile and soft brown hair gave her a pleasant quiver in her chest, and throughout the day, she hummed the melodies of pop songs that rolled in her head.

“Ms. Wilhelm?”

Courtney looked up from the computer screen. “Yes, Mora?”

Mora approached the desk. “Is there anything else I can do for you before I leave?”

Courtney looked at the clock on her desk. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes, I have to take my son to the orthodontist this afternoon.”

“Oh, right. I forgot. I don’t need anything else today, thank you.”

“I’ll see you in the morning then.” She stopped short of the door. “Ms. Wilhelm? Is everything all right?” She looked concerned.

“Yes, everything is fine. Why?”

“You didn’t leave your office at all today. That’s not like you, especially at lunchtime.”

Courtney gave her a curt smile. “I’m just extremely busy right now, Mora. Nothing to worry about.”

“All right then. I’ll be on my way. Good night.” Mora continued to look suspicious as she left the room.

“Good night.” Courtney turned back to her computer.

She worked up to six o’clock knowing she would still have plenty of time to get to the restaurant. She slipped into the private bathroom in her office and touched up her makeup. Since she wasn’t seeing clients that day, she dressed casual in Dolce & Gabbana white form-fitting trousers and button-up royal blue shirt with white stripes.

On the way out, she checked her lipstick one last time in the mirror. She gave the corner of her mouth a tiny wipe with the tip of her finger and darted out the door for the elevator.

Butterflies circled in her belly all the way to Bellamy’s. By the time she stepped out of the taxi in front of the restaurant, she could feel the caress of sweat running down her back.

She walked in and nodded a hello to the hostess on her way to the bar. In the dining area were twelve tables of which only half were occupied. The ambience was set by the glow of the candles on the tables and the dimmed recessed lights.

Courtney always liked Bellamy’s. It was Virginia and Evie who first brought her there for a casual dinner. Its rustic chic character was offset by the contemporary art adorning the walls. The ceiling was a unique mosaic of wooden wine case lids secured overhead by screws. The overall vibe of the establishment was romantic for her, yet she never brought a date there for dinner. It was a favorite of her and her father. She had been in with friends on several occasions, but not with anyone she was involved with.

She walked into the bar area with casual indifference and looked around for Lauren. The bar had an even lower percentage of customers than the dining area.

She had to work to keep her exterior cool and collected while her heart beat loudly in her ears. The muscles in her jaw tightened, even though she tried to relax.

With no sign of Lauren yet, Courtney took a seat at a small table for two in front of a large stained-glass window. The bartender approached for a drink order, but she politely stated she was waiting for a friend.

She pulled the BlackBerry from her handbag and checked for any missed messages. None. She was about to drop the phone back in her bag when she looked up and saw Lauren coming toward her. Their gazes met and her smile made her face light up in the sparely lit room.

“Hi. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

“No, I just got here myself.” Courtney held up her phone. “I was just checking for messages before I turn this thing on vibrate.”

Lauren shook her head. “It’s hard to believe we were ever able to function as a society before cell phones.” She laughed. “My mother of all people is a texting maniac.”

“I’m sure there was life before these little gadgets, but I’m not sure I remember,” Courtney joked.

Lauren sat and slipped her thin sweater off. She was wearing a sea green sleeveless silk shirt with ruffles along the v-neck. Her skin looked as smooth as the silk of the shirt.

Courtney’s eyes were drawn to the small amount of cleavage bordered by the ruffles.

The bartender distracted Courtney’s stare when he returned for a drink order.

“What would you like?” Courtney asked.

“I think I’ll have a pomegranate martini. What about you?”

“I’d like a Tanqueray and tonic please.”

The bartender retreated to get the drinks.

The two women sat looking at each other for what seemed like several minutes. Finally, Courtney asked, “How was school today?”

Lauren rolled her eyes. “Every day’s an adventure when you have fourteen first-graders to compete with.”

“Compete?”

“Yes, they’re very busy little people. To have the undivided attention of all of them at the same time is a daunting task. There’s always one or two that feel the need to be the voice of the class on any given day. And of course, they have their temperamental days, too. On occasion, we get two who are having a bad day together and can’t stop fighting with each other.”

“Gee, sounds like most of the days I spend in court,” she said with a grin.

Lauren laughed. “I’m sure, but with better grammar.”

“Hmm, don’t bet on it.”

They both laughed.

The bartender returned and set the drinks on the table. “Ladies, the chef sent this appetizer platter to you with his compliments.” He held up a marble plate with a nice selection of cheeses, meats, olives, dried fruit, and flatbread all beautifully displayed.

“Please give Christo our thanks,” Courtney said.

“You know the chef?”

“He once worked for the partner of a dear friend of mine. She helped him get the executive chef position here.”

“That’s a nice perk. Always good to have friends in the food business.”

“I think so. Christo is a genius with traditional American cuisine. It’s my father’s favorite.”

“A real steak and potatoes kinda guy?”

“Exactly. Follow that up with cherry pie and you’ve won him over.”

Lauren made a mental note of Mr. Wilhelm’s palate. Never know when she might need to score points with family, she thought.

“Your father must have a palate that runs the gamut. Traditional American to expensive Russian caviar,” Lauren said before taking a drink of her martini.

“He does, but honestly, I think the caviar and foiegras are more for show than anything. He never buys those types of things unless he’s having guests.” Courtney popped an olive into her mouth.

“What would your tastes be?” Lauren asked.

“I’m more of a lover of Asian cuisine. I love sushi, and authentic Chinese is a real delight. Honestly, I’m a lover of great food of any origin.”

“A foodie, huh?”

Courtney laughed. “I suppose so. How about you?”

“That’s easy. My favorite is anything my mother makes. I’m a sucker for her lasagna. Growing up, I always requested it for my birthday meal.”

“A birthday meal?”

“Yeah, didn’t you have those as a kid?”

“No, well, my father took me out for dinner, I suppose that counts.”

“What about your mom?” Lauren wished she could retract the question, judging by the expression on Courtney’s face.

“I’m sorry. Did I say something to upset you?”

Courtney swallowed the mouthful of Tanqueray and tonic and shook her head. “No, it’s fine.” She gave a slight smile. “My parents divorced when I was quite young. My mother moved to Europe, and I stayed here with my father. He was a busy doctor, and I had a nanny to take over the role of mother.”

Lauren was sorry she asked. There was an air of sadness in Courtney’s voice when she talked about her childhood. “Jade’s mother was your sister. Any other siblings?”

“No, Marissa was the only one. She was seven years younger and a very different child altogether.” Courtney took another mouthful of the gin and tonic. She found it difficult to talk about family with an outsider, even one she was interested in. She and Suzanne didn’t share stories about their childhoods. In fact, they shared very little information about their families.

“I think Jade is a very special child. Is she like her mother?”

“In many ways, yes. When Marissa was her age, she was very bright and inquisitive. Jade is always watching me, the way I do things, how I speak.” Courtney clenched her hands together. “She’s like a little sponge that soaks up everything around her.” She relaxed her hands. “Marissa was a lot like that.”

Lauren heard the passion in her voice when she spoke of Jade. “You did a good thing by pushing to get her into Mount Pleasant. I believe she’s in the right place.”

“I think you get most, if not all, the credit for that. I’m not sure what I would have done if Mrs. Sales’s word was final.”

“You would have done what was in the best interest of Jade.”

“Yes, that I would have.” She leaned back in her chair. “Enough about my family, tell me about yours.” Her gaze locked with Lauren’s.

Sensing she should leave the subject of Courtney’s family alone for now, Lauren happily picked up the subject of her own. “Well, I was born and raised here in the big city, Brooklyn to be exact. My dad is a New York City police officer, and my mom is a supervisor for a catering company.” She stopped and took a sip of the martini.

“Any siblings?”

“Of course,” she said with pride. “I’m the youngest of three. My older sister, Janine, is divorced with two girls. She works for the government, an economist, lives for statistics. My brother is an ophthalmologist in New Jersey. He and his wife have one boy. And then there’s me. Single, no children, and gay.”

“How’s your family with that?”

“My parents tried not to show how uptight they were about it at first. You know, the proverbial eight hundred-pound gorilla in the room routine. It’s still hard for them to talk about it, but it’s better all these years later. In the end, though, they love me, and that makes all the difference. My sister-in-law was the one that had the big problem with it. She’s very Catholic.” Lauren placed a piece of smoked salmon on a flatbread wedge and bit into it.

“It’s a shame that people can’t put aside religious mandates and see the real person. I think they miss out on someone that could make a difference in their lives.”

“I completely agree. She was always nice, but she didn’t go out of her way to spend any quality time with me. It all came to a head when they were planning the wedding.” Lauren dropped her gaze, reflecting back. “She didn’t want me in the wedding party. Actually, she didn’t want me to have any part in the ceremony.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Don’t I know it? It upset my mother so badly that she practically insisted to my brother that if Mary couldn’t include me, then maybe they should elope. It was a real mess. Seth managed to fix it. He arranged for Mary to spend the entire day with me alone.”

“How miserable was that?”

“I wouldn’t say miserable. I think uncomfortable is a better word. At first, she was rather distant but always polite. As the day went on, she loosened up, and by dinner, we were like old friends.”

“Ah, I like a happy ending. How is your relationship now?”

“Great. She asked me to be Jonathan’s godmother, and I jumped at the offer. Got to snub my nose at her four sisters, too,” she said with pleasure.

Courtney laughed. “Almost sounds likes a Cinderella story.”

“I like to think of it as making a point to those with closed minds. Jonathan is three now, and I think they realize Aunt Lauren isn’t poisoning his little mind. Believe me, that kid is all boy. A real breast man, if you know what I mean.”

“I can appreciate that,” Courtney said with a sheepish grin and took a slow drink.

Lauren laughed. “I hadn’t thought about it, but they probably think he learned that from me.”

They both laughed.

Courtney decided she hadn’t had such a good time on a date like this in quite a while. She was comfortable and enjoying their conversation. She didn’t get the feeling Lauren wanted anything from her like other women did. Her independence was prominent. She had her own life and ways she did things. She didn’t need to be on Courtney’s arm to provide any kind of a definition as to who she was.

Just like Amanda, Courtney thought. A spike of fear ran through her. This was not Amanda, and she didn’t know why the comparison kept popping in her head. She wasn’t looking for another Amanda. She was a mature woman with an important position now. She had new responsibilities at home. There was no time for the sappy, silliness of that sophomoric feeling she had as an undergrad, back in a time when she was crazy in love with another young, pretty girl who had big ideas and stars in her eyes.

Life had a way of jading a person as an adult. Dating educated, cultured women was never simple. They all came with personal agendas. Usually related to money and social status. Suzanne was a prime example.

“Do you like plays?”

Courtney snapped out of her trance. “I’m sorry, what did you ask?”

“I asked you if you liked plays.” Lauren’s eyes sparkled.

“Yes, I do enjoy the theater.”

Lauren gave her glass a nervous turn on the napkin. “I have a friend who’s directing an Off-Broadway show. It’s a satirical comedy peppered with politics. She’s offered me two tickets for opening night on Friday. Would you like to join me? Maybe we could have dinner before.”

Courtney gave her a soft smile. “I think that sounds lovely. Yes, I would love to go with you. Thank you for the invitation.”

Lauren beamed. “Great. There’s a fabulous little, and I mean little, sushi place just down the street from the theater if you’d like to try it.”

“I’m always up for fabulous sushi.”

They finished their drinks and decided to continue their evening with dinner. Courtney requested a table in the dining room.

After a bottle of wine and two steak dinners specially crafted for them by Christo, they capped their evening off with crème brûlée.

“My family would love this place,” Lauren said between spoonfuls of dessert.

“You should bring them here sometime. I can tell you, though, Saturday and Sunday nights are not a good time. The place is filled to the rafters.”

“I’ll remember that.” Lauren spooned the last of her custard into her mouth.

When dinner was over, there was a small disagreement over the bill, but Courtney won out with the argument that Friday night would be on Lauren.

“Thank you for dinner and the drinks. Thank you, too, for the company,” Lauren said on their way out the door.

“You’re welcome. It really was a nice evening, wasn’t it?”

Lauren nodded with a smile.

“Lauren, may I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

They stopped on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. “Are we breaking any rules by doing this?”

Lauren studied Courtney’s face. “You mean, does the school have any rules against faculty and staff socializing with parents?”

“Yes.” Courtney cleared her throat. The words felt like they were sticking in the back of her throat. “Yes, that’s what I was getting at.”

