



Not All Swings Are Fun

Madeline overhears a secret that nearly destroys her. Most people have pivotal moments in their lives but usually they are happy events such as graduations, new careers or marriages. Not so in Madeline's case. Her entire adult life has become a lie, the man she walked away from is the only one whom she thinks of during this challenging time. His acceptance of her and her current situation remains to be seen.



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Madeline came to tonight’s wedding as a favor to her husband. One of his colleagues is marrying off a son and invited the whole work crew, she felt obligated to go as much as he did, or so he indicated. By the look of his behavior, her husband is anything but reluctant to be here. Which brings her here to this moment, where she is sitting in a room full of people she doesn’t know, wondering why she came, not one person would miss her if she wasn’t here. She saw cabs outside, she could easily catch one and go home on her own. The people appear nice, but she has this overwhelming feeling of being uncomfortable around many of the men she passes, almost as if they are staring at her all the way through her clothes. She keeps checking to make sure she isn’t showing more than she wanted to.

The ceremony was simple, the passing of wine and appetizers while everyone waited for the new couple to come in, also seemed very normal but she can’t shake this feeling of something impending, something not so good. Part of her would like to go home, but she hasn’t actually seen her husband in the past hour to let him know. She has no idea where he is. He walked off to talk to a woman in a blue dress and she hasn’t seen much of him since. There are nice gardens here, maybe he is talking to

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her out there, she has no idea. Not much to see in a garden at night.

“Care to dance?” a man, who is now standing over her, asks. Madeline looks up to see one of the few people she recognizes. This man works with her husband and she has seen him at company holiday parties and events. His hand is extended to her so she stands and takes his hand, they walk to the dance floor. The music playing is for a slow dance, something she knows how to do well, and even enjoys doing, however, lately she only dances with her husband. This man, while she does know him, she doesn’t know him well enough to be as physically close to him as she is. He continually pulls her in close to his body and no matter how much she tries to push him away, he has her body completely touching his, his hands are lower on her back than is appropriate to someone else’s wife. When she has had enough of being uncomfortable, she says, “Please sir, I don’t know you, you are supposed to allow space in between people during these types of dances in order to do them properly. I don’t appreciate this closeness and it needs to stop or I will walk away.”

He looks down at her and smiles, “But we fit so nicely together, don’t we?” he asks, and if she is

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not mistaken his voice sounds sensual and he pulls her in closer specifically so she can feel his arousal. Madeline pushes him away, hard, this time he lets her go.

“No, we don’t. I’m a married woman and I believe you are married as well. This has been totally inappropriate. Please don’t ask me to dance again, ever,” she walks back to her table to sit down before the dance is even over. She continues to look for her husband, ah, there, he is back on the dance floor, dancing with that woman in the blue dress. She notices that he too is holding his partner rather closely. He never did that with her, he always dances properly with her. When she looks around the dance floor, all the couples dancing are doing the same thing. This is not how to do these dances properly. Madeline was trained in a proper dance studio on how to do all the classic slow dances. The beauty of these dances is how close you feel with your partner without being held close, that is why they are beautiful to watch. The flow of the steps being done with a partner is also what makes dancing them enjoyable. This, this nonsense, she is watching is no better than watching people do the more popular modern dances, which are all about bringing up the sexual heat between people. No, this is not

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right, not right at all. Madeline shudders watching everyone.

Madeline watches as the song changes into something that is not as slow, she watches as the dancers don’t seem to change their positions. Including her husband. On some level, she is embarrassed watching this, she feels like she is watching something personal happening between each couple, things that should only happen behind the closed doors of a bedroom. “Care to dance?” another man asks.

Madeline looks up and sees someone she actually knows by name. “Bob, how nice of you to ask,” she stands and heads to the dance floor with him, assuming that he will be different than the rest of the people at this wedding. Unfortunately, she is disappointed. Again. She keeps trying to push his body away from hers in order to do the dance properly. How can one turn to swing their partner if they are so closely attached? She thinks to herself. In fact, he isn’t holding her close, he is actually holding her uncomfortably tight against his body. Madeline takes a deep breath and pushes with all her might. “Not appropriate,” she says exasperated with him. Feeling as if she needs a shower, Madeline keeps walking past her table, right out of the reception

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room and straight into the lady’s room for a reprieve from all of the groping men. The women here don’t seem to mind and that baffles her even more. She minds. She minds a lot in fact. Her body is her own and partially to her husband but not to anyone who looks at her, dances with her.

She shudders again to get the feeling of his arms on her, off. She sits in a stall and does what she needs to do and finds herself at the sinks next to Bob’s wife. Madeline chooses not to say a word. How do you tell someone that their husband inappropriately groped you while dancing? She chooses to ignore what happened and blame everyone’s behavior on the alcohol that has been flowing, and probably overly consumed already.

“Good evening Madeline,” Bob’s wife says.

“Oh, hello Carol, I didn’t see you there. Lost in my own thoughts, I suppose,” Madeline lies, uncomfortably.

“Don’t worry. I saw you dancing tonight. You look really good out there. How do you know how to slow dance? I never learned, I mostly fake my way through,” she says.

“I was taught at a proper dance school. My father loved to slow dance and taught all of us, boys and girls alike in our family. Family gatherings can be

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a lot of fun when everyone knows the same dance steps,” she smiles remembering her own wedding when there were so many slow dances, they all had so much fun together. She danced with each of her cousins and her uncles that night and her husband had done the same with the female cousins and all of the aunts.

“Oh, wow. That sounds like a lot of fun. Not in our family though. Most of us have two left feet, not too coordinated on the dance floor. So how about this wedding? Pretty spectacular don’t you think? The flowers, the band, this place. Who knew that Art had so much money to throw at a wedding?” She comments.

“It is very nice. The venue is quite different from any I’ve seen. I like the yellow flowers all around. Makes this whole place feel like spring,” Madeline turns to leave.

“Um, Madeline, will you be joining us at the meeting this month?” she asks almost shyly.

“Meeting?” she asks.

“You know, our monthly get-togethers on the fifteenth?” she asks.

“At work? I have no reason to be there. I know my husband tells me sometimes the wives show up, but it is my understanding they are in the

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same industry and can contribute to the meeting. I know nothing of finance or sales. I’m a historian for a museum, totally different fields, nothing I can say will help anyone on a project, unless they need an ad campaign that includes historic facts,” she says simply.

“Oh, um, yeah. I guess that makes sense,” Carol quickly walks past Madeline out the door. Madeline follows her out and heads down the hall, she hears her name being mentioned and stops before she turns the corner to hear what they are talking about. Around the corner, she hears Carol’s voice.

“She doesn’t know. She has no idea why we meet together, that is why she doesn’t come over,” she says.

“How do you know?” she hears Bob ask.

“Because I just asked her if she was joining us at our meeting this month and she said she is a historian and has nothing to contribute to a finance or sales work meeting. He told her it is a work thing. What do we do now?” she asks.

“Well, some people don’t like to share this with their spouse or their spouses don’t want to participate, we know that. We have a few that show up without spouses. Rebecca and Grace don’t bring

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spouses either and no one seems to care, we all enjoy them. Even you I believe,” he says in a gentle tone.

“Well, truth be told, yes. I never thought I’d enjoy being with a woman but Grace knows what to do, that is for sure. What should we do about Madeline? I think she needs to loosen up a bit and might actually enjoy being with us. She has so much potential as a bed mate,” Carol tells her husband.

“Hmmmm that she does, I could tell from our dance together there is something inside her that needs to come out. I think maybe we can go over to their house and introduce her to the concept slowly. You know, kind of a one on one session. Let her know that being sexual is a human thing, not a husband and wife thing. Maybe she would warm up to us first. We’ve been there before, it wouldn’t be so hard to go again. Listen, they’re playing our song, let’s get back to the wedding,” Bob tells her.

Madeline hears them walk away, Carol’s shoes are very distinct. Madeline tries to catch her breath. All this time? For three years she has been oblivious to the fact that her husband participates in a monthly orgy, and with his friends? Not a figurative one, but a real one. Every fifteenth of the month he gets together with these people and has sex with a woman or two, who is not her. No wonder he comes

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back from those meetings so tired. Has he been with Bob’s wife? With Bob himself? He had told her that there is an industry meeting once a month that his boss had asked everyone to participate in. He does this so he can make sure he stays on top and doesn’t lose his edge. That is what he always tells her. Three years, how dumb can she be? Three solid years! She screams into her own head. Once a month and all this time she was fooled. Her husband, as well as the whole group of them, are having sex with people other than their spouses once a month. What kind of sick group of people are they? No wonder those men danced so close to her, they think she is one of them.

Again, she shudders, this time she feels she is going to be seriously sick. She makes her way back to the bathroom barely in time to throw up. When she is done, she sits down on the floor a moment and thinks about what she is going to do. Her husband talked to her at the beginning of their marriage saying he wanted to have a family but not yet. Said he wanted to wait until they were married for five years, which is actually coming up soon. Right now, she is very happy they have no children. There is no way she can stay and start a family with a man who feels he can freely have sex once a month with anyone he

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wants. How is this not infidelity? How is this not cheating on your wife when you lied about the whole thing? How does she know it only happens once a month? How is she supposed to look at herself in the mirror in the morning thinking her whole married life has not been a joke to him, that she is the biggest part of this joke? Could that be what he was doing tonight with the woman in the blue dress? Right under her nose? Madeline’s stomach goes for round two.

Madeline pulls herself together realizing she is in a public bathroom and not her home. She stands and walks out to the sinks, she rinses her mouth a few times and splashes water on her face to calm herself down. But no amount of water is going to wash away this feeling of betrayal. And to think she was going to ask him to start trying for children soon.

With a deep breath she walks out of the bathroom. “Madeline dear, how are you? Oh, my you don’t look good. Are you feeling well?” she turns to see her own husband talking to her. She hasn’t seen him most of the night. She looks at him differently, who was that woman in the blue dress? Where did they go? How many times has he been with her? The fifteenth is Friday this week, it is only

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Sunday now. What can she do for the next five days? How can she get out of this life in such a short amount of time?

“Madeline?” he asks again to get her attention.

“I’m not feeling well. I think I’ll take a taxi home. You stay with your friends. I don’t want to be a downer to everyone. I’ll be fine. Maybe something I ate here; the food is quite different than my simple pallet knows,” she says quietly.