“We’re good.” She held up a finger with a playful grin. “As for Miss Jade, don’t think for one minute this will get her special treatment. I have two teaching assistants to help keep the playing field level.”

Courtney held up her hands. “No, no, I never thought anything like that would happen. Jade has to make the grades on her own. Seriously, I wouldn’t want to jeopardize your position.”

They started walking.

“I know you wouldn’t. The board expects us to conduct ourselves in a professional manner, but they don’t put any constraints on us outside of school. Actually, we have a music teacher who married the mother of a student. They kept it on the quiet until the student graduated and moved on to high school, then they got married.”

“It’s a relief to know there are no policies being violated.”

“You’re a stickler for the rules, aren’t you, Counselor?”

“Rules and regulations I understand. Getting one out of hot water when they violate them is what I’m best at.”

“I just bet you are.”

Courtney stopped and looked around for a taxi. “Can I offer you a ride home?” she asked with a crooked smile.

“Thanks, but I think I need to walk some of this dinner off. My apartment’s not far from here, and it’s in the opposite direction anyway.”

“Are you sure? It’s getting late, and I don’t mind going in two directions.”

“I’m okay, really. It’s too nice an evening not to get a little walk in.”

Courtney released a deep breath. “Okay then.”

The two women stood face to face on the sidewalk in silence.

Lauren’s dark gaze grabbed hold of Courtney, and she was helpless to stop herself from sliding her arm around her waist and drawing her close.

Lauren stiffened at Courtney’s hand on her lower back but quickly relaxed in her arms. It was warm and exciting being pressed against her. The world calmed and went silent around them.

Courtney lowered her mouth in slow motion to Lauren’s. She paused just as their lips brushed together. She was in control, but she had no control. She knew what she was doing but couldn’t stop it. She didn’t want to stop it. It felt good to let the unbridled sensation take her where it wanted to go. She was happy to follow. To bask in the unguarded pleasure of a kiss with a woman who excited her to the core was out of her comfort zone. Somehow it felt safe. The only motive she identified was a sense of desire that seemed to ooze from Lauren.

She kissed her slow and soft. With her free hand, she caressed Lauren’s cheek.

Lauren wrapped her arms around Courtney’s waist and quivered in her arms as they kissed. A tender moan from Lauren ignited the want in Courtney. She covered Lauren’s mouth with hers and kissed her deep.

Lauren’s mind went blank. She lost all sense of what was around her other than Courtney’s arms and their mouths pressed together, tongues entwined in a dance of lust.

The blare of a truck horn and a male voice returning an expletive brought her back to reality. She eased out of the intensity of the kiss and took a half step back. “Wow” slipped out.

She scanned Courtney’s face for a reaction, then searched deep into her green eyes, looking for the sincerity in her soul. There was more in their kiss than her brain could process at that moment. She needed some sign that Courtney’s intentions were genuine. It was there. Lauren decided from their first meeting this was a woman who kept her cards close, even the ones of a personal nature. Her eyes gave away the vulnerability that had been exposed.

She took Courtney by the hands. “You sure know how to get a girl’s attention.”

“Sometimes I surprise even myself.”

“Call me. I’ll fill you in on the details for this weekend.” Lauren started to back away, letting go of her hands slowly.

“Sounds great. I look forward to dinner and a show.”

Lauren waved. “Me too. I think you’ll like the play.” Lauren waved and headed down the sidewalk for home.

Courtney rubbed her hands together with a smile. She gathered her thoughts while she watched Lauren walk away. After she turned the corner at the end of the block, Courtney moved to the curb to hail a taxi.

**CHAPTER 21**

The penthouse was quiet when Courtney walked in. Demi was sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter. She had a drawing pad in front of her. Her hands were covered with colored chalk dust, and she was busy rubbing and scratching at the paper she was working on.

“How was the evening?” Courtney set her bag at the end of the counter.

Demi looked up with her hands resting on the pad. “Everything was fine. We stopped at the store on the way home from school and got stuff for pizza.”

“I’m afraid that girl’s going to turn in to a ball of mozzarella and tomato sauce.” Courtney shook her head.

“She loves her pizza, that’s for sure.”

“Did she have homework?”

“Some, yes. We got it done. She seemed a little out of sorts when I put her in the bath.”

Courtney looked concerned. “How so?”

“I don’t know. She just wasn’t herself. You know, always chattering about something. She was kinda quiet and didn’t put up much of an argument about hair washing.”

“Maybe she was just tired. She’s had a lot of adjustment to make recently.”

“Yeah, maybe so.” Demi rubbed at the chalk on her palm. “I’ll clean up my mess and be on my way.” She picked up the pad and flipped the cover over.

“Thank you for staying a little later tonight.”

“No problem. The extra money is nice. I have this idea for my next piece.” She tapped the drawing pad. “I think this one needs an extra large canvas, which means more paint.”

“If you’re available, I have more time this weekend. Nothing is set in stone, but I’m planning on a dinner engagement.”

“Count me in. I’ll make myself available.” She stuffed the drawing pad in her messenger bag.

“Good. I’ll give you a call.” Courtney walked toward the hall. “Did she give you any grief about bedtime?”

“No, none.” Demi turned on the water at the sink to wash her hands. “She let me brush her hair, then she got right into bed. She was asleep before I got the bathroom cleaned up.”

“Hmm, that’s odd. She usually demands a book. I’ll just go check on her.”

“I’ll let myself out. Have a good night.”

“Thanks.”

Courtney peered into the dimly lit room. Jade was asleep in the middle of the bed with Happy Bunny wrapped tight in her arms. She quietly made her way toward the bed and picked up the empty glass on the nightstand.

Jade stirred. “Courtney?”

“Yes, Jade, I’m here. Go back to sleep.”

Jade rubbed her eyes with a hand. “I don’t think I feel so good.”

Courtney immediately put a hand on her forehead. She felt a bit warm but not enough to be alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

“My tummy hurts again.” Jade sat up and hugged Happy.

Courtney sat next to her and put an arm around her. “Do you think you need to throw up like last time?”

Jade leaned against her. “No, it’s different. It feels like somebody is poking me in the tummy with a stick. It doesn’t hurt too bad.”

“Do you want me to get you something to try to make it feel better?”

“I think I’ll be okay. It feels like it’s going away. Will you stay here till I go back to sleep?”

“Certainly.” Courtney helped her maneuver back under the covers. She kissed her forehead and sat on the bed, gently stroking Jade’s hair until she was sure she was asleep.

She worried that stress might be the cause of Jade’s discomfort. She was too young to be living with all the change. It had to get to her somehow. Since she moved in with Courtney, she had been such an agreeable child and appeared to be getting more comfortable with her new home. Nonetheless, Courtney made a mental note to call the pediatrician in the morning if only for her own peace of mind. She assumed, too, that tummy aches were common with children of Jade’s age, but she wanted to be sure it wasn’t something more serious.

She locked up the penthouse and turned out the lights. She made one stop in her office on the way to bed. She opened the top desk drawer, looking for a flash drive; instead she found the sheet of paper Jade had written Elsie Bridges’s name and number on. She had been putting off another trip to the Bronx. She wanted to know more about Jade and Marissa but wasn’t sure she was ready to hear the raw truth. Maybe she would never be ready. She pulled the paper out of the drawer and stuffed it in her briefcase on the chair. Perhaps there was no time like now.

She turned out the lights and went on to her room. She was coming down off the high she got from her evening with Lauren and realized she was tired. It had been a long day.

She crawled into bed and pulled the covers up. She sank into the luxurious softness of the memory foam mattress topper. She closed her eyes and relaxed. Lauren’s face popped in her mind followed by a replay of their kiss at the end of the evening. The electricity that ran through her when they kissed surged again. Courtney decided whatever this was between them, it could be dangerous. She was feeling way too much for this woman. She had enough on her plate without adding the stress of a relationship. Especially the type of relationship she imagined Lauren would want.

She closed her eyes, still smiling at thoughts of Lauren, and eventually drifted off.

**CHAPTER22**

The taxi pulled up in front of the tenement building around noon. Courtney got out and looked around. The neighborhood made her feel uneasy to say the least. She thought she would never have a reason to return to Marissa’s building again, but the name and phone number Jade wrote down stirred her curiosity. She had hopes that Elsie Bridges could help fill in the gaps of Jade’s life with her mother. She wanted to know what Marissa’s final days were like.

Catcalls and whistles came from the corner. Courtney turned in the direction of the noise. There were four men, who all looked to be in their early twenties, making obscene gestures and suggestive comments directed at her.

Fear crawled up the back of her neck. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her coat and walked toward the building. The voices sounded like they were getting closer as she walked. By the time she reached the steps to the front door, the men were right behind her. She was blocked between the stairs and her antagonists.

With nowhere to go, she froze. She could turn and try to make her way past them, hoping they would give up their efforts to taunt her. It didn’t seem like a plausible idea. Neither did the idea that they might listen to reason and back off if she tried talking to them. She decided the only choice was to ring the bell to the building in hopes that someone would let her in.

She clutched her purse to her side and started up the stairs, ignoring the verbal harassment. When they got no response from her, one of the men followed her up the stairs.

“Hey, bitch, we talkin’ to you.” He slapped his hand on her shoulder and spun her halfway around.

Her gaze shot daggers at him when he looked her in the face. It was only pure adrenaline that held her together.

“Here now, take your hand off the lady. You boys go on and git. You got no business with her,” the booming voice behind her ordered.

Three of them backed away like snarling wild dogs.

Courtney’s head whipped around to see Willie standing in the door. The scowl on his face was enough to overpower the aggressors’ advances.

“You need to learn to mind your own business, you old fuck,” spat the bold one who grabbed Courtney.

“You need to learn some manners, boy. Go on now like I told you.”

One of the other boys slapped the bold one on the arm. “Dude, let’s go. You don’t wanna be messin’ with him. We was only playin’ around anyway.”

The bold one stepped down. “I ain’t afraid of him no way,” he said, looking Willie up and down with an evil eye.

They walked casually down the street and didn’t look back.

Courtney went the rest of the way up the stairs to Willie.

“You all right, young lady?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Thank you, Willie. I wasn’t sure what they were going to do. When he grabbed me, my heart leapt to my throat.”

“You never know about these kids around here. Some are in gangs, using drugs, and some are just angry, frustrated young men with nowhere to go.”

“Weren’t you afraid they might try to hurt you?”

“Nah, I know all those boys. What’s more important, they all know my boy around here. Nobody bothers me.”

“Is he…one of them?” she asked cautiously.

Willie gave a hardy laugh. “No, not my boy. He’s a decorated Marine, retired now.”

He struck a match on the concrete wall of the staircase, sat down, and lit his pipe. “They all have respect for Slammin’ Jimmy Hamilton.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“My boy is a champion MMA fighter, you know, mixed martial arts. Nobody’s gonna come at me that knows Jimmy.”

“That’s good. The streets are rough, aren’t they?”

Willie nodded. He took a few puffs from his pipe. “It’s Courtney, right?”

She was impressed he remembered her name. “Yes, sir.”

“What brings you back up here?”

She pulled out the paper with Ms. Bridges’s name on it, the one Jade wrote. “I’m looking for a woman by the name of Elsie Bridges. I tried many times to reach her at this number.” She showed him the paper. “But I got no answer. I thought maybe if I came back here, I’d find her in person. Do you know her?”

“Ms. Elsie, I sure do know her. Lived here in this building longer than I have.” He puffed a few more times. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Ms. Elsie passed away a few weeks ago. Daughter found her in bed.”

Courtney’s head dropped. “I’m very sorry.” She paused. “Looks like my trip up here was all for naught.”

“What were you needing Ms. Elsie for, if I might ask?”

Courtney stuffed the paper back in her bag. “I was hoping she might be able to tell me something about my sister and Jade. You see, Jade told me she was very nice to them, so I thought she might be able to tell me about their life before Marissa died.”

“I’d imagine if anybody in this building knew, it was Ms. Elsie. She was kind of a mother to a lot of folks.”

“It’s nice to know someone cared.” Regret swelled inside her.

“I recall before Marissa died, Ms. Elsie saw to it that Jade got fed. She’s a mighty brave one that niece of yours.”

Courtney smiled. “Yes, she’s an extraordinary little girl. Did you see much of my sister?”

“Nah, not really. Kept to herself mostly, don’t think she trusted many people. Very protective of her child. When she was feeling good, they would go out to the store or sometimes down the street to the playground. Jade was the talker. Her mama was polite but a woman of few words.”

“How did she look?”

“I didn’t know her age, but I’d say she looked a lot older than her years. Sickness’ll do that to a person.”

“It’s okay, you can say cancer. I’m aware of my sister’s past and how she died.”

“I don’t ever say the word. It’s an evil word. I’ve known too many people in my years that have fallen to its curse.”

“You’re right, it is evil,” Courtney agreed.

“Wish I could tell you more about your family.”

“You’ve been a big help today. Thank you. Is there anyone else living here that might know something about them?”

Willie thought for a moment while he puffed on his pipe. “Hmm, I don’t believe I know of anybody else who called on them.” He shook his head and relit his pipe.

“I should be going. Thank you again for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” He tapped the bowl of the pipe on the bottom of his shoe. “If you want a taxi, you’re gonna have to call for one. They don’t pass by here like they do in your part of the city.”

Courtney dialed the number for a taxi and waited on the stairs in silence with Willie.

Five minutes later, the taxi pulled up to the curb. Courtney opened the door and turned to wave to Willie.

He waved back as he puffed on his pipe.

Emptiness accompanied Courtney back to Manhattan. She was hoping to speak to the person she thought had some adult insight into her sister’s final days. Unfortunately, she too was now gone, along with any knowledge of how Jade and Marissa lived before Marissa’s passing.

There was only one other person on the planet who had a view of the world they lived in—her mother. She was done with Kaye. Trying to find pieces of their life to make a whole picture with was not worth seeking out her mother.

**CHAPTER23**

“I’m glad you had time for dinner this evening,” Lauren said, followed by a gulp of iced tea the waiter had just set in front of her.

“I’m glad you called. I needed to get out after the week I had. Frank has the girls this weekend, so I’m a free woman until Monday after school.” Janine emptied a pack of Sweet’N Low into her tea. “Besides, how could I resist dinner with my sister and the topic of discussion, your new girlfriend?” she said with a fiendish smile.

“Cool your jets, sis. We had one date. That hardly makes her my girlfriend.”

“Well, I predict it’s only a matter of time. She wants to see you this weekend. I’d say the lady is interested.”

Lauren’s smile filled her face. “I hope so.” She leaned forward so only her sister could hear. “I really like this one. When I got home last night, I couldn’t stop thinking about her.”

Janine clanged the ice cubes in her glass with the twirl of a spoon. “Wow, you are really over the moon with this one. It’s nice to see.”

“I won’t call it over the moon, not yet anyway. I’m taking things slow. I don’t want to scare her off. She’s very different from the women I’ve dated in the past.”

“What makes her so different?”

“Well, aside from being very well educated, she’s a disciplined professional and comes from Manhattan society. Her father is a hotshot Park Avenue surgeon.”

“You’re well educated, too, keep that in mind. I’d even go so far as to say overeducated, but that’s your thing.” She waved a hand.

“Yeah, I’m no stranger to academia. It’s the society thing that spooks me. I Googled her the other day. It didn’t say much about her personal life, but there was plenty about who she is and where she comes from.” Lauren dropped back in her chair. “We come from blue-collar stock. I’m just not sure what she’s going to expect from me.”

Janine sipped from the straw in her drink. “Will you relax? I’m sure she gets dressed in the morning the same way you do. Besides, if she wanted a high society woman with a house in the Hamptons, she wouldn’t have asked you out. If she’s a person of quality, she’ll look past the labels on your clothes for the real person. Frankly, I think she already has.”

“You know, we didn’t talk about anything like that. She didn’t want to talk much about her family, but she knows current events and she was interested in Ruth’s play.”

“See, there’s more to her than Park Avenue.”

“I hope you’re right. I really want to get to know her better. And her niece is an absolute cutie despite the tragedy of losing her mother so young.”

“You ready to date someone with children? I mean, Macy acted like one,” she let out a snicker, “but this is different. That child is always going to come first.”

“Macy wasn’t a child. I mean, she had a way of getting on the nerves of some people, but mostly, she was just a free spirit. That’s what she called it anyway.”

“A free spirit, my ass,” Janine huffed. “Irresponsible was her middle name. I’m so glad you finally got rid of her.”

“That was the easy part. A masseuse job at some spa in Cancun, Mexico, was all it took.” Lauren shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “Can we not talk about her? She’s permanently in the past.”

“Okay, okay, sorry I brought her up.”

The waiter refilled their tea.

“I’ve given Jade some thought, and I know she’ll be first in Courtney’s mind, she has to be. Let’s not forget she has a high-powered job, too, that requires attention. If she puts me first every now and then when we’re together, I’ll consider that generous.”

“That’s very mature of you. My therapist would say you have a healthy grasp on what you consider acceptable in a relationship.”

“Better to recognize what you’re up against before you decide to fight the battle.”

“Ah, yes, choose your battles wisely,” Janine agreed.

“Yep, better to know ahead of time what it is you’re willing to fight for.” Lauren paused. “Gotta remember this is a first for her, too. It can’t be easy having a kid set right smack in the middle of your life with no help and no experience.”

“That’s hard.” Janine reached for a breadstick from the basket on the table. “It’s bad enough being a single parent after divorce. At least Frank is an active father. I know I have him to fall back on with the girls.”

“True, he’s a good father, despite being a lame excuse for a husband.”

“I try not to let it get to me. Anyway, he’s free to date any of his coworkers he wants now.” She shook her head. “Sounds like Courtney’s on her own to figure the parent thing out with Jade.”

“I think so. She hasn’t talked much about her family so far, seems to be a touchy subject. I get the impression that no one is offering a helping hand.”

“So this one’s in a nesting phase. She might be ready to settle down if the right girl were to come around. I know Mom and Dad would love to see you have a family of your own.”

“With a husband. I doubt they consider the idea of me with a family and a wife.”

“You’re wrong about that. Mom was watching you with Jonathan at Seth’s birthday dinner. She said she and Dad hoped that you would find a solid girl to settle down with and maybe even have children before you got too old to have them.” She laughed. “She leaned over and whispered to me like it was some big secret, ‘Ya know, they can do that kind of thing nowadays without a husband.’ I almost laughed out loud.”

“Very progressive our parents are.” Lauren laughed.

“Just follow your heart, Lu. Listen to your head a little, too. You never know what might come.”

“We’ll see, right?”

**CHAPTER24**

An older, gray-haired gentleman held the door as Courtney and Lauren exited the theater.

“Thank you,” Courtney said, passing by the man.

He nodded with a smile much to the chagrin of his impatient wife waiting at the curb for a taxi.

“I loved the play. Your friend is very talented,” Courtney said as they started down the sidewalk.

“Thank you, I’m glad you liked it. I’ve known Ruth since high school. She’s always been the creative type, thinks outside the box.”

“Did you date her?”

Lauren laughed. “Nah, we were too much alike in school, had the same taste in girls. She was the first person I ever told that I liked girls. Turns out, she did, too.” Lauren linked her arm with Courtney’s.

Courtney reacted with a smile and pulled their arms closer to her body.

“We used to sit on the wall that overlooked the sports field and watch the cute girl jocks. We had to be careful when the cheerleaders were out practicing, though. If they caught us staring at them, they would yell things like ‘get lost, loser lezzies.’”

“The teen years are the worst. Kids can be so mean and very self-conscious.”

“That’s for sure. I ran into one of the former cheerleaders a few years ago. She and her fat, balding husband were trying to get their youngest into the school.”

“Did she remember you?”

“Oh, yeah. She came by one day to deliver some papers and stopped by my office. I thought it was odd since she could’ve just as easily have dropped the papers in the mail. Anyway, we chatted for a few minutes, then out of nowhere, she tells me that back in high school, she secretly thought I was cute. Did a little flirting, then she asked me out for a drink and followed up with, ‘then maybe see where things take us.’” Lauren shook her head. “I was floored.”

“Did you go out with her?”

“No way. I was in a relationship at the time, and I had no interest in being some middle-aged housewife’s experiment. I guess being a stay-at-home mom, she was bored with life and thought a little fling on the dark side might add some spice.”

“Did she say as much?”

“No, she didn’t have to. I could see it in her body language when she was with her husband at the admissions meetings. They were so detached from each other.”

“Did their kid get in?”

“No, his test scores were some of the lowest I think I’ve ever seen. I wasn’t formally a part of admissions then, just a volunteer on the review committee.”

“She didn’t solicit your help to get him in?”

“No, not that I could have been any help back then. After I rejected her so-called invitation, she didn’t speak to me again.”

“No great loss then?”

“None at all.”

“Would you like to go for a quick cup of coffee?”

“No, thank you. No coffee for me at this hour, I’ll be up all night.”

Courtney stopped. “Then I insist you allow me to see you home tonight. The taxi is my treat.”

Lauren sighed. “Okay, but only if you come up for a piece of my mom’s peach cobbler.”

Courtney hesitated. The time and the possibilities of what could happen filled her head.

“You don’t like peach cobbler?”

“No, it isn’t that.” She took a deep breath and looked at her watch.

“Oh.” Lauren’s voice hinted at disappointment.

“But it’s only going on ten. Another hour wouldn’t be late.”

Lauren smiled. “My mom’s cobbler will be worth it.”

“I’m sure it will be.” Courtney hailed a taxi, and they piled in like school girls for the short ride.

“Nice building,” Courtney complimented as they got out on West Eighty-third Street.

“Thanks. I really got lucky,” Lauren explained on the way up the steps to the wood and glass door. She put her key in the lock and pushed the heavy door open. “I’m subletting a co-op on the fifth floor. It’s owned by a PhD archaeologist from the museum. She’s working somewhere in the Middle East as part of an exchange program.”

The building was fashionable and well kept. The architecture looked to be pre-war with the modern convenience of an elevator added decades later.

Lauren pressed the up button for the elevator. The doors opened.

Courtney followed her onto the elevator.

“The woman is crazy as a loon and loaded. She gave me the deal of the century on this place. The agreement was only for two years, but I got an e-mail from her last month asking if I would be interested in an extension. I said yes. Of course, it’ll probably be six months before she gets back to me with the amount of time.”

“Typical scientist. I don’t think they live in the real world. Hard to say how their minds work.”

“I’m glad I don’t have to write her checks every month for the rent. God knows when she would get around to cashing them. She was smart enough to set up a direct deposit account.”

The door opened on the fifth floor, and they stepped out. Each floor had four apartments, all with big corner windows.

Lauren unlocked the door to 5D. “Welcome to my home.”

“Very nice.” Courtney looked around the large living room.

“I’ll give you the grand tour,” she said, walking to the center of the room. She held her arms out. “This is the living room with its lovely view of the not-so-pretty building next door.” From there, she walked to the right. “In here, we have the master suite.”

The room was simple in its décor with white walls and Pottery Barn-style white furniture.

Lauren opened the bathroom door. “This is the massive bathroom complete with a shower/tub combo.”

“This is really nice. Is this all your furniture?”

Lauren headed for the door. “The furniture belongs to the good doctor. She either sold or gave away everything else. The decorations and personal items are mine.”

They crossed the living room and entered the kitchen. “This is, as you might guess, the kitchen. I said the doctor was crazy as a loon. She had this entire room redone before she left, including the stainless steel appliances. Would you believe she’s never used them?”

“Does sound crazy. My assistant and her partner would die for a kitchen like this.” Courtney pointed to a spiral staircase in the corner of the room with a door at the top landing. “Escape hatch?”

“This is probably the coolest thing about this place.” Lauren started to climb the stairs. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

At the top, she unlocked the door and stepped onto the roof. “All the co-ops on the top floor have a roof garden.” She plugged in the string of lights that illuminated the garden.

“Wow, this is a nice surprise.”

Lauren had many pots filled with colorful plants and flowers placed around the area. A table with a large canvas umbrella and four chairs occupied the center of the space. It was the perfect place to lounge or dine on a beautiful evening.

“Besides the great price on the rent, this was a huge selling point. I’m walled off from my neighbors on two sides and have a great open view from the other two sides.”

Courtney walked to the short sidewalk and looked down on the tree-lined street below. “The professor may be crazy as you say, but she has an excellent instinct for real estate.”

Lauren walked over to Courtney. “I agree. It’s very romantic up here, especially at night.”

Courtney felt Lauren slide closer to her. She turned and faced her, her heart beating in her ears as she ran her hands down the length of Lauren’s arms.

Lauren leaned into Courtney’s chest and tilted her chin up, looking her in the eyes.