“Are you sure? I’ll wait with you for the taxi. Come,” he takes her hand and walks her to the front of the venue, he turns to the desk clerk, “Can you call a taxi for my wife please, she is not feeling well,” he sits with her on the bench right outside the front door. They sit in silence.

Madeline’s mind is playing tricks on her now, does she smell perfume on him? Then she realizes that if he is dancing as close as the men did with her then it would make sense he smells from their perfume. But this isn’t on his clothes, it’s on the hand he touched her face to check for a fever. Oh Madeline, you’ve been living a lie for almost five years, this is not right. This is not a safe place to be. What if he pulls you in? What if he decides he wants me to be part of this monthly party? What if Bob

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and Carol *do* come over and they try and persuade her to be part of a foursome?! She could never do that. Never! Her head is spinning with her own thoughts, she can’t even go there.

The taxi pulls in front of them, Madeline jumps up, gets in and closes the door before her husband can say another word. She gives the taxi driver her address and tells him to get her home as fast as legally possible. He smiles and says, “If you need anything Maám, you let me know,” he looks at her with sympathy.

Madeline tries to figure out why and then she thinks about how fast she left her husband. Maybe the driver thinks she is running from him for some serious reason other than her own reality. In essence, she is, running from him that is. The question is how can she run even further and how can she get there, and where is she going to? Who will make her safe again?

On the drive home Madeline decides that she will have to look through her calendar. She wants to check how many times her husband didn’t go to a social event of their own because it was on the fifteenth. How many times did she go alone to things from both sides of the family because he was busy at these monthly “meetings”? How many times did he

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leave early from a family party to attend this?! Madeline’s stomach starts to churn again. This is so overwhelming. How did her life become such a joke, he must sit at these parties and laugh about her each time. What about those scattered late nights at work? Is she supposed to believe he actually was working? He never works that hard at home, she has never seen him work much at home at all. When he takes a call, he takes it behind closed doors. Oh Madeline, what has become of your marriage? She thinks about all these questions and more.

The taxi pulls in front of her house. “Do you need me to wait Maám?” he asks softly.

Madeline looks at the driver, he must have seen many terrible things to ask this. “Thank you for your concern. I’m really doing fine, I got sick at the wedding we were at and needed to come home quickly before anything with my stomach happened again. I must have eaten something my stomach is not used to. You are very kind to be concerned,” she says rubbing her own stomach.

“All the same, please take my card. This is the card I only give women, should you ever need an emergency run, you call me day or night. It will be a free run,” he looks at her sincerely.

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“I hope I never need this but would it be alright if I gave this to someone I think might?” she asks thinking of her own cousin who is in a bad relationship and needs a push to get out.

“Any time, day or night. This is a special number,” he says thinking she is really referring to herself.

“Thank you,” Madeline takes the card and heads into her house. She immediately runs upstairs to check her personal computer. She changes clothes while her laptop is starting up. Laptop in hand, she walks back downstairs into her home office, knowing if she is in there when he gets home, he won’t bother her. She makes sure to close the door. Half the time he doesn’t even believe she is working but he sure is happy enough to deposit her incoming client checks.

She opens up her calendar. The first thing she sees is that his own brother’s birthday party was on the fifteenth only a couple of months ago. She remembers specifically being there on her own because the original time was during the morning and he could make that but suddenly her mother in law changed the time to be in the evening and he refused to go, saying this meeting was too important. He picked sex with a stranger over his own brother’s birthday.

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She looks back more, a wedding, an engagement party, friend’s birthday party, her own industry gathering and now she stares at the calendar even more. Looking at the notation almost a year ago, her own birthday, she had written in that since her real birthday was on a weekday and she had many clients to serve at the time, they decided to celebrate over the weekend. He couldn’t even give her a whole day on her own birthday. She is positive he went to this swinging sex meeting on her own birthday last year, instead of celebrating with him she went out with some old friends for a few drinks and they went to a late movie, she also remembers coming home before him.

“Oh Madeline, you’re such a naïve idiot!” she screams to herself. “How can you live like this?! Over three years of deceit and you let all of this happen. Every month for over three years you *let* him go to this meeting regardless of what your plans were. You are the biggest jerk there is.” Madeline takes a deep breath and prints out the past three years of calendars. She begins to write down all the times he missed events, all the times he let her down for a romp under the sheets with people other than her. Thinking back about what Bob and Carol said –

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as far as she knows, her husband could have been with either or both of them at any given moment.

When she is done with gathering the dates and times, she realizes she needs to leave this marriage, she needs to do so on solid ground though. Madeline takes a walk around her house a couple of times to collect her thoughts and start thinking more clearly. She comes back and looks through her finances and comes up with a number of how much she has contributed to their joint account in the past three years. The first year and a half of their marriage she can’t count, she specifically remembers these meetings started a little over three years ago. She prints and copies her past three tax returns as proof as to how much she contributed to their household. But what kind of household do you have when you aren’t good enough to keep your husband in your own bed? What kind of joint account do you have when you now see that your husband has taken out a hundred dollars each month on the fifteenth of every month? What could he possibly be doing with this? Every month? Does he pay for these get-togethers? Does he pay the woman in the blue dress?

Madeline’s hands are shaking, she doesn’t know what to do any more. What can she do?

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Where can she go? Where will she be safe? Safe, that is what she needs right now, to feel safe. Safe from this kind of garbage. Safe from this feeling of being unworthy and useless. Ugly and unable to satisfy your own husband, she feels ashamed more than anything else right now. She tries to keep her professional head on and think of this as a business and what she would need to do to get out of a merger that went wrong.

~ ~ ~

Wade has been working at building his business with his best friend Weston for almost five years now. He had left his hometown shortly after the only girl he ever cared about, married another man, despite his and others’ continued protests. Someone not worthy of her, someone Wade distrusted but could not get her to see otherwise. So, Weston and he took their business model many hundreds of miles away and they have made the company bigger than they had dreamed it would be at this point.

They surpassed their five-year financial goals by thirty percent and, more importantly, did this a year early, they are headed towards their next goal and as things look today, they will get there without

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any difficulties. Weston and his wife of two years are the happiest people Wade knows and he is happy to call Razy his friend as well.

Today’s big meeting went rather well if it were not for all the times Weston decided to email him and not call him back when he asked him to. When Wade became agitated about all of the texts and e-mails, he had called his friend but Weston did not answer. Instead he received an instant message that read ‘some of us are busy on important things too. Go with the original plan.’ And that was that.

He re-stated the original plan to the clients and they liked this idea so much they signed on for longer than expected. To Wade, the meeting was a rousing success, although frustrating with all of his people not responding to him.

Weston and he bought a run down, old, twenty-five-room hotel to build their business in. The building only has four floors and that suited them very well. They put Wade’s office on the top floor because he likes to work alone, along with all their archived files, business supplies, promotional items and a couple of large conference rooms.

Weston works on the third floor with their marketing and finance people. The second floor has their graphics team and social media as well as

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website experts. Then, scattered around all the floors, one can find the human resources director as well as several secretaries, only the tech guy is on the ground level. All in all, they have seventy-five people working for them now. The first floor of the building, where there used to be banquet rooms, has been used to have office parties and an occasional casual meeting from some of the managers with their people. Only one office is there, Wade’s cousin, he is in charge of everything technical and security. They kept the original lobby as a lobby but updated the decor to their personal aesthetics. They also hired a retired marine, whom they call Major, to be their security guard at the front door. He keeps track of all who come and go.

After his confusing meeting, the rest of Wade’s day goes by relatively quickly. Nothing in particular happens. He is on his way down the elevator when Weston steps in on his floor. At first, Wade remains quiet then he says, “What the hell happened today that you couldn’t call me back when I asked you to? Is everything going well? Something I need to know about?” he looks to his friend.

Weston looks at his long-time friend. “You’re kidding right?” he says. The elevator gets to the main lobby and Weston continues with, “Not all

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of us get to have liaisons with our secretaries and have it effect who we speak to and encourage our ego, but hey you do as you wish, your business I only work here,” he says in disgust. For the first time since they started the business, Weston is frustrated with Wade.

The doors are about to close and Wade grabs his friend’s arm and pulls him back inside the elevator. He pushes the stop movement button and looks at Weston in the eye, “Want to explain what that comment was about? Because from where I stand, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he says.

Weston stares at his friend, really stares at him, right in the eye. “Really, you don’t know what is going on under your own nose?” he asks.

“I come to work, I work my ass off, I expect the same from everyone else. My secretary is more of a figurehead than anything else. I generally use her to keep my calendar and make my flight arrangements when I need them. She does no paperwork for me, nor does she ever see me in any way that is not professional. So, yeah, explain please. I won’t let you out of this elevator until you do,” he crosses his arms with his back near the buttons of the elevator. The last thing he wants is for anyone to

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think he is favoring one person over the next. Especially his secretary, whom he has been looking for ways to get rid of recently. He rarely uses her, it is a waste of resources.

Weston looks at his friend again, he should have known it was all a lie, he has been so caught up in his own work, his logical brain wasn’t working. “Your secretary won’t patch in my calls, she says you are in a meeting and when I say that I know this and that I’m calling to give you the information you need for said meeting, she told me that I was not on the list of people to attend the meeting and that she will give you the message that I called. Same goes for all of the other people you ever try to reach during a meeting. Whether a phone meeting or one in person.

Have you given her such power? To decide who gets to see you and who doesn’t? She has taken it upon herself to tell everyone that she is the only secretary on the top floor for a reason. That the two of you don’t need anyone else up there.

I can see by the look of shock on your face that this comes as a total surprise to you. My secretary is my ears and eyes around the building. She hears all, and reports all. She is the one who told me about the people who wanted to use the lobby as

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a party venue and that they were going to convince the security guard that I approved the party. Ring a bell?” Weston asks.

“Yeah, we got rid of all four of them the next day. They were a bit shocked. In the end, all of our new people are working for the greater good of the company. I can’t believe she has done this to me. No wonder it has been remarkably quiet these past few weeks upstairs. We need to change this, how can I? I actually don’t even need her every day, I can do my calendar by myself. Come to think of it, any of the work I give her I can do on my own. I don’t need memos typed or other correspondence. I had assumed everyone has a secretary so I got one on my floor.