Courtney wrapped her arms around Lauren’s small frame and kissed her, sweeping her tongue over Lauren’s. She tasted the wine Lauren had with dinner and the green tea ice cream for dessert. The urgency came without warning; their mouths grew hungrier for each other. Hands roamed freely up and down each other’s bodies. Electricity flowed between them with force.

Lauren pulled back and whispered, “Do you want to go downstairs?”

Courtney wasn’t able to think with a clear mind. The intensity vibrating between them demanded immediate attention. “I’m not sure that any of this is right, it’s happening so quickly.” She hesitated. “I want you so much right now.”

Lauren slipped out of her grasp and took her hand. “Let’s take this inside and see how it feels.” She led Courtney down the stairs to the bedroom in a rush.

Their lips locked together as they awkwardly stripped off clothes and tossed them aside. In a naked pile, they fell onto the bed, urgent in their need to touch, taste, and excite.

Lauren rolled Courtney over with strength Courtney would never have guessed she had for a woman of her small frame. *Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God* repeated in Courtney’s head when Lauren held her down, when her hips pressed into Courtney’s, when her mouth came down hungry for flesh.

Courtney twisted her fingers in Lauren’s hair and pulled her in. Desire swelled so fast and hard from every direction inside. She’d suddenly remembered what it was like to really want a woman, so raw, so sensual. The curves of their bodies molded together, her mind firing the message her body wanted more, more, more.

Lauren plundered Courtney’s mouth with her own, hard and wet. A deep, sexy moan escaped her and filled Lauren’s mouth.

Courtney dug her heels into the bed and grasped Lauren’s butt with her hands. She stiffened and lunged down Courtney’s neck, to her shoulders.

Lauren’s hands led the way down her body. First her fingers, then her mouth. She teased and delighted all the way until she found the place where she was hot and wet.

Courtney squeezed a pillow to her head when Lauren’s mouth sent streaks of fire to her head. She gasped for breath when she filled her with her fingers, struggled to feel everything that swirled inside her with every thrust. Finally, she could hold up the wall no longer. She let go, she didn’t care. Orgasm toppled over in a violent flood of pleasure that tore through her with the power of a tsunami.

Courtney opened her eyes for a second and saw Lauren above her through blurred vision. She closed them again and felt Lauren’s warm moist body lower onto hers. She wrapped her arms around her and held her tight, enjoying the waning moments of the orgasm as it dissipated.

“You’re amazing,” she whispered against Lauren’s ear.

Lauren rolled to the side, propped herself up on one elbow, and gently pushed damp hair from her new lover’s forehead. With a smile, she scanned Courtney’s face, memorizing every feature in detail. “I’d give that four stars,” she said playfully.

“Is that the highest rating?”

“Sure is.”

“Then I concur, definitely four stars.”

They lay next to each other, looking up at the ceiling, and giggled like young lovers.

Courtney rolled over and hugged Lauren. “I think I need a few minutes to recuperate. And then I’ll be ready for round two.” She relaxed in Lauren’s arms.

“Take all the time you need. I’m enjoying this.” She nuzzled Courtney’s neck.

Courtney closed her eyes and let her mind wander. She thought of the first time with Amanda. It was much like what had just happened, only more primal. They were young, inexperienced, but hungry for each other. The hunger was much the same with Lauren, but the primal had matured, refined by age and past lovers.

In the still of the room, they succumbed to the quiet and drifted off to sleep.

Courtney jumped and woke Lauren. “What time is?” she asked, brushing her hair back with her palm.

Lauren turned her head to the clock. “Eleven thirty,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“Damn!” Courtney jumped from bed, hands pointed to the floor searching for clothes in the dark. “I’ve got to get home. I told the nanny I wouldn’t be late.”

Lauren pushed herself up to a sitting position and rubbed her face. “I wouldn’t say you’re late. It’s not even midnight yet.”

Courtney stumbled, trying to get her underwear and jeans on. “By the time I get a taxi and make it downtown, it’ll be after midnight.” Standing half-naked at the foot of the bed, she stopped. “I’m sorry, Lauren. I didn’t expect for this to happen tonight.” She grabbed her white linen shirt off the floor.

Lauren’s gaze was glued to Courtney’s half-naked torso. The sheen of soft skin on her shoulders was lovely, so feminine and smooth.

Embarrassment seeped through Lauren. “Do you regret having sex on the second date?” she asked with uncertainty.

Courtney dropped the shirt and crawled onto the bed, stopping in front of her. “No, not for one minute do I have any regrets.” She brushed her lips across Lauren’s. “Better planning might have been in order is all. I don’t like having to run out on you like this.”

Instantly, the embarrassment was replaced with joy.

Courtney sat on the side of the bed and stroked Lauren’s leg. “Having Jade at home is still very new to me. Getting used to the added responsibility of a child puts a damper on spontaneity. I have to go home. I can’t just spend the night out on the spur of the moment anymore.”

Lauren circled Courtney’s bare shoulders with her arms. “We were unquestionably spontaneous, maybe even a little dangerous.” She ran her fingers through Courtney’s hair. “And I hope you don’t think I make a habit of seducing women I hardly know. Inviting you in was a giant step for me.”

She brushed the back of her fingers over Lauren’s cheek. “No, I don’t think that way of you. I think that tonight might have been out of character for both of us.” She got up to search for her clogs, pulled them from under the bed, and slipped them on. “Lauren, I’d really like to see you again. I like how this feels, you and me.”

Lauren hugged her legs close to her chest. “Me too. I think we may be on to something.”

“Definitely.” Courtney slipped her bra and shirt on. “Call me when you get a minute. I can usually take calls anytime during business hours except when I’m in court.”

“That’s fine.” Lauren crawled out of bed and slipped on a red silk Japanese print robe. “Maybe dinner one night next week?”

“Sounds great.” Courtney ran her fingers through her rumpled mane in an effort to make it look less like sex hair.

“So very lovely,” Lauren declared.

Courtney smiled sweetly. “Thank you.” She thought how nice it was not to always be the pursuer. To hear an unsolicited compliment from someone she was intimate with hadn’t happened in a very long time. It warmed her through. “I’ve got to go,” she said with a heavy sigh, picking up her bag from the floor.

She kissed Lauren long and deep at the door. She didn’t allow her hands to venture too far from Lauren’s waist else they would end up back in the bedroom, and there was no time for that.

“I forgot to thank you,” Courtney said, standing in the open door.

“Oh, I think you thanked me several times.” Lauren leaned against the frame.

“I mean for the dinner and play. I really enjoyed your friend’s work, very funny.”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”

“And you were right, the sushi place was terrific.” She pressed her lips to Lauren’s. “I’ll talk to you later. Oh, and I’ll take a rain check on that cobbler.” She winked.

“You got it. I’ll be in touch.” Lauren pushed the door closed; a huge smile remained on her face. She could still smell Courtney on her skin. She was sure she would smell her on the sheets, too. How hard it would be to sleep with the scent of the woman she had just seduced still embedded around her. She would look forward to their next meeting. The next time she could hear her voice, kiss her lips, touch her skin. This indeed felt right.

Courtney sat very still in the taxi as it went south toward TriBeCa. Leaving a woman after enjoying the pleasure of sex was never an issue for her. At least it hadn’t been in a very long time. “I don’t like running out on you like this” played over and over in her head. She really did say it, and she had no remorse. She could have stayed all night. In fact, she wanted to stay all night. To wake with the glow of the dawn coming through the window and Lauren sleeping peacefully in her arms was how she wished it could have been.

Lauren touched her in a place she thought she had sealed closed. After Amanda, she vowed to keep that place sacred and hidden. Lovers would come and go. When she needed the touch of a woman, she could find it. She could manage her life without another occupying that place within her that took so much of the rest of her.

Lauren unknowingly found that place and was threatening to take possession. Courtney wasn’t sure she wanted her to take it, nor was she sure that she wanted to keep it from her.

She was tired and didn’t have the mind to analyze everything in her head. She would regroup the next day and try to make some sense of all she was feeling.

**CHAPTER25**

Mr. Nosheki and his consultants returned to California, leaving Courtney to push full steam ahead on the acquisition of Crammell Silicon. Somehow she needed to get the two sides to the negotiation table. Mr. Rosewell was breathing down her neck to come up with a resolution. The Pelham Group was absolutely no help.

Courtney’s frustration with Dodson was off the charts. After countless attempts to get him on the phone, he finally responded with a registered letter stating his intent to take the case to court per his client.

Research uncovered that the founding Crammell did indeed hold class B Crammell Silicon stock. The old man had ruling authority in the company, but the trust was sealed until his death, and no one was sure whether Junior was the heir apparent. Courtney was preparing to go to war with Dodson. Nosheki indicated that he wanted the company and would pay the price to acquire it.

“I’m no technical genius like the cone heads at MIT, but I’d like someone to explain what’s so damned special about Crammell’s technology that Nosheki is willing to drop a fortune to get their hands on it,” Deborah said.

“Some kind of new computer system security software from what I understand.” Courtney’s gaze was glued to the computer screen. “Rumor has it the program may be impenetrable. You know, hackers, viruses, worms, anything that can steal or destroy.”

“Wow. Sounds like some top-secret government project.” She thought about it for a minute. “Do the feds know about this?”

Courtney looked up. “They’re the ones paying for a big chunk of the development.” She laid her glasses down. “Nosheki hired away one of Crammell’s designers. Everyone has their price, you know? That’s how they discovered what was going on at Crammell Silicon, so they started buying up stock.

The original design was started by an engineer at Crammell. The old man was still head of the company at the time and ran to the government, hoping to pull his company out of the hole with all the competition coming from Silicon Valley.”

“And the government funded it?”

“Yeah, that is until the engineer died. It was so secret he was the only one working on it. The feds threatened to stop the cash flow, so they had to find someone to keep it going. That’s when the project became a team effort. Anytime it becomes a group involvement thing, there’s bound to be one that’s willing to sell out.”

“And that would be Nosheki’s guy?”

“Exactly. He knew just enough information to tell them that the project was viable, and that once Crammell completed it, the company could possibly be worth more than Microsoft with a planned government and public version of the software.”

Deborah was stunned.

“So you can see why Junior’s trying so desperately to hang on to the company. If he’s the heir, he stands to be the next Bill Gates. Unfortunately, he’s not nearly as smart.”

“As proved by the law firm he’s hired.” Deborah snickered.

“You’re bad.” Courtney shook her head.

Deborah sat in a chair in front of the desk. “All right, I’ve kept my nose to myself for nearly two hours. Spill it! I want to hear about the date on Saturday.”

“We had a good time.” Courtney kept her gaze on the computer screen.

“And? I want details.”

“She’s a very charming woman.” She turned to face Deborah. “We had a lovely time, and I enjoyed the play.”

“That’s not much detail. Will you see her again?”

Courtney’s grin was hesitant. “Yes, I think we’ll be seeing each other again soon.”

“That’s fantastic. So you like her?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t agree to another date if I didn’t. I’m not one to string a woman along.”

“I can’t wait to tell Christie. Now maybe she’ll stop asking if we should try to fix you up.”

“You can tell her I appreciate the sentiment, but being fixed up wouldn’t work for me.”

“I told her over and over you’d never go for it. She really didn’t like Suzanne, always thought you could do better. I kept telling her Suzanne was your choice, not hers.”

“I can’t disagree with her on Suzanne.”

“Speaking of the devil, did I tell you I saw her at that reception at the mayor’s office?”

“No, you didn’t mention it.”

“You didn’t miss anything by not going.” Deborah leaned forward. “Suzanne was there on the arm of the deputy mayor.”

“What?” Courtney was shocked. “You’re talking about Anna Lopez?”

“Yeah, short, stocky, and over the top with her power trip.”

“Geez, didn’t take her long to move on. I thought Suzanne would do better. The woman looks like a horse, or in her case, a miniature pony.”

Deborah laughed. “You should have seen her. She was all smiles while the media flashed away at them.”

“I bet. Suzanne is attracted to powerful, influential women. I guess the deputy mayor’s authority is much more important than her, dare we call them, equine features?”

“You have a wicked sense of humor, Counselor.”

“Why thank you, Counselor.”

They laughed.

“I told my father I would RSVP to this thing at MoMA on Wednesday. What do you think about me asking Lauren to go?”

“I think that’s a great idea. Gives you a chance to introduce her to your father in a public place. He can’t get too upset in a museum.”

“Good point. I think Virginia and Evie will be there. Is that too much? Do you think she’d be overwhelmed?”

“I think she’ll be fine. Virginia and Evie are easy. They’ll love her. Your father, well, he’s a hard man to please where you’re concerned. Just don’t tell Lauren that, you don’t want her to be on pins and needles.”

“Good advice.” Courtney tapped a pen on the desk. “I think I’ll ask her. Who doesn’t like MoMA and free cocktails?”

“Right!”

Leaving the building around five o’clock, Courtney walked to the end of the block and called Lauren.

On the second ring, she picked up. “Hello, this is a pleasant surprise.”

“Hi, Lauren. I know I said call me, but I had this thing I forgot about on Wednesday night at the Museum of Modern Art. I was wondering if you would like to come with me.”

“I love MoMA. Some of my favorite works are there. Yes, sounds like a nice evening.”

“Great.”

“So how are you?”

“Aside from work being somewhat stressful right now, I’m good. Jade and I are plugging along. I’m still a little concerned, though. She keeps getting these stomach pains.”

“Now that you mention it, she didn’t eat all of her lunch a couple of days last week, which is not like her. She looked a little distressed, but she said she was okay when I asked her.”

“The pediatrician says she’s still adjusting to all the change and that it’ll pass. I’m supposed to watch her. If it keeps up, I’m going to make an appointment.”

“I’ll let you know if she has any more episodes.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your concern.”

“All a part of my job, but you’re welcome.”

“I’ll text you with the details for Wednesday.”

“Good. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sounds great, bye.”

“Bye.”

Courtney shoved the BlackBerry in her bag. She continued to walk while she replayed the call in her head.

She grabbed her phone from the bag once more and dialed Virginia’s number.

“Good evening, my dear. How are you?”

“I’m good, how about you?”

“Everything is status quo. I’m just finishing a few things here at the office, then I’m on my way out the door. Will I see you Wednesday at the party?”

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m sure your father is thrilled. The last time I spoke with him, he was still fretting over your disagreement about Jade.”

“Yes, well, he has to accept that things have changed for me. Jade is here to stay.”

“I think it’s sinking in.”

“Evie is still coming with you on Wednesday, right?”

“Oh, yes. I couldn’t be happier. We’ve finally got to spend some time together. It’s just a shame it took a fainting spell and a doctor’s order to get her to stop working so much.”

“Consider it a little gift from heaven. Thankfully, she’s healthy.”

“Yes. Honestly, the young lady she hired to take over as evening manager is doing a stellar job. We might actually be able to take that vacation in France we’ve talked about for ages, once she gets more experience under her belt. Evie says she’s more and more comfortable with her each week.”

“Good. So you’ll be bringing a date. You won’t believe this, but I’ve got a date for Wednesday, too.”

“Really! Please tell me you’re not back with that awful Dempsey woman,” Virginia huffed.

“No, it’s not Suzanne. She’s moved on quite clearly from me. Deborah saw her out with Anna Lopez a few nights ago.”

“Oh, my heavens, that’s a match made in narcissistic hell. That Lopez woman is nothing but annoying.”

“She’s got the two things Suzanne loves—power and media coverage.”

“Good luck to them both. And who will you be in attendance with?”

“Her name is Lauren McCallum. She’s the teacher I told you about.”

“McCallum, McCallum…is she related to the McCallum family from Boston?”

Courtney laughed. “No, and they’re McClarins, not McCallums.” As much as she loved Virginia, she was a bit of a snob when it came to the who’s who of the East Coast, something Courtney paid no mind to.

“Ah, that’s right. You said she was a teacher?”

“Yes, and about to complete a PhD in educational administration.”

“You always did like the brainy ones. That Dempsey woman must have had it between the sheets because it certainly wasn’t between her ears.”

Courtney burst into laughter. “Will you stop with Suzanne? I’m done with her. Anyway, I think you’ll like Lauren. She’s extremely smart and sweet.”

“I’m sure I’ll love her. Listen, dear, Evie is on the other line. I’ll see you Wednesday at the museum.”

“Okay. You two have a wonderful evening…together at home.”

“Yes, we will. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Courtney dropped the phone back in her bag and hailed a taxi for home.

The big door swung open to the penthouse. When Courtney stepped in, Jade was right there to greet her, Happy Bunny in hand.

“Hi, Courtney.”

“Hello, Jade.” She dropped her bags on the chair and held her arms out for a hug.

Jade eagerly wrapped her arms around Courtney’s neck and squeezed tight.

“How was school today?”

Jade let go of her hold. “I had a good day. I made a new friend. His name is Connor, and he likes to hang upside down on the monkey bars.”

Courtney held back a giggle. “Well, that’s very impressive. Your new friend sounds very talented.”

“Yeah. He pushed me real fast on the merry-go-round, too.”

“You didn’t get sick, did you?”

“Oh, no. It was fun.”

Courtney thought, she’s only six, and already the boys are chasing her. She was in for a long twelve years until Jade graduated.

“That’s good. You know you can invite your friends over here any time you like, but make sure we talk about it first, okay?”

“Okay,” Jade happily agreed.

“Where’s Demi?”

“She’s sitting outside. We were reading books.”

“That’s wonderful. Will you go tell her I’m home?”

“Sure.” Jade ran out the French doors leading to the rooftop patio.

“And don’t forget to bring your things in,” she called through the door.

A few minutes later, Jade and Demi came in with their books and dishes.

“Hi, Courtney,” Demi greeted

“Hello. How was she today?”

“Perfect as always.” Demi gave Jade a wink. “We made fruit salad. It’s in the fridge if you’d like some.”

“I helped, too.”

A look of concern crossed Courtney’s face at the thought of Jade cutting fruit with a knife.

“She pulled the grapes off their stems and peeled the bananas,” Demi was quick to inform.

Courtney’s brow relaxed. “Reading and a cooking lesson, you must be super nanny,” she teased.

“That’s me, super nanny to the rescue.” Demi laughed.

“Demi, Wednesday evening, I have a reception to attend at the Museum of Modern Art. Will you be able to stay with Jade for the evening?”

“Sure, no problem. Like I said, I can definitely use the money.”

“Great. That’s a relief.”

“Courtney, can I go to the party at the museum?”

“No, sweetie, it’s just for adults. I promise I’ll take you to see the museum sometime, though.”

“Okay,” she said dejected. “Can Connor go, too?”

“Yes, but we’ll have to ask his parents.”

“Okay.” The spunk returned to Jade’s voice.

“What would you like for dinner?”

“Could we have noodles and cheese?”

Courtney cringed at the thought. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll make chicken with some vegetables, you promise to eat some, and I’ll make the noodles with cheese.”

Jade thought for a moment, then stuck her hand out. “Okay, deal.”

Courtney accepted the handshake agreement. “Go put your things away, so you can help me with dinner.”

“Okay.” Jade grabbed her books and ran to her room.

“Guess I’ll be on my way, too,” Demi said.

“Demi, have you noticed Jade acting as if she’s not feeling well?”

Demi picked up her bag. “Hmm, can’t say that I have. She sometimes looks very tired when I get her from school, but we take a little cat nap, and she’s right as rain again. Why? Has she been sick?”

“Every now and then, her stomach bothers her. The doctor said it was probably stress from all the new adjustments.”

“I’d say she’s right. That girl has been through the wringer.”

“Yes, she has. Oh, well, maybe I’m just being overprotective.”

“You have every right to be,” Demi said on her way to the door. “See you tomorrow.”

After dinner, Courtney had Jade read some of her homework for her. She was determined to monitor Jade’s education and progress every step of the way. That’s how she thought Marissa would do it.

She sat at her desk and looked at the tattered photo carefully framed of her and Marissa that she retrieved from the apartment. She silently asked Marissa to please help her to do her best by Jade. She wasn’t much for prayer. It wasn’t a part of her upbringing. Having a silent conversation with her sister gave her some comfort. She imagined that was what prayers did for those who believed.

She looked at the clock on the wall and yawned. It was only nine o’clock, and she was exhausted. Working all day, then coming home to make dinner and see to Jade was beginning to feel like two full-time jobs. She reached for the chain on the desk lamp and turned off the light.

She made one pass by Jade’s room to make sure she was asleep. Satisfied that she was down for the night, Courtney went off to bed herself.

**CHAPTER26**

Courtney returned from lunch with Mr. Rosewell and Mr. Clooney. Her head felt like the two men had played ping-pong with it over their steak tartare. She never had trouble with any of the cases she was handed. She was no stranger to other firms that avoided her pre-trial. In a sense, she was aware they were in fear of her. This was different. Dodson was making her look bad, and he was getting away with it.

Rosewell and Clooney wanted the acquisition completed; they made that perfectly clear.

It was the reputation of the firm that was at stake, the payoff secondary. They wanted her to take down the Pelham Group a few notches on the way to completing the deal, and they were holding her feet to the fire to get it done.

She dropped into her chair and tossed the BlackBerry on the desk. She was aware her focus was not there. Ordinarily, this all would have been over and done by now. She’d be sitting back contently resting on her laurels with Nosheki as the new owner of Crammell Silicon.

She got up and walked to the window. New York was radiant with the afternoon sun.

She thought that once she got this all worked out, she would finally plan a real vacation with Jade. It would be good to share time on a beach somewhere with no interruptions, no deadlines. Maybe she would ask Lauren to join them.

She shook her head and returned to her seat. “I have to stop thinking that way. I’ve got to focus and get this case done.”

She picked up the phone and called Deborah into her office.

“What’s up?” She took the seat in front of the desk.

“I just got my ass chewed at Keens Steakhouse by Rosewell and Clooney.”

“Wow, they must be on the warpath if old man Clooney was in on it.”

Courtney nodded. “Apparently, word is spreading that Pelham has the upper hand on us, and the old men don’t like it. They equated them to a chain store and reminded me that litigation and acquisition are our specialty. It wasn’t good for business or reputation if the clients all thought they could get the same service at a cheaper price from some cookie-cutter outfit.”

“They really laid it on thick.”

“Yes, they did, and I understand where they’re coming from.” Courtney slipped from the chair and began to pace the length of the office.

“It’s not fair that they centered all the blame on you. Do they know what’s been going on with you and Jade?”

Courtney turned sharply. “No, they would never accept that as an explanation for what’s going on. I have a reputation to uphold myself. I get results, that’s how I got where I am today. Do you know how far back that would set all the females in this firm?”

Deborah held up her hands. “You’re right. That was stupid of me. It’s a shame they can’t take into account that there’s life outside of this office.”

“It’s still an old boys system. You know how it works and how they think.”

“I most certainly do.” Deborah scratched her head. “So where do we go from here? Crammell won’t negotiate, even though that would be the easiest thing for him to do.”

Courtney stopped in the center of the room. “We take him to court and prove he hasn’t got a leg to stand on. Something is fishy about those class B’s he claims he controls.”

“We’re still digging on that one. I’d guess foul play will be unearthed if we dig deep enough.”

“I agree. It needs to happen soon. I can’t put Nosheki off too much longer now that Rosewell and Clooney are nipping at my heels. We have to take this to court.”

**CHAPTER27**

“I think I’m ready,” Courtney announced. She stood in front of Jade and Demi in her best Armani black silk chiffon strapless cocktail dress. Cut just above the knee, it shimmered in the light. The outfit was complemented by a simple strand of pearls with matching earrings, a pair of black pumps from her favorite shoe designer Christian Louboutin with the signature red soles, and a leather clutch bag in black.

“How do I look?”

“Wow,” Jade exclaimed.

“You look like a runway model,” Demi said.

“Thank you both.”

“What type of event are you going to if I may ask?”

“It’s a party for one of my father’s friends. The museum is honoring him for twenty-five years of dedication to fundraising.”

“Good excuse for a party.” Demi grinned.

“My father and his pack of cronies don’t need a good excuse for a party. Any excuse would do,” she joked. She opened the closet in search of her cashmere wrap.

“All right, girls, I’m off.” Courtney draped the wrap over her arm. “Demi, I’m not sure what time I’ll be home. I’ll call if it looks like I’ll be late. Feel free to take the guest room for the night if you like.”

“Thanks.”

Jade gave Courtney a hug and a kiss on her way out the door.

The taxi arrived in front of Lauren’s apartment. Courtney got out and went to the front door while the taxi waited. Lauren buzzed her in.

Lauren was standing in the door when Courtney stepped off the elevator. She was wearing a red sleeveless, form-fitting dress with matching heels.

“You look gorgeous,” Courtney proclaimed.