How could I have let her get away with this? Is there a way I can catch her doing this? Make her see I am on to her and don’t appreciate her in my business? Weston, this is not good,” Wade says shaking his head and is now leaning back into the wall of the elevator. Feeling stupid, feeling duped.

“I agree. I’m sorry I snapped at you before, my emotions got the better of me and I should have known better. We’ve been together too damn long to have you pull something like this. I’m sorry. Really,”

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he reaches to shake Wade’s hand, and Wade gladly receives the gesture

Weston continues, “Maybe we need to rethink where everyone is. In our original plan, this worked, maybe we are wrong. Maybe we need to shake things up. It will have everyone questioning their positions especially our chief financial officer, why do we need someone else to sign our checks anyway? We are a nice sized company, seventy-five people strong, but between the two of us, we should be able to sign the payroll checks ourselves once a month, one time you will sign and the second I will. My secretary, as well as many others, tells me that he is nothing but a blowhard. He walks around making sure everyone knows his title and how important he is, he has people that work for him now, that I recently realized we don’t have on payroll. In other words, there are four people here who come in everyday, have been given access to our accounts I think, and work with him directly but don’t even work for us.

We’ve given him too much *carte blanche* in what he spends money on. This needs to change, how do we do all that?” Weston throws back at Wade. But before Wade responds Weston says, “You can monitor her calls by the way, and what she

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is doing on the phone from your office phone. For example, if she sends in a call, there is a light that shows whether or not she has hung up. She may be listening in to your conversations and you don’t know she is because you never paid attention to what that light is. Maybe that is why she suddenly thinks she is so important. She feels she knows our secrets and plans on using them against you and me somehow.”

“I don’t have secrets. But we do have clients that need to be kept discrete,” he says calmly, “I have even less patients for someone who is listening in to my conversations. You can show me how to set this up in the morning? Also, before you come in tomorrow, stop by the bank and ask them what we need to do to change the signatures on all of our accounts. The next payroll is this Friday the fifteenth, that gives us three days to overhaul the whole place. We can do this. I want to fire him. I never really liked him and with this last paycheck we will give him what his contract says we owe him for early termination, in person. You and I will be in the office together. We will tell him together, we will expose that we know about these other four people. But we need to find out who they are.”

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There is a knock on the door, “Gentlemen? Is the elevator stuck or are you having a private meeting in there?” the Major asks.

Wade smiles and hits the button to open the door. “Sorry Major, we had some issues to get over and I’m glad we did. Question for you? Do you know about the men who come in the building each day that don’t work here? Does that sound familiar?” Wade asks

“Let’s go sit down, I’ll explain,” Major says. The men follow the Major to the lobby seats. “Hold on,” he walks to the front door and locks it first, then comes back to join them.

“I proposed a new security ID tag system to you a few months ago, they are the reason why. Your CFO came in one day telling me these four people will be coming in each day and that I was not to card them at all. That, on his word, and his word alone, I should let them in. When I began to argue he became quite agitated and began telling me about how I should learn my place. Not only do I not trust these people but I think he is running a side business right under your nose.

I’ve seen them use the conference rooms on the fourth floor when you’re not around Wade. I’ve

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never given them a key, I don’t know how they have one, but I can guess.

So, I will tell you now, again, my security plan. I have an old service buddy who can do this for you in a matter of hours not days. Tomorrow would be the best day because all of them won’t be in tomorrow including your CFO. I was given word that they will be out of the office tomorrow in case someone is looking for them. Because as we know, the place can’t run without contacting him a few times a day, his words, not mine. I assure you.

Here is what needs to be done. Each and every person gets a picture taken. In order to get your picture taken, you must have a recent pay stub or receipt that proves you work here, I will take the pictures and print them out a new ID card to be given to them on their next payroll day, which is coming up in a matter of days. It takes forty-eight hours to process all of this and that will bring us to Friday. Each new ID card needs to be swiped to get through me and then again when they get to the floor they are assigned to. Each ID will include their name, position and floor their office is on so if you’re planning on changing anything you need to let me know now. Ok, I’ve said my piece. Sorry if it was

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in the wrong tone. Sometimes my military voice still comes out,” he looks from one to the other.

“Ok, let’s look at this logically,” Weston says. “On occasion we have clients that really don’t want to be seen, yet somehow they always are because we have to take them all the way upstairs to the quieter conference rooms. This lobby is quite large for a business our size, how about we take off a third since the front door is not centered anyway. We make a wall of one-way glass so that no one can see in but people inside can see out so they don’t feel closed in. We should be able to make at least two conference rooms right here on this floor along that wall. Most likely even larger than the ones on your floor Wade. We can even put in a vending machine because sometimes people are looking for something and we have to send a secretary out to make a drink run. Then, we move everyone around, shake things up,” he says looking to Wade.

“Let’s start with you moving up to the fourth floor with me. There is another large office next to mine, not sure why we didn’t do this to begin with. On the opposite wall is that large conference room which we will move in our business manager who handles all things non-payroll and we will move in the older payroll guy, the young one is too close to

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the CFO. No reason the two managers can’t share an office that large. Right now, that room has a table that seats fifteen. They can each have a desk as well as all the files they need, plus room for each of them to be able to sit and talk to someone if necessary. The files can be set as room dividers. With the two of us being the ones to sign the checks this coming payroll, no reason for them to be on any other floor than ours,” Wade says.

“Yes, love that idea.” Weston begins to write this all down, names of people, titles and what floor they will be on. “We will move my secretary upstairs as well and she will sit in the desk in front of your office, do work for both of us and those managers, your current one will be moved to the secretary pool in the center of all of this along with two of the other secretaries and they will do work depending on who needs what from them on the second or third floor,” Weston comments.

“Let’s also put the head of human resources on the second floor to give everyone access to him without them thinking we are watching, in case they have complaints and they don’t want us to see them walking in. Let’s pull up the head of marketing and our head of social media up to our floor too, they can share the second conference room up there. If they

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don’t like to share that will be tough on them. Better than the cubicle they are sitting in now. That second one is the one with the full wall of windows. I won’t tolerate complaining though, I’m telling you that now,” Weston takes a breath.

“How do we go about telling everyone and getting all of this moved in time for the next payroll?” Wade asks.

“May I?” the Major asks.

“Sure, go right ahead,” Weston says.

“As the head of security, I will send out an email tonight to all of those you have listed as being on payroll. I will post myself at the far end of the lobby to take the pictures tomorrow and set up each person’s ID based on the list you’re making now. I will inform them when they will receive this new ID, and their new room assignments as they come in the next day. I will have my moving crew come in at 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning tomorrow, in that hour before anyone gets here, you’d be surprised how much can be done when the office is void of people. The crew I know is very efficient. They did the re-org for the Montel building downtown in two hours and our building is a third of that size and a quarter of the people.

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I can easily move all desks and computers with the company of a friend of mine. We will move everyone upstairs first, rearrange the rest of the floors so they don’t look empty and I can get you an estimate on getting the lobby done within two weeks, that’s before your big meeting with that guy who wants to use his money for good instead of evil now,” Major laughs and so do the men in front of him. This is a joke they’ve had between them since that particular client came in. “With the move done before people are here, there is nothing to argue about,” Major looks from one to the other to see if he has overstepped his position are not.

Weston looks at Wade and smiles, “I like this plan, what about you?” he asks.

Wade sits back in his chair and thinks over all that has occurred in the past hour. He takes a deep breath and sighs. “Not what I was expecting when I walked into work this morning. Needing a new secretary, firing one of my officers and overhauling my whole building. Gentlemen, I’d say we need a drink. Care to join us Major? You have a lot to do tomorrow, need to relax a few minutes tonight,” he smiles.

“While I appreciate the respect you two always give me at work, if I’m going to go out with

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you for a drink, can you please call me Hal?” he smiles.

~ ~ ~

Madeline has made up her mind, she needs to leave this town. She needs to go far away and redo her adult life. She has decided that the best time to escape will be on Friday morning, long before her husband gets home to push her to go with him to his ‘meeting’. Or worse, to have his friends come over early and show her that this whole, have sex with anyone, is not such a big deal. Once again, she finds herself in shudders at the idea of having those men as well as Bob and/or his wife touch her in an intimate way.

She had studied her bank accounts and the pattern of her husband’s withdrawals from their joint account. He does everything by the clock, routine is what he understands best. So, as per his usual, he goes to the bank every fifteenth by 11:00 in the morning. Which means she has to get to the bank no earlier than 11:45 to make her withdrawal and leave.

“Hello Mom, how are you today?” Madeline asks.

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“Doing fine, how are you? You sound tired dear, how was the wedding the other day, or was it last night?” her mom asks.

“Very nice, the venue was beautiful, something you would have appreciated. High vaulted ceilings and lots of great chandeliers hanging from them. Listen, I have a favor to ask you, can you meet me at the Breakfast Bar on Friday morning? Say, 9:30 or 10:00?” Madeline asks.

“Well isn’t that a nice invitation? I’d love to honey. Just the three of us like old times,” she says smiling

Madeline thinks about that for a moment, oh no. She can’t say this to her father, he will kill her husband, hopefully ex by then but still. Her ex will be dead and her father will be in jail, “Actually Mom, I was hoping we can make Friday a girl’s only breakfast, we haven’t done that in forever. Besides, I have something personal to talk to you about, if you don’t mind,” she says.

“Oh darling, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize, and here I opened my mouth. Yes, of course it can be the two of us. You sure you’re feeling alright? I really don’t like the tone in your voice, you almost sound scared,” she says sincerely.

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“I’ve had a long week already. I’ll explain all of this on Friday. Thank you, thank you so much for always being there for me,” Madeline hangs up before she starts to cry. She has done enough of that already. She gets out of her car finally and walks into the lawyer’s office she found that is two hours away from her home town.

“Excuse me, I have the 1:00 appointment today,” she says quietly.

“Madeline?” the receptionist asks.

“Yes. That’s me,” she says.

“Please follow me.” Madeline follows the woman to an open door. The receptionist closes the door and leaves.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice. Time is kind of essential here,” Madeline says to the lawyer she spoke with on the phone.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t look to be in dire straits. I mean usually if I get a call like that the woman looks beaten up both physically and emotionally. Please sit, tell me why you are here and why you picked me to help you,” the lawyer says.

“Well, yes. Um. I can explain all of that.” Madeline explains the night of the wedding and what was revealed to her although not directly. She also

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explains the calendar and how many of their personal events he has missed because they came out on the fifteenth of the month. “So, my only alternative is to withdraw what is mine and walk away. I want nothing from him, it would feel as if anything connected to him is tainted with filth. You understand, don’t you?” she looks to him pleading with her eyes.

He nods, she sighs, “I picked your office, by the way, because you are the farthest away from where I live that I was willing to travel to, and you have an incredible reputation as being a very aggressive person when it comes to crimes against women. I don’t know if this is a crime in the literal sense, but I sure feel violated,” she says.

“Madeline, exhale,” he says smiling. She sits back and does that very thing, not realizing she had been holding her breath in the first place.

“I’m honored you checked up on us and that our reputation matches the philosophy in our practice. Don’t feel that you are stupid, the first time I came across this type of lifestyle myself was when I was around twenty-five, I had a friend who invited me to a party. She said it was a social gathering for people who want to meet people in our profession. So, I met her there. Little did I know what was going

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on until I had two women come up to me and start touching me in places they shouldn’t. I remember jumping back from them and spilling my drink.

Then I had asked them what they thought they were doing? One of them answered, and I remember exactly what she said, ‘Doing? What are we doing? Why we are doing the very thing we came here to do. Now walk back over here and we will help you out of those wet clothes.’ After hearing that I looked around the room. Each and every person was doing the same thing with whomever they were near. Some enjoyed it, some moved on to someone else. I stared around the room and watched as people did as they pleased with anyone near them. I excused myself and ran out the door. So, in case you’re wondering, yes, these meetings are as bad as you picture them to be. Possibly even worse with today’s feelings of freedoms,” he pauses.

“Can I ask you a question?” Madeline asks.
“Sure.”

“How did you look at that woman again? I can’t even look at my husband. I can’t look at him without picturing him with her, our so-called friends. I can’t look at the couple of people I knew at the wedding either without wanting to vomit all over

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again. All I want right now, is out. No looking back,” she says.

“I only saw her once after that, she approached me and told me I embarrassed her by leaving, and that now they won’t allow her to bring in a guest anymore who isn’t approved ahead of time. I remember laughing in her face and walking away.

But seriously, about you, where do you plan on going? I’ll need to know how to get in touch with you. If anything is going to come up, it will usually happen within the first few months after quick divorces. Are you going to be able to support yourself? Will you be in touch with family, can I have their number too? I’m sorry for the barrage of questions but since you want this done immediately, then we need to get this all out in the open right away,” he pauses and looks at his new client. Now she looks more like a woman in desperate need. The worry in her eyes has become very apparent.

“I plan on making all those plans this evening. I have an old friend I’m going to call. I’m sure he will take me in initially. Here is my mom’s phone number,” she says with a quiver in her voice. “She will be the only one I am telling about what is happening, and I’m only telling her minutes before I

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leave town this Friday,” her tears begin to fall before she even realizes they are there.

The lawyer comes around his desk and sits next to her with a box of tissues. “This is not your fault Maddy, had he wanted to share this part of him, he would have. He never wanted you to be part of his fantasies or he would have made you his top priority. Here. Take a moment to yourself. I’m going to step out and get some paperwork,” he stands and walks away giving her a minute to collect her thoughts.

He sees his receptionist, his soon to be wife, and he wonders how anyone could be so cruel to the one they promised to love and cherish. Despite his clear instructions to her about keeping things casual in the office he walks over to her and pulls her out of her chair and kisses her deeply. “I will always cherish you, you are the only one in the world for me, please don’t ever forget that,” he looks down at her.

“Rough one?” she asks softly.

“Disgusting one,” he says.

She puts a hand on his shoulder, “I’m sorry honey,” she has no other words. He is hurting, she can tell. She also knows he will tell her why later. He kisses her once more and heads back to his office with the papers.

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“Feeling any better?” he asks.

Madeline can’t get over the fact that he called her Maddy. It must be a sign that she has to call her friend. She has been debating doing this since Sunday. But now her thoughts are clear, she is calling him. Who else? He had made her a promise and she is going to make him live up to it, or at least try to. “You called me Maddy,” she says softly.

“Ah, sorry about that. I had a close friend years ago whose name was Madeline. I suppose old habits are hard to get rid of. Not professional. I apologize,” he says. “Here are the documents you need to sign today to get things started. I’m going to go over them with you one at a time. Any time you feel you don’t understand something ask me please. This has to be fully understood before signing,” he looks at his client to see if she is doing well or not.

She looks into his eyes and smiles, “Ok.”

For the next two hours Madeline and the lawyer sit in his office and read through the most rudimentary divorce papers. Simple, nothing to give, nothing to ask for. The townhouse they live in was her husband’s before they were married, her car is a lease, and is up soon, she will let her brother borrow the car until the lease is up. She has already deleted her contacts from their joint phone account and

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added the important names into a pay as you go phone of her own, in her own name only and paid extra to have a private number. She will use this new phone after she leaves in case her husband contacts her and she needs to tell the lawyer. She has no other assets to argue over. She is leaving all of their shared belongings, she will take only her clothing. She is walking away asking for no alimony from him. She wants nothing to do with him. Nothing to do with his dirty money. What if he gets paid for this?

“Ok, when you have all your arrangements made, please call me and let me know what they are so we can keep in touch. On Friday, the fifteenth of July, we will be serving your husband with the divorce papers at his office around 4:30pm so that you will already be long gone. Most men don’t like such public displays, actually a woman probably wouldn’t either, but sometimes this is the best way to get them to sign quickly.

Now, on a personal note, I suggest that you leave the engagement ring so this doesn’t become something he will say you stole. Guys do weird things when hit with papers they didn’t know were coming. Often times they are really cocky about saying they were going to do this anyway, or that she never deserved him, you get the picture. If you have no

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sentiment towards any item he ever bought you, leave the item in the house.

I will meet you Friday morning to personally deliver your copy of all of the documents. Then we will keep in touch only as necessary,” he says in his most professional voice.

“Thank you. I’m meeting my mother at 9:30 Friday morning at the Breakfast Bar. Going to the bank at around 11:45 to make my withdrawal, I’m sure to avoid him at that hour,” she says. “From there, the airport.”

“Perfect, I believe I’ve been there before. I’ll find you. Oh, and Madeline. I’m sorry again for calling you Maddy,” he says.

“Oh, I wasn’t insulted, I didn’t mind at all really. My old friend used to call me that too, but no one else since him. It caught me off guard. I’m going to go try and call him again today. He is a hard person to reach,” he better be reachable and not avoiding me, I don’t know where else to go. She thinks to herself as she walks out of the office to the front door. Maybe I’ll have to call Weston if he doesn’t answer this time, she thinks to herself. Yeah, that will work. I have to leave under all costs.

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She turns one more time to look back at the nice man who has helped her all afternoon. “Thank you again.”

“We’ll take care of our part, you take care of yourself,” he smiles, and she walks out the door feeling a little better that some of her plan is in motion.

She dials again, please answer damn it. “Hello, may I please speak to Wade?” she asks.

“Mr. Noble is in a meeting, I told you that before. He is an important man, you can’t call up a company and expect to speak to their president because you ask in a desperate voice,” she says annoyed and hangs up.

~ ~ ~

“Weston, I’ve seen three calls come in and none of them have been put through to me yet. One came in first thing in the morning. Then an hour and half later and now it came in again. Is there a way to check the phone number from my phone?” Wade asks.

“I believe you can put in the caller ID mode and all calls will show up, then you can choose to let her get them or pick them up yourself. Also, open your door, listen to her and see how and what she

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says to people. I never understood why your door is always closed anyway,” Weston says.

“Because she keeps closing it so I won’t be disturbed she says. I’ve never closed the door myself. Hold on, let me open the door now. Major really pulled through this morning. I came in at 7:00 and he already had his crew here working on moving up all of the desks he said he would. We made sure that each room looks as if it was always set up that way. So far not one complaint from anyone. How about you? Anyone grumbling down there?” Wade asks then turns to his secretary, “Leave the door open, I never asked you to close it before and I don’t want it closed now,” he walks away before she can answer. They decided that they won’t move Weston and his secretary up until Wade can catch the secretary and decide how bad things are and what to do about her position here.

“People love the idea of the new ID badges actually. From what I hear, all those that are being moved upstairs are happy and all those being shifted around the other floors seem happy as well. I suppose we needed to shake things up to get everyone to pay attention again. I’m coming up in a few minutes myself. The movers came down and told me that my office will be set up in the next half

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an hour or so. Maybe I’ll hang out in your office. Sounds as if your secretary is up to her tricks this morning. I’m pretty sure the same person will call back if they’ve done a few times already. Or they may call me if they know you well enough to call so much, they probably know me too. I’ll let my secretary know. You should know, my secretary is more than happy to be working for both of us. She says the other woman needs to be taken down a level or two. Things will get interesting when our financial officer comes back in tomorrow. I’m surprised no one has said anything to him,” Weston answers.

“I think that is because no one likes him and they all want to see his reaction when he gets back and sees that his office hasn’t been moved upstairs. Oh, call coming in. Let me go see this one., he hangs up to listen to his secretary.

“I really don’t care who you claim to be. You’ve called three times already and I keep telling you the president of the company doesn’t talk to anyone who calls in without a purpose. If you’d tell me your name, I can leave a message and see if he will call later. You’re lucky we are even here so early today,” she takes a breath and is about to say something else when Wade interjects from his doorway.

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“Who is on the phone that you are speaking to so harshly?” he asks.

“No one, she has been calling for two days saying she knows you and needs to speak to you. She won’t give me a name and won’t say what company she is from,” she says to him proving she is protecting him from something.

“No one asked you to screen my calls. Ever. Ask for a name,” he says as he stands watching her with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“Whom do you want me to say has been harassing him?” she asks in a condescending tone.

“Please tell Skippy this is Maddy,” Madeline’s voice is quivering now.

“Seriously? You want me to tell the president of the company that someone is calling him Skippy and her name is Maddy? Are you for real?” she snaps.

“PUT IT THROUGH!” Wade yells at her still standing at the door. “I’ll deal with you later,” he snaps and runs to his phone. He hasn’t heard that name in years and there is only one woman who calls him Skippy. Madeline, Maddy. His Maddy.