“Thank you, thank you. You don’t look so shabby yourself.” She put one arm around Courtney’s neck and kissed her passionately as she stepped into the apartment.

“Kiss me like that again, and we’ll be staying here the rest of the night.”

“Just giving you a little taste of the after party I have planned for you.”

“Ms. McCallum, are you suggesting you plan to seduce me once again?”

“You can bet on that.” She brushed her lips over Courtney’s.

“Well…okay, but we have to go to this thing first.”

“Shall we go? The sooner we start the evening, the sooner…”

“I got it!” Courtney laughed.

They quickly made it down to the taxi and off to the museum.

A young man dressed in a white jacket opened the door to the taxi for them at the museum.

Courtney paid the driver and slipped the white jacket some bills.

Yet another young man held the door for them as they entered the lobby.

Lauren held on to Courtney’s arm. “This is new for me. I’ve never been to any kind of special event or benefit in a place like this.”

“You haven’t been to any of the fundraisers the school has hosted?”

“They don’t invite the teachers to those things. They’re schmoozing for money. The last thing they want is impromptu parent-teacher meetings. We might anger the donors.”

“Whose idea is that? Wait, don’t tell me, Roberta Sales?”

“You’re very intuitive.” She gave Courtney’s arm a squeeze.

“She’s the consummate con artist.”

“That’s a fair evaluation,” Lauren agreed.

A photographer stepped in front of them and flashed a picture. At first, she was stunned; Courtney worked to keep her private life out of the media. She relaxed and asked the man what agency he was with. He told them The Associated Press, then asked for their names. Courtney decided to give them to him. He then asked if he could take a few more.

Courtney looked at Lauren for an answer. She nodded, and the photographer fired off several more shots. He thanked them before moving on.

Courtney’s behavior with the photographer was very surprising, Lauren thought, especially since she was unable to find any images on the Web of Courtney and a date. She squeezed Courtney’s arm and smiled. They would be all over Google now, compliments of the AP.

They strolled out the glass doors into the Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. The garden was lovely at sunset with the glow of the blue lights coming from around the building. Soft piano music created the audible ambience that filled the garden, complemented by the sound of water flowing in the pond.

Courtney said hello to several people she knew as they walked through the older crowd of people.

“How do you know these people?” Lauren asked.

“Most of them are friends of my father. This is his scene. When I was a kid, he would parade me around these events, then send me home with the nanny before his buddies had too many scotches.” She waved to a sophisticated woman in a gold dress at the bar. “I hated coming to these things back then. I was the only child. My father told me it was good experience for me.”

“This is no place for a child,” Lauren said.

“I wish someone would have told my father.”

“Courtney, dear, you’re finally here.” Virginia had Evie by the hand heading toward them.

“Good evening, ladies.” Courtney held her arms out to Virginia.

She hugged her, then Evie.

“This party is such a bore. I’m so glad you finally got here.”

Courtney took Lauren’s hand. “Virginia, Evie, I’d like for you to meet my date for the evening. This is Lauren McCallum.” She turned to Lauren. “Lauren, these are my dear friends Virginia Beckman and Evie Roberts.”

Virginia stepped back and looked her up and down. She flashed a genuine smile and threw her arms around Lauren. “So nice to finally meet you, dear.”

“Thank you, Virginia, it’s very nice to meet you, too.” She gave Courtney a wide-eyed glance for help.

Virginia released her, and Evie took over with a hug.

“Courtney tells us you’re a teacher,” Virginia said.

“Yes, first grade at Mount Pleasant School.”

“You’re Jade’s teacher. Is she doing well in school?” Evie asked.

“Yes, she is. She’s a very bright girl. You’ve met her?”

“No, not yet. Scheduling conflicts, but that should change.”

Courtney stepped in. “Between my case load and Virginia’s, our schedules have been incompatible. And of course, Evie’s fledgling restaurant has kept her busy, as well. We all seem to be closer to being on the same page now.”

“Good, I think you’ll find Jade will delight you.”

“I’m sure she will, just as all the Wilhelms have.” Virginia raised her glass to Courtney with a wink.

“I think I need another drink. Anyone else?” Evie asked.

They all agreed and worked their way to the bar.

“Have you seen my father yet?” Courtney asked Virginia.

“Not yet. You know your father. He likes to make the grand entrance.”

Courtney sipped from her champagne. “Yes, he does. He and Dr. Elkhart, I’m sure, will be working their way through the crowd together.”

“Yes, poor Estelle. I just don’t know how she puts up with both of them.”

“I think she’s finely tuned her skills. After all, she’s been with Dr. Elkhart since college.”

“That does say something indeed.”

Lauren nudged Courtney. “Isn’t that Audrey Bloomberg, the actress?”

Courtney looked over heads at the woman in the white evening gown sitting on a white couch. She was surrounded by listeners who appeared to be hanging on every word she said.

“Yes, that’s her. She’s a huge supporter of the museum.”

Lauren watched her entertain her audience with conversation.

“Do you know her?”

Courtney swallowed her champagne hard. “Yes, my father dated her for a short time. Thank God nothing ever came of it.”

Lauren added no comment. She scanned the crowd in the garden. She recognized no one, but then, this wasn’t the group of people she was used to socializing with. Her parents had friends from the police department and church. They were all blue-collar families like hers. They never attended black tie events with champagne and movie stars. She did her best to contain the uneasiness.

“Oh, look, here comes Gunther now,” Evie pointed out.

“Good evening, ladies. So nice to see everyone.” He turned to Courtney. “And my lovely, lovely daughter. I’m so happy you could be here.” He took her in his arms gently and kissed her cheek.

“Good evening, Papa.” Courtney returned a kiss to his cheek with a smile.

Courtney stepped to Lauren’s side. “Papa, I’d like for you to meet someone.” She took her hand. “This is Lauren McCallum.”

He inspected her in a split second. His chiseled features didn’t flinch while his mind processed the information.

Lauren could see a lot of him in Courtney. The same sharp green eyes, perfect nose, and straight jaw line.

He extended a hand to her with a cordial smile. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms. McCallum.”

She slipped her hand in his. His grip was firm but gentle. His skin soft and warm. He had a strength about him that could be felt when in his presence.

“It’s nice to make your acquaintance, too, Dr. Wilhelm.”

“My daughter didn’t tell me she had a new…friend,” he said in a pleasant voice.

“We’ve only just met,” Courtney interjected. She was trying to protect Lauren from too many questions.

He put his hands behind his back. “I see. Perhaps you’ll arrange a dinner sometime for all of us. It’s been a while. And I can get to know Ms. McCallum better.”

“We’ll talk about it.”

“Splendid.” He put his hand on Courtney’s shoulder. “And how are things at home?”

“Everything is fine. Jade is doing wonderfully in school.”

“Any word from Kaye?” He made it look as if it pained him to say her name.

“No, and I don’t anticipate hearing from her.” Courtney really wanted to change the subject.

Virginia heard the strain in their voices and jumped in. “Gunther, where are Daniel and Estelle?”

“I left them in the lobby. A *Times* reporter cornered them.”

“You look like you could use a drink, Gunther dear.” She took him by the arm and Evie took the other as they escorted him to the bar.

“Your father is very charming. I see where you get those beautiful green eyes,” Lauren said.

Courtney’s cheeks flushed slightly. “He can be very compelling when he wants to be. As for the green eyes, they are definitely a Wilhelm trait.”

“Shall we see what’s at the hors d’oeuvres table before we start round two with my father?” Courtney’s full attention was on Lauren.

“I think that’s an excellent idea. I can’t drink much of this champagne on an empty stomach.”

After a pass around the food, they sat at a table with plates containing several of the bite-sized appetizers.

Lauren looked over both plates. “These are almost too pretty to eat.”

Courtney examined her plate. “Most people probably don’t even notice. I think I was one of those people until you pointed it out.”

“If my mom’s company makes hors d’oeuvres like this, she’s never brought them home.”

“That’s right, your mom is in the catering business.”

“She would on occasion bring home shrimp cocktail or cheese and meat platters but nothing that resembles this.” She took a bite from a crustless toast corner topped with prosciutto and blue cheese.

“They look nice, but you won’t gain weight on these, too small.” She popped an olive stuffed with a spiced almond in her mouth.

The muffled ring of her phone came from her bag sitting on the table. She casually opened the small clutch and pulled the BlackBerry out.

A look of concern crossed her face when she saw the caller ID.

“Demi, hi, what’s going on?”

“I’m not sure. We had dinner and sat down to watch a movie, then Jade got sick.”

“Sick how?” Courtney reached for Lauren’s hand.

“She threw up. I managed to get her to the bathroom before it happened. After that I laid her in bed, but she’s not getting any better. She says her stomach hurts worse, and I put my hand on her head, she’s burning up.”

Courtney motioned Virginia to bring her father over to the table.

“Did you take her temperature?”

“Yes, it’s 102.”

“What’s wrong dear?” Virginia asked. She had Dr. Wilhelm by the arm.

“It’s Jade. Papa, she’s throwing up and has a temperature of 102.”

His face hardened. “Where is she now?”

“She’s at home with my nanny. This isn’t the first time she’s been sick, but this time, it’s worse than ever.”

“I would recommend she be seen in the ER. It could be any number of things. She’ll need to have some tests.”

“Demi, I’m coming home to take Jade to the hospital.”

“Have her call for an ambulance. Have them take her to NYU Langone Medical Center on First Avenue. You can meet her there,” he ordered.

“Demi, call 911 and have the paramedics take her to Langone on First Avenue. I’ll meet you there.”

Courtney hung up and was in a panic. “We have to go, Lauren. I’m really sorry, but Jade needs me.”

“It’s fine. I’ll go with you.”

“I’ll call the ER and talk with the pediatrician on duty,” Dr. Wilhelm said.

“Thank you.” Courtney stood and grabbed hold of her father’s arm. He felt her sway and caught her with his free hand. “Courtney, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I just need to get to Jade. She must be so scared. She’s sick and I’m not there.” She regained her balance and picked up her bag.

“We have to go,” she said to Lauren.

“You’ll let us know what’s happening, won’t you, dear?” Virginia asked.

Courtney nodded. “Yes, I’ll call you when I know something.” She took Lauren’s hand.

Virginia rested her hands on Lauren’s shoulders. “Take care of her, please.”

Lauren patted her hand. “I will.”

They worked their way toward the main entrance. The crowd was heavy, but Courtney was determined.

The young man in the white jacket motioned for a taxi to pull up when they came out the door. Courtney thanked him for his expedience as she got into the backseat.

Lauren gave the driver their destination and asked him to please hurry.

Courtney held tight to Lauren’s hand for the entire ride. Fear had a grip on her like never before.

“The doctors will take good care of her.”

“I’m sure they will.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I wasn’t there to take care of her when she was sick. I promised I would take care of her.”

“Please don’t blame yourself. People get sick, especially kids. You can’t know when it’s going to happen.”

“You’re right, but I should have been there.”

Courtney choked back tears, staring out the window.

The taxi pulled up to the entrance of the emergency room.

“You go and tend to Jade. I’ll take care of this,” Lauren told her, pulling out her wallet.

Courtney kissed her cheek. “Thank you. I’ll see you inside.” She hopped out and dashed through the automatic doors to the reception desk.

A few minutes later, Lauren came through the same doors and found Courtney talking to a tall, thin woman with midnight hair. The young woman looked distressed as she talked.

“How’s Jade?” Lauren asked.

“They just brought her in.” Courtney handed her a visitor’s badge. “I wanted to talk to Demi before I went back to her room.”

Courtney had turned to the nurse’s desk and forgot the two women hadn’t met.

“I’m Lauren,” she introduced herself to the young woman.

“I’m Demi, the nanny.”

“Nice to meet you.” Lauren smiled curtly.

“Same here.” Demi looked uncomfortable as she watched Courtney.

After a few minutes, Courtney walked back over to the waiting area where Lauren sat quietly while Demi paced from vending machine to potted plant.

“We can go back now. I’ve finished all the paperwork and signed the consent forms.”

Demi stopped pacing. “How is she?”

“The nurse said she’s stable. Someone’s in there now with her.”

“When will we know something?” Demi asked.

“I’m not sure. It’s probably going to be a long night. Why don’t you go on home and get some rest?”

“Will you call me when you know something?”

“Yes, I will. Thank you for taking care of her.”

“No problem. Wish I could’ve done more.”

“You were a big help. I’ll call you.”

Demi picked up her bag from the chair on her way to the door, head down and feet dragging.