He practically falls over to get to his desk chair and answers the phone. “Hello,” he says hoping she is still there.

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“Skippy, it’s me Maddy,” she says softly.

Wade’s mind is in a hundred places now but the blinking light distracts him for a second, he sees that his secretary is still listening to the call. He presses the button that Weston had showed him and says into the phone, “Hold on,” he walks to the door and looks at his secretary.

“You’ve overstepped way too many boundaries this morning, with this call alone. Who knows how many I didn’t catch, I’ll deal with you and your position here later, right now I have a private call to take, one that should have pushed through over any other call I’ve ever received. Way over bounds,” he slams his door and gets back to his call.

“You still there Maddy girl?” he asks somewhat breathless.

“Yeah. I’m here.” Her voice is soft and tender but he hears something else, something is not quite right with her, he has always been able to tell. Oh no, he hears fear. He is certain of what he hears.

“Been a long time Maddy, how are you doing?” he asks softly trying to keep his composure.

Madeline takes a deep breath. She can do this, she has to do this, all the other wheels are in motion. Wade waits for her to answer, something is

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wrong, he knows even more now that his gut is right, he knows her so well, he can tell, he can still feel her. He sends a text to Weston ‘*Maddy is on the phone, she wouldn’t put it through, said the caller is harassing me by calling so much, for two days!!*’

Weston sends back a message, ‘*coming*’

“Maddy?” Wade asks again.

“Skippy, things aren’t as happily ever after as I’d thought they’d be,” Madeline takes another breath and blows it out slowly to keep herself from crying right now.

Weston walks up to Wade’s office three steps at a time and sees the secretary trying to punch buttons of the phone. He pulls the phone up from the table. “Trying to tap back into the call you don’t belong on? I suggest you rethink where you belong in this company, or even if you belong here at all,” he unplugs the phone and sends a text down to the Major ‘*secretary worse than we thought, needs supervision. Wade has a very important, personal call I need to help him with. She has been blocking this call for two days.*’

Immediately he gets back a message, ‘*be there in 5*’

Weston puts the phone on the floor on the opposite side of the desk. “Don’t move this. Ever,”

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he says, then he walks into the office and watches as his friend is barely holding himself together. Madeline was his only love. Really, his *only* love. He told Weston that if some other guy had won her heart, then he needed to leave. So, they left together shortly after college and started up their company.

Weston sits down in the chair across from Wade. He taps the desk so Wade looks up and sees him. Wade nods and Weston picks up a second receiver to the phone.

“Fairy tales do come true though Maddy. Weston and I are still together, we started the business we always talked about and we now have seventy-five people working for us in an old hotel we converted to be our place of business. We have four floors.

Weston married the woman of his dreams and together we go to movies and eat sloppy bar-b-que as often as possible. But her sauce is not as good as yours,” he shrugs not knowing what else to say, Weston nods.

“I’ll bet I know who he married too,” she says grateful for another topic for a moment. “She is not as tall as him, probably comes up to his shoulder at best, she has deep green eyes with strawberry blonde hair and she must have that hair all the way

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down to the middle of her back at least,” she smiles thinking of how handsome Weston is and how he used to describe his perfect woman to her.

The three of them used to go out and have bar-b-que beef sandwiches at least once a week and movies once a month. Then there were the ice cream runs as well. Plus, plenty of laughter, always a reason to laugh with Wade, why did she leave him for the man she is with now? No one can say the sex was good enough because he obviously gives that to anyone who asks, why give to your wife, he has no purpose in being monogamous. No purpose to please her.

“Maddy, are you calling from a cellular phone?” Wade asks.

“Um, yes, why?” she asks.

“Hold on,” Wade sends a picture to her of Weston and his wife, she is exactly as Madeline described.

Madeline hears her phone ding with a message, she looks down and sees her men. Wade standing tall on top of a chair toasting the new bride and groom. Then there is Weston and his wife, Weston looks as good as ever and his wife. “Oh my,” she says out loud. She looks exactly as Madeline had described moments ago.

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Wade has to fight back tears, if anyone could have called out who Weston married, the only person could have been Maddy. The three of them were so close they finished each other’s thoughts and sentences. They knew if someone was having a bad day, what to do that would cheer them up, depending on the person, that could mean hot dogs with all the trimmings, or ice cream sundaes. Hearing her voice is not enough, he needs to see her, needs to hold her.

“You didn’t call me to talk about Weston and his wife, why did you call Maddy? After so much time, why did you call me, of all people?” he asks remembering full well the day of her wedding was the day his heart was ripped out of his chest and thrown to the ground. But hearing her, he would take her in if she would ask, he would give this amazing woman all he had. Forever is not long enough to be with her.

“Do you remember the promise you made me a long time ago?” she asks nervously.

Wade looks to Weston whose memory is better on details. Weston quickly writes down something on a piece of paper. Wade smirks, “I promised you that you’d always be safe with me. Always be loved, always be cherished.”

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“Yeah, well, about that first part. Skippy, I need a safe place to go to for a while. Need to start anew, my whole adult life is not what it is supposed to be. Take two, in other words,” her tears begin to come again. Damn, she thinks to herself, he is going to be able to hear these, feel these.

Wade has to take a couple deep breaths himself and so does Weston. Why does she need to be safe? Wade quickly writes something down on the paper Weston used before, ‘I’m going to kill him!’

Weston grabs his hand before it leaves the paper, he shakes his head no to remind Wade he is on the phone. Wade nods, “When do you need to come Maddy girl?” he asks with his heart broken, he can hear her tears that she is trying to hide, he can feel them. Their closeness is back, she is his again.

“Friday, is that too soon?” she asks through tears.

“Maddy, we’re all the way on the east coast now. Do you know what airport to go to?” he asks. Before she answers he sends her a text message as to which airport is closer to him and most convenient.

“Ok, let me see what kind of flight I can find. Oh no,” she says.

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“What’s wrong Maddy?” he asks. “Should I come get you now?” he looks over to Weston who nods in agreement.

“The only flight out on Friday is 3:00, with the time difference that means I won’t land until close to midnight your time. I’ll get a hotel for the night,” she says.

“You can come on Saturday too Maddy,” he says

“No, no, oh I can’t do that. I must leave this Friday,” her voice is shaking from her tears and her fears now. “I’ll go somewhere else for now; and catch up with you later,” she catches her breath and tries to stay calm.

“You’ll do no such thing. Now, book the flight while I’m still on the phone with you, then send me the itinerary right away so I can keep tabs on the flight,” he tries to say this softly, but it comes out abrupt. He looks to Weston with daggers in his eyes, he is going to kill the man who has ruined her this much that she has to run away. Weston nods again, he understands his friend’s motives and wants to give him the assurance that he is right, she is in a bad way and needs to be saved. Weston is happy she thought of Wade first.

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“Are you sure Skippy, I can wait until the next morning to see you. I’ve waited this long,” she says, tears still running down her face. Oh, how did she let this man go? The one who promised her everything? You *are* an idiot Madeline, I don’t care what the lawyer says.

“I’m sure,” he says holding down his desire to run out to get her right now.

“I’ll be traveling light. I’ll only stay a couple days, until I can find a place of my own and get myself situated with a job and all.” Madeline is sitting in her home office now and is shaking. Her husband is due home soon and she needs to pull herself together to make some dinner.

“We’ll discuss all of this when you get here. Maddy, I can’t wait to see you. Our trio will be whole again. I’m going to tell Weston you’re coming,” he states.

“I’ve missed you both so much, only recent events have showed me how much I need you two back in my life. I have to go now,” Madeline quickly hangs up. Her nerves are falling apart and if she stays on the phone too long, she will never make her husband dinner and he will be suspicious of her whole day.

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She forwards her itinerary to the email Skippy sent her. Now all she has to do is get through today and tomorrow. How can she do this without falling apart? How can she look him in the eye over their kitchen table and behave as if nothing has changed? What if Bob and his wife invite themselves over before Friday? Oh no. Her whole world has changed and currently she feels her life is upside down.

“I need to take my mind off of all of this. What should I do?” she asks out loud. Mindlessly she opens up her business laptop and does another search of their joint bank account. This time she is going to look through all of their finances and not only do a search for the fifteenth of the month as she had done last time.

What she sees shocks her yet again. There, right in front of her, is a withdrawal of five thousand dollars from their savings account. She checks to see the date, this happened about a year ago. Madeline sits back and thinks hard on what might have been going on at that time. Who or what would her husband have needed that kind of money for? Why didn’t they talk about this? They always talk about the bigger expenses of the house.

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When she started working, and really bringing in some good money, her husband had decided that her money should go into their savings and his will go into their checking account. She clicks on the dollar amount to get more details of that transaction. This was a wire transfer to..... Madeline screams. She lets out a shrill really. She had specifically said no to this so-called investment, telling her husband that what he was thinking of putting her hard-earned money into is nothing but a sham. Nothing will come of it, they will never see a dime of this money back. That night was one of the few times they have had a full-blown argument with each other. Screaming match actually.

She told him he should use his own money for something so stupid and he proceeded to tell her that whatever she has belongs to him because the law is always on the side of the husband when arguments involve money and how the money is used. Madeline will never forget that day, he had said some very mean and hurtful things to her. She had called her brother to yell at him about asking for the money in the first place for a crazy scheme that would never work. Her brother had apologized and told her that after he had spoken to her, he saw what the money was really going to be used for and never ended up

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investing himself. He apologized many times that he brought the idea to her husband. He had no idea he followed up.

She continues to look and sees another thousand dollars that was taken two years ago, also a wire transfer but this one went to a person. She writes down the name, amount and date for each of these transactions. When she finishes, she has written down eight different times he has taken out at least a thousand dollars or more in the past three and a half years. Her hands are shaking, the tears haven’t stopped falling since she was on the phone. She needs to leave the house and not be here when he gets home.

Madeline takes her laptops with her, both her business and her personal one. She runs to her room and quickly packs her suitcase with about three weeks’ worth of clothes. Hoping this is enough, “Well, it will have to be,” she says to no one.