A nurse’s aide in pink scrubs and a ponytail escorted them to the room where Jade was. She held the door open to let them in.

An African-American woman of middle age was standing next to the bed writing on a clipboard. She looked up at them when the door opened.

“You must be Courtney. Jade described you in detail.”

“Yes, that would be me.”

Jade was lying on the gurney. She was balled up in a sheet in the fetal position. Wires attached to her chest and a tube leading to a blood pressure cuff around her arm were sending information displayed on a screen above the bed. A bag of fluid with long plastic tubing hung from a pole that was connected to an IV somewhere inside the sheet.

Jade raised her head. “Hi, Courtney,” she said in a pitiful voice.

Tears welled in Courtney’s eyes. She fought them back hard. The last thing she wanted was to scare Jade any more than she already was.

She leaned over the rail of the bed to put a hand on her forehead, brushing back the dark curls. “How are you feeling, sweetie?”

“Not so good. I think I ate something bad.” She scratched her nose. “Why is Miss Lauren here?”

“Lauren was at a party with me, and when she heard you were sick, she wanted to come see you. The doctors are going to find out what made you sick.” Jade nodded and lay her head back down on the pillow.

Lauren stood behind the nurse watching. “Has the doctor been in yet to see her?”

“Not yet. We’ve just gotten the IV in, and the blood has been sent to the lab.” She reached up to silence the beeping of the EKG monitor.

“My name is Pam. I’ll be taking care of your little one here in the ER. If you need anything, just let me know.” She walked over to the sink to wash her hands.

“Thank you, Pam.”

“The doctor will be in to see her soon,” she assured them. She picked up her clipboard and left the room.

The room was lit only by the light coming from under the cabinet. Jade looked so pale in the dim light.

Every scenario imaginable ran through Courtney’s mind. She even considered something hidden within Jade that she might have gotten from Marissa that lay dormant until now. She wanted no stone left unturned. Jade needed to be cleared from head to toe. She would solicit her father to use his influence to get it done.

The gentle touch of Lauren’s hands on her shoulders brought her out of her deep thought.

“Don’t get too upset yet. Let the doctor work her up and give us some idea what’s going on.”

“I can’t help thinking this is my fault. She’s been complaining off and on about stomach pains, and I didn’t do anything.”

“But you did. You called the pediatrician and you followed her advice. It could very well be stress. We just don’t know yet.”

She placed one hand over Lauren’s while continuing to rub Jade’s back with the other.

The delicate knock came from outside, and the door opened slowly. In stepped a nice-looking man of about forty with blond hair and dark-framed glasses. He looked fresh, and his light blue scrubs were neatly pressed.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Reeves, the attending pediatrician here in the ER.”

Courtney stood and offered a hand. “Nice to meet you, Doctor. I’m Courtney Wilhelm, Jade’s aunt.” She pointed to Lauren. “This is Lauren McCallum. My support for the evening.”

He shook Lauren’s hand.

“I understand we have a sick little girl with a fever somewhere under all those covers.” He lifted a corner and peered at her pale face.

Courtney proceeded to fill him in on Jade’s history of stomach complaints since she came to live with her.

Dr. Reeves looked Jade over carefully before making any comments. When he pressed on her abdomen, she tensed and moaned in pain. Her moans got louder when he pressed on the right. He stopped and made notes on the clipboard he brought with him.

He returned the pen to his breast pocket. “I think I might have a very good idea what’s made your niece so sick.”

Anticipation glazed over Courtney and Lauren’s faces.

“She’s more tender on the right side of her abdomen than the left. I’ll need to check the lab work, might even order a CT scan or ultrasound to be sure, but I’m leaning toward appendicitis right now.”

In a small way, it was a relief to hear it could be something she was familiar with, however, Courtney knew it would require surgery to correct.

“She’ll need a surgeon.”

He took a deep breath. “Yes. I talked with your father earlier, and he asked me to call Dr. Hamm in to take this case. I have great respect for your father. He knows who’s the best at what. I think you’ll like Leslie. She’s great with kids, and she’s a master at laparoscopic surgery.”

“My father’s word is gold, Doctor. Let’s get Dr. Hamm in as soon as possible.”

“I’ll go make the call. In the meantime, I’ll order something for the pain.”

“Thank you.”

They were left to wait together. Lauren put her arm around Courtney. In silence, they watched Jade as she slept.

“Why didn’t I see this coming? I kept a close eye on her. I watched what she was eating. I should have taken her to the doctor and had her examined before it got this bad.”

“Courtney, sweetheart, stop blaming yourself for this. People get sick, it just happens.”

“I told Children’s Services I didn’t know anything about raising kids. I should be the last person they would be willing to let take care of a child.”

“You’ll learn. Nobody knows exactly what’ll happen with their children. I’m sure Marissa had no idea what to do at first. You try to do the right thing, and in the end, somehow it works out.”

The tears at the corners of her eyes were dripping. She took a tissue from the box next to the bed and wiped away the moisture.

The door opened quietly, and Pam stepped in with a syringe in hand. “Dr. Reeves ordered some pain medicine and something to bring down that fever for Jade. I think it’ll make her a lot more comfortable.”

They watched as the nurse administered the drugs through the IV.

“Jade, honey, how do you feel right now?”

She scratched her nose and looked up at Pam. “I feel a little sleepy.”

“Okay, baby. That pain should be a lot less soon.”

“Pam, do you know when Dr. Hamm will be here?”

“No, ma’am, but I’ll check with Dr. Reeves.” She closed the door on her way out of the room.

Timepassed very slowly. Jade went for a CT scan and returned. To Courtney, it seemed like it was midnight, but it was only ten. Lauren had nodded off in the chair in the corner.

A small knock came from the door. Courtney looked up at the clock as the door opened. A woman walked in wearing a lab coat over a mint green shirt and khaki pants. She whispered, “Hello, I’m Dr. Hamm.”

She looked to be in her forties. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had a medium build at about five-foot-seven.

Courtney shook her hand. “Hi. Thank you for coming.”

She looked down at Jade sleeping on the bed.

Lauren stirred in the chair.

“I got a call from your father earlier this evening. He asked me to take a look at his granddaughter. What’s a surgeon to do when the head of cardiothoracic surgery calls you personally and asks you to see his granddaughter?” She smiled.

Nothing came out of her mouth when she tried to speak. Courtney tried again. Finally, it happened. “His granddaughter? That’s who my father asked you to see?”

Caught off-guard by Courtney’s reaction, Dr. Hamm tilted her head. “Yes, Dr. Wilhelm clearly said his granddaughter Jade. Of course, I’m happy to take the case.”

“Yes, I apologize for my surprise. My father sometimes astounds me with his abilities to make things happen.”

She opened the file she brought in with her. “I’ve reviewed Jade’s tests results. Looks like we have an abscessed appendix. I’m sure you know that requires surgery.”

“I was expecting that.”

“We’ll need to get her in tonight. I don’t want to sit on this. It only creates more complications.”

“Yes, of course,” Courtney agreed.

“I have the consent papers here for you to sign. I’ve already called the OR. They’ll be up to take her to pre-op when they’re ready.”

“Can I stay with her until they take her into the operating room?” she asked after she signed the forms.

“Once she goes to pre-op, you’ll have to go to the waiting room. She’ll be sedated, and it won’t take them long to get her ready to go. In the meantime, I’m ordering an antibiotic to be started before surgery.”

Courtney wasn’t happy with having Jade in pre-op alone, but she trusted Dr. Hamm. Her father sent the best.

The OR nurse woke Lauren when she and two assistants entered the room. They brought their own gurney in and began to transfer Jade and her attachment over to their equipment.

“Where are they taking her now?” Lauren rubbed her eyes.

“Dr. Hamm was in a little while ago. They’re taking her to the OR. Her appendix is abscessed. They want to take it out right now.”

“That’s a relief that they found the problem so quick.”

“You look wiped out. Why don’t you go home? I’ll be okay.”

“No way. I’ll stay until we know Jade is out of surgery and on the road to recovery.”

“Could be a long night, and you have school tomorrow.”

“The nice thing about having two teacher’s aides is I can call and let them know I’ll be in at noon. They know the teaching plan. The class will be in good hands.”

“Thank you.” Courtney wrapped her arms around Lauren’s waist.

“I want to be here with you.”

Jade slept through the entire transition.

Courtney kissed her forehead several times before they wheeled her out of the room. She leaned in and spoke softly in her ear. “I love you, Jade. I’ll be waiting for you when you’re done.”

Jade’s eyes opened no more than a sliver, and she looked at Courtney. “I love you, too, Courtney.”

A smile covered her face.

On the way through the door, Lauren leaned down to Jade. “Get better, kiddo. You have to get back to school.”

Jade giggled and waved.

“I think it was the medicine making her loopy,” Lauren said.

“Probably.” Courtney nodded.

“If you ladies will follow me,” Pam directed, “I’ll take you to the OR waiting room on the third floor.”

As they made their way to the third floor, Pam explained, “Dr. Hamm will come out and talk to you as soon as the surgery is done. Jade has already been admitted. I imagine Dr. Hamm will keep her a few days for antibiotic therapy.”

At the end of the hall on the third floor, Pam left them in the waiting room. It consisted of some well-worn chairs and sofas, a coffee maker, vending machine, and a new flat-screen TV on CNN. A man sat with a woman who appeared to be his daughter. They sat silent with their eyes fixed on the TV. The man watched them walk in.

Courtney and Lauren landed hard on a sofa, looking equally tired. Courtney, however, had the added expression of worry.

She fell back on the sofa, wishing she had something more comfortable like a pair of jeans and a T-shirt to change into. She hadn’t planned to be in the cocktail dress quite so long. Lauren also looked uncomfortable in the red dress. She reached for Courtney’s hand and lay her head back.

There was nothing to do now except sit and wait.

**CHAPTER28**

What was taking so long, Courtney wondered. She got up from the sofa to stretch her legs.

She wandered into the empty hall to a window overlooking a parking garage. She thought about the first night with Jade in the house and how she broke the jelly the next morning. She wanted to laugh then at the innocent expression on her face. She remembered their shopping trip and all the things Jade was afraid to ask for. The horrified face Suzanne made when Jade threw up on the rug.

Jade was such an intelligent, inquisitive child. Out of the darkness of her life, Marissa created this shining being who would bring her back to a good place, only to be cut down again by a demon that followed her from her past.

Now she was in Courtney’s hands. Jade would look to her for everything she needed.

She sat in a chair in the hall.

“The coffee in there is so bad.” Lauren sat next to Courtney. “I think I’ll run down to the cafeteria and see if there isn’t something better. Can I get you some, too?”

Courtney patted her knee. “That would be nice, thank you.”

“Be back in a few minutes.” She disappeared into the elevator and left Courtney alone in the hall.

The quiet of the hall and the stress of worrying about Jade had finally caught up to her. Tears escaped her eyelids. The harder she squeezed, the more water ran over her lashes. She lowered her head and covered her face with her hands.

The tears were now allowed to flow freely, and the stress and anxieties that had built up purged with her sobs. She cried hard for a few minutes; she needed it.

An arm around her shoulders interrupted the sobs. She lifted her face from her hands and found her father sitting next to her. A somber expression covered his handsome face. He cradled her in his arms, allowing her to cry until she got it all out.

With her head on his chest and his arms wrapped around her, she knew she was safe. She could let all the stress of caring for Jade, the guilt over Marissa, and pressure of work go.

“My dear, dear girl. Everything will be fine. I sent you the best pediatric surgeon in New York to take care of the little one.”

“I know she’s in good hands. Things have been weighing heavy on me for some time now. I guess I hit my limit tonight, and I had to let it out.”

He offered her a handkerchief.

She wiped her eyes, then her nose.

Lauren stepped off the elevator with two cups in her hand. She stopped when she saw Dr. Wilhelm sitting with Courtney.

“I think you tried to do too much by yourself. I should have stood by you when you made the decision to take Jade into your home and your life. I wasn’t thinking wisely.”

“You were thinking with your heart.”

“I was thinking with the piece of my heart that has been cold and black for many years.”

He sat up straight, keeping his arm around her. “Not anymore. It’s time we started to act like a family. That family includes Jade.”

“Why the change of heart?”

“I’ve been thinking about it since you told me what happened. Of course, I also had Virginia and Evie in my ear. Those two are relentless, I tell you.”

Courtney laughed. “I know it.”

“This young lady with you tonight, she’s a good one?”

Courtney nodded. “Yes. She gives me something I thought I’d never have again in my life—a chance at that one true love.”

“Then you should do everything in your power to make it happen.”

“I’m working on it.”

Lauren walked over to them and held out a cup. “They had cappuccino in the cafeteria. I hope you like it.”

Courtney gladly accepted.

“Hello, Dr. Wilhelm.”

“Hello, Lauren.” He gave her a warm smile. “Thank you for staying with my daughter. It’s not good to be alone during a crisis.”

“I couldn’t leave her. She was in no shape to be by herself.”

“Tell me, young lady, what are your plans for my daughter? Do you intend to be a part of our family?”

“Papa!” Courtney was shocked.

“No, it’s all right. I intend to be around your daughter as much and as long as she’ll let me, sir.”

He slapped his knee. “Good then, you can see to it that she makes time to enjoy what she has.” He turned to Courtney. “Please don’t be like me. I spent too many years away from you. I didn’t really see you grow to the fine woman you are. I was in and out of your life, even though we lived in the same house. Take vacations, go to the park on the weekend, make dinner at home. Do the things that will stay with you and do them with the ones you love.”

A tear rolled down Lauren’s face. “Your father is a very wise man. Listen to him,” she said quietly.

Courtney hugged him tight. “I love you, Papa.”

A few minutes later, Dr. Hamm came down the hall. She still looked fresh in green scrubs at two in the morning.

Courtney stood and took Lauren’s hand when she saw Leslie.

“Good morning, Dr. Wilhelm, it’s a pleasure to see you.”

“Good morning, Leslie. Do you have good news for us?”

“I certainly do. Jade came through fabulously. She’s in recovery. I would expect she’ll be moved into her room shortly.”

“That’s wonderful news.” Courtney was overjoyed. “When can we see her?”

“When she gets to her room. She’ll still be out of it probably for the rest of the night. I would suggest you go home and get some rest. In the morning, she’ll be more alert.”

“Thank you, Doctor, for everything.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Everything is going to be fine.” Courtney hugged Lauren.

“I think you’re right.”

**CHAPTER 29**

Courtney, Dr. Wilhelm, and Lauren were waiting in the room when Jade was brought in from recovery. She was very groggy when she opened her eyes to Courtney’s voice. “Hi, sweetie. Everything is going to be fine.”

A small smile crossed her face. “Hi, Courtney.”

Courtney leaned over the rail of the bed and kissed her forehead.

“She’ll be good as new in the morning,” the nurse who accompanied Jade to her room reassured.

Dr. Wilhelm approached the bed. “She’s a beautiful child, just like her mother was,” he said in a low voice.

Courtney wrapped her arm around him. “She’s good girl.”

“Smart as a whip, too,” Lauren added from the foot of the bed.

“She’ll have a good life. We’ll make sure of it,” Dr. Wilhelm said.

Once Jade was settled, the nurses convinced Courtney to go home for a while. They promised they would call if there were any changes.

“I really do need to get out of this dress,” Courtney said.

“I’ll see to it that you get home. Lauren, will you ride with us?” Dr. Wilhelm asked.

“I’ll grab a taxi on my own, thank you, though.”

“Very well. I’ll go ahead to the lobby and get two cars.” He patted Jade on the leg as he left the room.

“Thank you for staying with me. It really means a lot to me to have you here.” Courtney hugged Lauren.

“I can’t imagine being anywhere else but right here with you.” She kissed Courtney’s cheek. “I think we’ll have some explaining to do when Jade wakes up.”

“You’re right. I’m sure she’ll have a pack of questions, as she always does. I think she might make a great prosecutor.”

They both laughed.

“Come,” Lauren took Courtney’s hand, “you need to go home and change. We don’t want to keep your father waiting.”

Courtney kissed Jade’s cheek and ran her fingers through her soft curls. “I love you, my girl,” she whispered to Jade.

Later that morning, Courtney sat half asleep slumped in a recliner next to Jade’s bed. She only stayed at home long enough to shower and change clothes, then she was back at the hospital by Jade’s side. She brought Happy Bunny with her. When she put the bunny next to Jade, she immediately wrapped an arm around Happy. If all went well, Dr. Hamm would let Jade go home later in the day.

Courtney called Deborah and told her the story of her evening. Deborah assured her things would be handled at the office and she should concentrate on Jade.

Lauren called to check in. She would be going into work at noon. After school, she would check in again and bring dinner.

A nurse entered the room to check on Jade. “Ms. Wilhelm, can I get you anything?”

“No thank you. I’m fine.” She smiled.

Jade stirred in the bed and tightened her grasp on Happy.

Courtney settled back in the recliner and tried to relax.

The muffled sound of the BlackBerry in her bag woke her from a shallow sleep.

“Hello, this is Courtney Wilhelm.”

“Hello darling. How are you?”

“Mother. I’m fine. As always, your timing is impeccable,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Oh, darling, please don’t be bitter.”

“Don’t be bitter? How dare you?”

Jade stirred again, hearing Courtney’s voice.

She left the room and found an empty waiting room at the end of the hall so she wouldn’t disturb Jade.

“Courtney, darling, I know we have a lot to discuss. Can we please do it in a civil manner?”

“Like I said, you’re timing is impeccable!”

“First, tell me how Jade is doing. What did the doctors find?”

Courtney was taken aback. “How did you know she was sick?”

“Virginia sent me a rather scathing e-mail. I just had to call knowing you were in distress.”

“I must commend Virginia for being able to get your attention since I failed to do it.”

“Darling, you always have my attention. I think it’s better, though, that I keep my distance, considering the family history.”

“Whatever, Mother. As you may have guessed, I’m in no mood for this today.”

“Yes. I do want to know how my granddaughter is.”

“She’s doing well. It was appendicitis. Papa arranged for a surgeon. She’s resting comfortably. If she does well, I’ll take her home later today.”

“Splendid. And how are you doing?”

“I’m fine. I wasn’t the one who was sick.”

“You’re the parent now. I’m sure this has all been hard for you.”

“Yes, it has. All of it. While I have you on the phone, let me thank you for dumping everything on me without warning. You could have told me about Marissa and Jade. Can you imagine my shock hearing all this from a social worker?”

“I did what I thought was best for Jade. You know I wouldn’t have been able to give her what she needed. I’m in no position to take on a child, especially at my age.”

“You were in no position to take on children at any age,” Courtney hissed.

“I understand your frustration. I hope you understand I did what I felt was in the best interest of Jade, truly I did. You were her best hope at a good life.”

“I get that. What I don’t get is why you never told me about Marissa’s pregnancy and illness. I could have helped. She might still be alive if she had the proper medical attention. I could have made sure she got it. And Jade would still have her mother.”

Kaye’s voice softened. “I had no control over that. I wanted to tell you. Marissa forbid me from contacting you. She said she had caused you enough trouble over the years and she would take care of things herself. She would contact you on her own terms.”

Tears formed again in her eyes. “That is so not fair. I deserved to know everything. My God, she was my only sister. I loved her no matter how sick she was from the drug addiction.”

“I agree, but that was not Marissa’s wish. She wanted to be the one to tell you about her life, but only after she was standing on her own two feet. Unfortunately, cancer prevented her from ever getting there.”

“Why didn’t you do more for her? Jade told me you were here.”

“I tried. I really tried to get them out of that tenement. I was prepared to set them up in an apartment in a decent neighborhood, but Marissa didn’t want it. The best I could do was send her money now and then. She definitely had her father’s stubborn streak.”

Courtney was speechless as the tears ran down her face.

“Darling, it’s a new day. Marissa is gone and now Jade is yours. I wanted you to have her. She will become a woman Marissa would be proud of with you. I hope you understand I did this with Jade’s best interest at heart.”

She wiped her eyes. “Yes, Mother, I believe you did what’s best for her. And she will become someone we’ll all be proud of because she’s a wonderful person by her own right.”

Kaye agreed.

“From here on, there will be no more secrets. Do I make myself clear? I will allow you to have a supervised relationship with Jade if that’s what you want. You in return must make an effort to prove to me that you will be a responsible grandparent. No floating in and out of our lives like you did in the past.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your faith in me. I want things to be better, I do.”

The nurse appeared in the door. “She’s awake,” she whispered.

Courtney waved. “I have to go. Jade is wake. I’ll let you know how she’s doing.”

“Thank you. I promise I’ll stay in touch.”

“Good. I’m counting on it. Bye.”

Courtney hurried back to Jade’s room.

**CHAPTER30**

“Jade, honey, put your hat back on. I don’t want you to catch a cold,” Courtney fussed. “It should be warmer out here than it is with the sun shining,” she told Lauren.

“It’s November, sweetie,” Lauren reminded her, sitting on a bench watching Jade play with the other kids at the playground.

“I used to go into hibernation around late October. Spending a Saturday afternoon in the park this time of year would have been unheard of.” She sipped from her Starbucks cup.

“That was the old you. The new you loves to be out and about, even when the air is chilly.”

“Chilly? I think you understate the November weather in New York.” Courtney squeezed Lauren tighter. “I’m holding on to the thoughts of Christmas on a warm beach in St. Thomas. Jade is going to love it.”

Lauren rubbed Courtney’s arm. “I have to admit, I’m looking forward to getting out of the cold, too.”

They watched Jade and two other girls laughing so hard they could barely hang on to the merry-go-round as it went around and around. Her friend Connor was doing his best to keep up the speed.

Courtney stretched her legs out in front of her. How different life had become. Not so long ago, she wouldn’t have been able to envision anything that was now in her life. Jade was healthy and doing well in school. She asked for piano lessons and was playing on a peewee soccer team with Lauren’s niece.

She was a real parent with all the trappings of a family, and she was happier than she ever thought possible.

Courtney’s father was becoming a fixture in Jade’s life. Every time he heard her call him Grandpa G, his face lit up with delight. Courtney’s relationship with him was changing, too. Their conversations had become more in depth. He was trying hard to really listen to her instead of doing all the talking. They were closer than ever before.

Her mother was staying true to her promise. She sent Jade a huge get well package of cookies and toys. She also called once a week to check in. Courtney didn’t think Kaye could ever change, but she was so far pleasantly surprised by her efforts. She was even talking of a visit in the spring.

The relationship with Lauren was moving forward. She and Jade had become unofficial members of Lauren’s family. The experience was overwhelming at first, but she found it easy to care for people who genuinely cared in return.

Life with Lauren was easy. She loved unconditionally and completely. Courtney was learning how to be that way, too. They were building a life together and becoming a family.

She thought her chance at love and happiness had passed her by years ago. Fate gave her a second chance, and she pursued it unwaveringly.

The Crammell case was a slam dunk. Crammell Junior was indicted on charges of fraud. He was accused of forging his father’s signature on the transfer of the class B stocks. It was uncovered that Crammell Senior had left everything to his daughter, leaving his son out completely. Junior knew he would lose his meal ticket if and when the old man passed. With the takeover by Nosheki, it would happen much sooner. The Pelham Group dropped Crammell in light of the charges, claiming they too were defrauded by Junior.

Crammell’s daughter stood to make a fortune that would sustain her for a lifetime. Since she had no involvement in the company other than as a shareholder, she was happy to have a merger with a company of Nosheki’s reputation and cash flow.

Rosewell commended Courtney for a fine job. The firm would continue to be Nosheki’s lead counsel through the takeover and eventually its main legal representation. This was huge for Rosewell and Clooney. It was huge for Courtney and Deborah, too. Both received a bonus worthy of a queen. Deborah not only gave Christie the kitchen of her dreams, she gave her the wedding of their dreams, as well, in Hyannis Port.

Virginia made the decision to retire. She and Evie realized they still had many things on their bucket list and wanted to be of an age where they could still enjoy them. Virginia surprised Courtney and Deborah with an offer to take over her practice. It would involve a transition to turn her clients over to them, for which she anticipated no problems. Her clients would be thrilled with the new counsel. They also decided they would add family law and were actively searching for someone with expertise. They planned to tell Rosewell and Clooney after the first of the year. The old men would not be happy.

“I think it’s time to go,” Lauren said. “We still have to pick up a few things at the store before everyone shows for your father’s birthday dinner.”

Courtney looked at her watch. “Wow, you’re right. And the cake is supposed to be delivered at five.” She stopped and kissed Lauren. “I love you, you know.”

Lauren gave her a shy grin. “Yes, I know. I love you, too.”

“Good. I won’t ever get tired of saying it.”

“And I won’t ever get tired of hearing it.”