She takes some of her personal hygiene products and a couple of items her mother had given her that she uses in the kitchen and packs those in a second suitcase. She finds anything that belongs to her personally and finds room for that as well. No way can she stay in this house one more hour. He has transferred money to the same woman all this

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time. This one isn’t a business account, Madeline knows the difference in the bank numbers as to when one is personal or business. Who is he paying off? How can one woman be duped so often and for so long? If she hadn’t felt like a fool before, she certainly does now. Not to notice these withdrawals, has she been blind? Sleeping?

One more walk through the house and she sees an empty kitchen table. She has to do something that won’t make him nervous or suspicious. Not that he puts too much thought into her obviously. Quickly she makes him a sandwich with deli meats, lettuce, tomato, onion and a combination of his favorite condiments. She slices the sandwich open and fills the plate with his favorite potato chips. She sets a can of cola and a glass of ice next to the plate. She grabs the notepad off of the refrigerator and writes ‘*I need to visit a client. Very urgent, could mean big money for my business. I’ll contact you later.*’

“Later as in never,” she screams at the piece of paper.

Madeline checks her watch, he won’t be home for at least a half an hour, she has plenty of time to get to a hotel and check in using cash so there is no trace of her. She runs out to her car and

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throws everything in the trunk. Her hands haven’t stopped shaking since she found all of this information about her life. What else does she not know about?

Pulling into the hotel’s parking lot, her phone rings. She looks down nervously, the caller identification says the call is from her brother. “Hello Ralph, what is new?” she tries to sound calm but she fails miserably. She had sent a mass text to all of her contacts on this phone to say she has a new number, she wasn’t expecting anyone to use this so soon.

“Listen Sis, I’m not going to be soft here, I heard a very strange rumor about your husband and I think you need to know about this right away. Are you in a place where I can speak freely?” he asks.

“I’m in a hotel parking lot, an hour away,” she says slowly in order to keep her head focused.

“Which one? I’ll come to you. This should not be done over the phone,” he says.

“The Royal Crown,” she says.

“I’m at a client, not too far from you. Don’t move. I’ll find your car,” he says and rushes out the door.

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The tap on her car window wakes Madeline. She hadn’t even known that she fell asleep. She looks up and sees her brother. Madeline shakes her head and turns her car off. She gets out of the car and looks at her brother, his face full of concern.

He pulls her in for a hug. A long, tight hug. She gladly accepts this right now. She hasn’t had any loving touch since long before the wedding she went to recently. She takes a deep breath and looks up at him, “Thanks for that. You don’t know what that contact means for me right now.” Without another word, she opens her trunk with the button on her key fob and takes out her suitcases, her life. Her brother immediately takes them from her and follows her into the hotel straight over to the check-in counter.

“I need a room until Friday morning please,” she says.

The clerk finds that the only room they have immediately available is a suite, Ralph immediately says, “No problem, use this credit card to pay please.” Madeline looks to her brother, he must know something big and seeing her suitcases, he knows she is leaving. If he pays, he also knows she can’t be traced by a money transaction. Thank you, at least one of us is smart, she thinks to herself.

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They walk quietly up to her suite and walk in. He sets down her suitcases and she looks to her brother, she puts a finger up for him to be quiet while she makes a phone call. She calls the lawyer and explains what she is doing and why. This way she only has to say her story once and not repeat the information to her brother.

“Ok, I have all of this written down. We will check into each and every one of these people and figure out who this woman is that is receiving the money. Where are you now?” he asks.

Madeline tells him and also says who is with her. “I’d like to hear what he has to say, can you put this on speaker?”

She does, “Hello brother of Madeline. I’m her divorce and anything else she needs done lawyer, please explain to her why you are here, I need to hear this as well. What we thought was going to be a simple matter of infidelity, may not be after all. You’re on record. Please tell us what is going on,” he encourages.

Ralph looks to his sister. She nods. “I was visiting a client of mine in her home. I am a physical therapist and I occasionally have to make house calls after someone has major surgery. That being said, there I was getting her to do some stretches for her

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shoulders and her hip when she asks me if I’d ever be interested in a swing party. I had no idea what this was so I ignorantly asked. Boy, am I sorry I did.

After she explained what goes on, she also told me about when they are and that she is allowed to bring in a guest as long as they are informed and announced beforehand. I told her no way a bit abruptly and she seemed to take offense to that. After that I was no longer willing to be hands on for her therapy session and I would only talk to her and tell her what to do or demonstrate so she can copy me. When I got back to my office, I told my boss what happened and that maybe they should only send female therapists to that house. His response to me was very awkward, he says that a female therapist wouldn’t matter because those parties cross all sorts of lines of normal.

Then he began to list previous patients we had that were part of the same swing community. One of which is your husband Maddy. Remember he was in need of our services after he pulled his shoulder out? My boss knows about this community because any time he tries to book a person on the fifteenth of the month they say they can’t come unless the appointment ends before 2:30 pm giving them time to go to said meet ups. The weird part is

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that my boss didn’t seem as bothered by this as I am. I suppose for those involved, its normal. But Madeline, I’m so sorry. I’m so very sick from hearing about this. My guess is, by these suitcases, you’ve recently heard about this too or something worse than that is making you run,” he finishes and looks at his sister, tears running down her face, he is going to kill the man, with his bare hands, wait until his father hears about this.

“Ok, now here is the plan. Madeline, you continue on your quest for a better life. I will take care of everything from here. We now have confirmation from an outside source that this event takes place and that he is involved in something you find distasteful and that his actions are all without your knowledge. Infidelity, by definition, is a violation of a couple's assumed or stated contract regarding emotional and/or sexual exclusivity. This is definitely a violation. I believe I will have to call in our private investigator to get to the bottom of the other issues as quickly as we need them to be. Not to worry Madeline, I will still meet you on Friday at 9:30. All will be taken care of, I promise, and if something is not done, I will make sure this is as painless as possible for you. Do you believe me? Do

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you still trust me to get this all done for you?” he asks.

“Yes, I believe I do. Thank you,” she answers, her voice still shaking.

“Stay strong Madeline. You’ve got this. You have a good support group, this will work in your favor, you will see yourself recover in no time. I’m going to hang up now. Your brother, I’m sure, will stay with you until you make your way to the airport on Friday. Bye for now,” the lawyer hangs up and looks down at the paper and numbers in front of him. He does a quick calculation. From a cursory look, the data appears to be showing that her husband has taken almost twelve thousand dollars out of their saving account alone. Some of this can be traced, other monies not as much. He puts in a call to his friend who is an investigator. He knows this will all get solved in the timeframe they need or very close afterwards anyway. The divorce is his priority, these other financial issues may take time to figure out, but he will, and this man will be charged to the fullest they can.

~ ~ ~

Last night Wade and Weston sat for a long time discussing the mental state of their old friend

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Maddy. If they weren’t in the middle of re-organizing their own business this week, Wade would already be on a plane out to go see her. But they have to wait until Friday morning at least so that they can give out the paychecks with their own signature on them and fire their financial officer in person, not on paper.

Today, the day after the big overhaul, they are expecting their financial officer to come in and be angry, instead they receive an e-mail that he is not coming in today because he is working with a client and his time is better spent with the client than in the office today.

On that Wade calls Weston into his office. “What is this dribble? He doesn’t meet with clients. He has no authority to do so. Who the hell is he meeting with?” Wade asks.

“I have no idea, but here is an interesting note, I’m going to call him out on this, we stop this, now,” Weston calls their financial officer on the phone.

“Hello Weston. What is the problem? Can’t survive another day without me?” he says sarcastically.

“Who the hell do you think you are? You have no authority to meet with our clients. Who are

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you meeting with?” Weston asks in a low but angry tone.

“My contract says I am supposed to keep clients happy. So that is what I’m doing. I don’t need a babysitter nor do I need to report to you where I am or who I’m with,” he says with cocky confidence.

“Nor do you need to receive a paycheck from me anymore. We are done with you as of today. No, as of right now actually. All clients will be receiving an email from us in the next ten minutes to inform them you no longer work for our company and anything you say or have said without one of us there is not authorized by us and never has been,” with that Weston hangs up the phone and looks to Wade. “He will either call you in a minute or call one of the people we moved up here. Call over to the bank and let them know he may be coming in as a revenge tactic, that he was fired and because we signed the paper yesterday and he doesn’t even know about that yet he may actually try to take money from us. I’m going to tell the other people here to be on the lookout for him and any call or email he makes to them should be reported to us or Major immediately,” Weston walks out quickly to inform the rest of the building, especially Major.

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Wade calls the bank and speaks directly to the branch manager. “We will be on the lookout sir. I guarantee he will not be able to make any withdrawals. His bank card has already been canceled as of yesterday when the papers were signed by you and your partner, so if he tries to get money from the machine, he will not be able to. His card will be taken and not sent back out to him, I assure you. We will call the police if there is a problem and call you right afterwards, that is our protocol,” the manager says.

“Thank you. We aren’t sure how well he is going to take this. Possible hostile employee we are dealing with,” Wade says. Then he follows up on what Weston said and he sends out a mass email to all of their known clients to inform them of their CFO’s change in employment. He adds that any meetings that this man has made with them privately, before today, was not authorized by Weston or himself and he requested that they contact him immediately of any such meeting and what might have been discussed or promised. Especially if there was a contract with their company name involved or any paper signed by him. None of which were authorized by the owners of the company and that

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their CFO never had such authority to represent them alone.

Wade calls Weston, “Nothing yet, but how arrogant can you be? He must have been doing something on the side, but with our clients? We need to immediately get his password made invalid so he can no longer sign in to our computers remotely or otherwise. I’ll run down to tech support and get them do to do that immediately,” Wade says.

“Ok, I’ll let Major know we may be dealing with a bigger problem than we originally thought,” Weston says and runs down to see their security guard. No one he spoke to so far is surprised by the CFO’s reaction. They will happily report any contact he tries. This doesn’t make him happy, it means they knew about him and decided not to report about his actions to Wade and/or himself.

Wade runs down the steps to their technology manager and tells him what is going on. “To be honest, I did what you’re asking already, yesterday. I saw that everyone was being moved around and he was not. Everyone was given a new ID and he wasn’t. Mostly because he wasn’t here, but no transformation was being done with his position either. I saw the whole new hierarchy and he wasn’t listed. There had to be a reason for this. He has

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been blocked out since yesterday afternoon at around 3:00. His name, social security number, previous passwords and anything else I could think of have been flagged. I even found he had two false names he had signed in as later in the day and I took care of them as well. I was going to tell you this morning but it is only 9:40 and I figured you needed to catch your breath from yesterday. I’m sorry for being impulsive,” he tells Wade.

“Good thing you’re my cousin. Otherwise I might be concerned that someone is second guessing my moves. Although I’m a little scared with what you can do without me knowing,” he says.

“Truth is, if you didn’t like any of what I did there is a way of undoing it all very simply and I was going to show that to you today too. I have no intention of screwing you out of anything Skippy. I owe you my life. I’ve got your back,” he says.

Wade takes a deep breath upon hearing his nickname again. He needs to get to Maddy, she is in a bad way. Weston and he decided that he is going to fly out there tonight and make sure she gets on the plane tomorrow. He will surprise her at the airport. He went so far as to notify her brother to make sure she gets there. Her brother gave his word that he personally will make sure she will be there.

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He looks at his cousin, “You don’t owe me anything but I appreciate the sentiment. Maybe we should move you upstairs as well,” he says.

“Skippy, look at me. Really look for a change. That accident did more than take my legs away, I’m not exactly the best-looking person around with all of these facial scars. Plus, I can only ride the elevator by myself because of how much room this electric chair takes up. I’m grateful for the education you paid for and the job you gave me. I love this, I love what you do. You’re stuck with me,” he says. “But your stuck with me on this floor, I like being here. Especially if we take fire emergencies into account. I can’t be anywhere else.”

“Conrad. You’ve been like a second brother to me my whole life. Then Weston came along and made us three. We’ve been a great family all our lives,” he says.

“Skippy, I’m not part of your trio, Maddy was,” he says.

“Au contraire my dear cousin. You were part of the three musketeers. Or three stooges as it may be more aptly named when thinking of the three of us boys,” he laughs. “On a serious note though, he really can’t get in?” Wade goes on to explain the

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conversation from this morning and their findings with Major.

“Oh, well, that explains a lot. He has come to me in the past asking for clearance to things he should not have clearance to, I always told him he has to take it up with you and he would say he doesn’t have to because he is your next in command to which I laughed in his face. Literally. I laughed. A few times even. He threatened me once and I said to him not to push that thought because I guarantee I’ll still be the one with the job no matter what he says to you.

Then I told him if he can get you to sign off on this new clearance level, I will give it to him. He tried once and then I took out another sheet of paper you signed and compared the signatures right in front of him. I told him he was a real ass if he thought I’d do that without your knowledge or approval. Next thing I know he is sending down the people that work directly for him to ask for the same thing. I have all the papers they tried to forge through me, right here. Each person that came down said they had a written request from him and I took it and said, ok now get out of here. I never acknowledged any of them.

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I suppose now is a good time to call in Prissy. As much as you don’t like her, you can’t use your current lawyer, I think he is working with the financial officer, I can’t prove this yet, but my gut tells me they are working on something together and using this office as a front,” Conrad states.

“Ok, you call from here, no one will hear you. Notify Major that she is coming and give her complete and full clearance to come up to me immediately. Meet me up there when she says she can come. I need to get back upstairs before anything else happens today,” Wade looks at his cousin and nods.

Before he is out of the room, Conrad calls to him, “Skippy? You heard from Maddy didn’t you?” he asks. Wade turns quickly, questioning him with his eyes. “I saw your eyes when I called you Skippy before, she is the only other one who could get that response from you.”

“She’s in a bad state. I don’t know what yet or why. But she is flying out here Friday night, she can’t go any other day. Weston wants me flying out there the night before making sure she gets on the plane. I’ll be back with her late Friday night. You’ll come by Saturday morning with Weston and Razy?” he asks.

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“Weston needs to pick me up. My wheels aren’t reliable right now, in the shop for the newest failure to work. Going to cost me a fortune to get fixed. I like the independence of a specialized car but I don’t like the maintenance that comes along with that. Go. I’m good. Take care of today first,” Conrad says.

~ ~ ~

Madeline and her brother sit together for a while and she explains all she knows. “I can’t believe I’m so easily fooled. All these years, all this wasted time with the wrong man. With someone who stole from me so much more than money,” she sighs, “so much more,” she whispers.

“Maddy, you’re the strongest woman I know. You didn’t melt down in public as you heard the news, didn’t scream and run out to them to yell at how disgusted you were. I’m not so sure I wouldn’t have run out and given them a piece of my mind, then I would have found him and beat the crap out of him. Right now, I’m using all of my willpower not to go over there and kill him. Our father is going to go crazy when he finds this out. I hope he doesn’t find out the way I did, in a public way. This will destroy him. Having someone violate you like this.

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To change the subject, you’re meeting the lawyer on Friday morning? 9:30? Why then?” he asks.

“I asked Mom to meet me at the Breakfast Bar, I was planning on taking a taxi there and having her drive me to the airport after going to the bank. I was going to give you my car until the lease ends in four months. I’m going to the bank and withdrawing all that I’ve personally put into the account over the past three years. Our savings should not have been touched, hence the reason it is a savings account, and probably why I never noticed, but he has been withdrawing over the years anyway, things the lawyer knows about and now you too actually. I’m sorry you’re dragged into this. I don’t want to leave you, but I have to. I can’t even stand the sight of his belongings let alone him,” she bows her head and sits back down on the couch.

“Maddy, I’m glad you’re meeting Mom. But you know you can only give her some of the information, right? And don’t worry about our other siblings. Once they know the truth, they won’t mind hearing about the divorce. I know you think they will feel this is not necessary. But you have me at your back. I’ll make sure no one says a disparaging word about you. Family or otherwise,” he sits down next to

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his sister and lets her cry all the tears she has left in her until she falls asleep on his lap. Then he finally relaxes and lets himself sleep for a while too.

Madeline wakes in a start, who is holding on to her, she begins to fight. Her brother holds tighter and calls to her, “Maddy! Maddy! Wake up!!”

She opens her eyes a moment and looks down, she sees the arms around her, she recognizes the scar on her brother’s arm and turns to him. Maddy takes a deep breath, “Oh my. I’m going to be a total mess by the time I see Skippy,” she says.

“Skippy? You found him?” he asks.

“He isn’t hard to find. He has made a real name for himself. I looked him up on the internet and found his company. The hardest part was getting through to him, his secretary wouldn’t patch me in. Then one time I heard him yell at her to patch me in. I think she was playing gate keeper without being asked. That’s the impression I get anyway. I heard his voice and I nearly melted. How can a person I haven’t seen in five years hit my heart so quickly? Something is wrong with that, with me,” she says. “I’m supposed to be married right now.”

“Maybe because in the deepest part of your heart, Wade has always filled you up. I personally love that man. Your conversation was good with him

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then, that’s good. Do you want me to go with you?” he asks.

Maddy looks over at her brother, “You would do that for me? Wow, I’m sorry I never acknowledge your love for me. You are the best brother to come to me with this information today. If you think this was hard on you, imagine how things were for me when I heard this around the corner of a wall. I was frozen in my place. I haven’t stopped shaking, then I heard Skippy’s voice and I almost fell over. I need to leave on Friday because if you looked at the calendar, Friday’s date is the fifteenth. I didn’t want them to try and convince me to join them. I had to be gone by then. Today, I left him a sandwich for dinner and ran like a tornado was carrying me away. Anything I looked at in my home, was making me cringe. Items that he said were given to us by friends, I now feel they were given to us by those people and I don’t want to look at them. A sweater from one of his friends makes me think a woman gave it to him as a thank you. Mind you, when we are together, our intimacy was nice but I can definitely say I don’t feel as if my world has been rocked beyond purpose. What is he doing for these people that he can’t do or doesn’t want to do for me? I think my self-esteem has taken the biggest hit in all of this.

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I need to go shopping. Maybe I shouldn’t even take the clothes that are in my luggage, he bought me some clothing and right now I’m not even sure what is in there,” she pauses.

“I think that is a good idea. Let’s go. We will drive about an hour west, no one we know will be there. I know where there is a large outdoor shopping center, we can stretch our legs and get you some new duds. Maybe even get your haircut to prove to the jerk that you look as beautiful in short hair as in long. If my memory is right Skippy always liked your hair short too,” he smiles at his sister. He will stay with her until he drops her off to his mother, he doesn’t want her alone at all.

“I don’t have enough cash,” she says.

“Maddy, I’m going to take care of you. You are my big sister and you always took care of me. If I hadn’t listened to you, I would never have finished school and found my true love in therapy. If I hadn’t listened to you, I would not have invested the way I did and been as financially sound as I am. Please let me give back to you. I don’t know when I will see you again to shower my love on to you. Now is the time and yes, you deserve this,” he smiles at her and pulls her in for another hug.

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“Come, we need to eat dinner and go have fun,” he brings her to his car and stops a moment. “How about we do this, we drive back to my place in your car and take a cab to shopping and another one back to the hotel, this way I can take my car when it is time to leave the hotel. Oh, and by the way, I’m not leaving until I take you to Mom on Friday,” he smiles at her and she grins back and begins to walk to her car.

She may not have been in a loving marriage, but now she has realized that she is in a loving family and that counts a lot for her. “Thank you,” she says as she gets into her car’s passenger’s side. If by any chance her husband sees her car by her brother’s place all her brother has to say is that she turned the lease over to him. He can say he doesn’t know where she is, and that is true, she never told him where, only with whom.

~ ~ ~

Half way through Thursday Wade gets the call he had been expecting. “Sir, there is a gentleman here saying he works here but he has no ID what should I do?” Major asks. “He is standing here with four other people all saying they are with him. No one has an ID.”

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“Thanks Major, Weston and I will be down in a minute,” Wade says. Before he hangs up, he hears their financial officer yelling at the Major. ‘how dare you stop me from going in, you know damn well who I am. I’ll have you fired the minute I get upstairs. Don’t give me crap about following my e-mails. Those mass e-mails are for the peons who work here, not for people like me.’

“Weston,” Wade says as he stands in the door of Weston’s office. “He’s here and he is loud. He brought his four people too.”

Weston stands and walks to Wade, “Ok, we’ve got this. No worries,” he turns to their secretary, Weston’s secretary, and says, “This may take a while but we’re hoping not. If you hear sirens, you’ll know why.”

“Ok, Um, Wade, what do I do if that lady calls for you?” she asks.

“Tell her the truth, that I’m downstairs dealing with a hostile employee and I’ll call her back first minute I can. If she can’t wait, send me a text and I’ll call back immediately. She will always be my first priority from now on,” he is so happy to have gotten rid of his secretary and is now dealing with Weston’s. His secretary did not go quietly either. She started yelling and making threats that she knew

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information that she could leak to all his competitors which he told her he knows the same amount about her home life as she assumes she knows about his. She was so startled, she had quieted down immediately.

She was then told if she wanted to keep a job here, she could move downstairs to the secretary pool on the second floor, that is the only job they were willing to offer her. She went down yesterday but, not surprising, she called in sick today. Now they are thinking that she is in cohorts with the financial officer which is why she thinks she knows things about the company. Probably she knows things about their CFO’s company. Conrad took care of her access immediately after she called in sick.

Weston and Wade walk out of the lobby elevator at the same time, they walk over to the Major who now has two other security officers standing near him, his friends from nearby buildings. “What seems to be the problem Major?” Weston asks.

“Major!! You believe that crap?! You think he really served this country as an officer?! This is complete garbage, I don’t have time for your games, tell this fool who I am and let us through this stupid gate you put up,” he yells.

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“At one point you worked for us, that was over this morning I believe. These other men never have. They have no business even being in this building, never did. You had no authority to hire anyone without a contract signed by us so whatever they think they’ve been doing, it is not officially our problem. You’ve written them checks without telling us for the past six months and somehow you thought this would go by us forever. We have noticed your job is a duplicity of other people who are here and are actually working for the greater good of the company. Here is your last paycheck. According to your contract we are allowed to terminate you without explanation, however, I have also included a letter of all of the infractions that you have accumulated. All of the things you have done that, if I wanted to mind you, I could bring you up on legal charges, one or more of which is a federal charge.

Gentlemen if you thought you worked for us, you don’t. We don’t know why you are here, and right now we don’t care either. If you have issues with not being paid this month, take it up with the man who hired you, he was given five months’ pay as per his contract, clearly he has some extra cash right now he can give you,” Wade takes a breath as he watches their financial officer read the pages, plural,

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he had given him. In the day and a half, he has been out of the office, and with the help of his amazing technological savvy cousin, they found all of these things he has been trying to do under the radar. Both their radar and that of the state and federal government.

The man is stunned. Weston adds in his opinion, “Gentlemen, we are sorry that you’ve been working under false pretense but that is not our doing. We never hired you, neither of us even know any of your names. Neither of us has a copy of your contract in our files, whatever contract you have, if it has our name on the signature line, you are holding a forgery. You can take this up with this man here who hired you. We have no open jobs at this point and have nothing to offer you,” he says.

“What about retrieving my equipment?” one of them asks.

“Sorry, we have sent those down to our lawyer. She will be looking through all of them to make sure there is no infringement of our policies on them and no information that you were not legally privy to see. We turned over that sheet of paper you’re holding Mel to her as well. We told her she can do what she wants, so my advice to you is not to go too far, because if she decides to press charges,

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she will. This little game of feeling as you are the most important person around here? Is over. You aren’t and you never were as good as your ego thinks. The people under you were the ones doing all the work, and they will continue to do so. You have already been cut out of our system and will not ever be allowed to log into us at any given time.

Please see yourselves out so we don’t have to call the police. There is a restraining order that will be served to you at your home Mel with a list of all the employees here that you are not allowed to get near. Good day,” Weston says while crossing his arms in front of his chest to show the conversation is over.

“You will never be able to make any of this stick. All of this is hearsay,” Mel retorts trying to save face.

“Mel, we have all the papers as well as an e-mail trail, your phone records and the testimony of seventy-four people in this building. Now take your self-imposed importance out of my building. We’re done here,” Wade watches as no one moves. “When I get to three, Major here will be calling the police. 1,.....2,.....3. Major.”

“Already done, now gentlemen, if you’ll follow me to this holding room until the police get

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here,” he says with the other guards now coming over to help. The four extra men are following easily when one of them speaks up, “Do you know what we are supposed to do? I mean we thought we were all working for him here.”

“Didn’t you ever think it was weird that your taxes weren’t taken out of your paycheck? That you were never given a real desk or introduced to anyone? Think about that while you wait here. You can tell the police all about what he had promised you,” one of the guards says before he closes the door and leaves.

Meanwhile, Mel is still at the front desk yelling at Major, Wade and Weston. The police show up and immediately take him away, still yelling. Two other officers follow Major into the back room where they spend time finding out who these men are and why they think they belong here.

One of the officers asks if Wade wants to press charges against these men. “For what? Being stupid? I don’t even know what charges to bring up against them. Hopefully they learned their lesson. Unless you think otherwise or our lawyer finds anything on their computers that make us change our mind.”

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“We will take them all down to the precinct and sort this all out, we will call with information as needed,” he says before he escorts them out of the building.

Weston stares at Wade, “Hell of a day so far,” he comments

“Weston, those people honestly think they work here, what the hell have we been doing? Are we really so blind? Do we have to go through each person now?” he asks.

“No, and to tell you the truth, it has only been for four months, not as long as we thought. I heard one of the guys tell the officer this. Once we moved the two financial people up to the fourth floor, they knew we are watching. The guy in charge of payroll has already confessed to writing checks for them under the direction of the man we had deemed the chief financial officer. He assumed things were on the up and up from us, we can’t fault him for doing his job, we did say that he reported to Mel to some degree and that Mel had authority to order checks to be written. I told him we trust him but that he will be watched for a while. He understood. Conrad will watch him more closely now I’m sure.

The business manager never gave them anything they asked for; she told me they couldn’t

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supply the appropriate forms, those forms are on the intra-company communications system to which they had never been part of because they aren’t real employees. At least Mel never tried to do that because we probably would have caught him sooner. Our lawyer will get to the bottom of this and let us know if we have to do anything more. Right now, the time is getting late and you have to go get ready to leave. Are you going to be all right seeing Maddy alone?” he asks to distract him from the office troubles.

“Nice save but that won’t mean I won’t be worried, we have to contact all of our clients and vendors to make sure he never made any business deals with them even though I sent out the email. We should call them personally. Make sure no contracts were signed only by him. Call Prissy and make sure she looks into all of our accounts and contracts, have her talk to the payroll person and get all of the papers he has ever had from Mel. We need to collect his laptop as well,” Wade’s voice is nervous, they worked too hard to build themselves up to be ruined by one greedy man.

“She is on all of this and more, and Conrad already has all of their laptops, he took them yesterday when they were gone. Mel never took

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anything with him because he would always say work is for work, he refused to do anything after hours, remember? She will be here any minute, she had a trial this morning but she said she will take this very seriously. I know you two have had your arguments in the past but this time we let her take over, yes?” Weston asks.

“Did I hear my name?” Prissy says from the other side of the security desk.

“How did things go this morning at your trial?” Wade asks trying to show his interest in her professionally and that he appreciates her coming so quickly for them.

“Thank you for asking, I was actually a little nervous, the other lawyer brought up a couple of points that I had not looked into however, he tripped on himself and I believe the jury caught that and ruled in my favor. Could have gone either way. Now, I know if you called me Wade things are really important. I also know that in the past, when we’ve worked together, we butt heads a lot. Don’t feel that I’m angry or bitter about that. I take that as part of my job. I have to take the sides of my clients but I also have to point out the legalities to them that they may not have thought of. So, argue away, I take no offense. Oh, and thanks Weston for sending me all

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the heads-up information, that has helped me get a good handle on what is going on. I read most of those files last night. Needed a distraction from my trial.

Nice security by the way, I had suggested you beef up your security a year ago, nice to see that you guys finally listened. What are you doing with the lobby over there?” she asks looking at the construction. Major has a lot of connections; the man started the day after he was called for an estimate.

“We are creating two very large, comfortable conference rooms. Each one could sit around twenty-five people, much bigger than the ones we used upstairs. Using one-way glass so that from this side everyone will see a decorative mural. We did a full re-org this week along with some cleaning house, that is part of the reason you are here. We’ll talk on the way up,” Weston leads them to the elevator.

When they walk out of the elevator on the fourth floor Prissy says, “I’m going to doubt he got very far in his venture, four months isn’t a long time, and if memory serves me well, he isn’t smart enough to do too much damage so quickly. However, he also stole money from you to pay these other guys, so that

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is a big deal. How much security has Conrad done to combat all of this?” she asks.

“You remember him?” Wade asks.

“Remember him?! You’re kidding right,” she looks from one man to the other.

Wade and Weston both shrug their shoulders. “Oh my, I thought I had made myself pretty clear when I left a year ago from here. That man is so gorgeous I could hardly work with him. One look into his eyes and I was distracted already. I had to work with my head down the whole time which is why he always thought I was angry with him. Then if he smiled? I was a goner. Weston, I asked Razy to set me up with him after we finalized everything last time but she told me Conrad was in a bad place emotionally at that time so nothing ever happened. Is he married now?” Prissy asks.

Wade can’t help but smile, “You don’t see his facial scars Prissy? From his accident,” he asks.

“Oh, I see them, I want to kill the man all over again every time I see them. I’m the one who looked into the accident report and the background of the driver. I was the one who brought the case to light again and had him receive the money he was owed. Didn’t you guys know this?” she asks trying to remember if she ever told them.

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“Um, no. and I don’t think Conrad knows either. Why would you do that without telling him?” Wade asks.

“Because he was given the rotten end of the stick. The lawyer he had took whatever the other guy’s insurance would pay and told Conrad to say thank you and move on. Conrad was clearly in no way shape or form with his right mind to make that decision for himself. The lawyer took a large chunk of the settlement, larger than average, I’m sure Conrad doesn’t even know that either. I had a judge overturn that fee and the lawyer had to hand him back what Conrad was really due. If I hadn’t looked into his case, Conrad would have never known how much his lawyer screwed him. Guys like that give us a bad name. I fight for the downtrodden, I don’t take advantage of them as some clearly do. Please tell me he is still here,” she looks from one man to the next.

“Conrad told me he received a check from the company who employed the truck driver who hit him, he said it was unexpected and quite large. That is the last I heard about anything having to do with the accident. Seriously Prissy, you don’t see his scars? His inability to walk? This is all he sees. He forgets how brilliant his mind his,” Wade says to her with all new respect.

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“I’m telling you the minute he shows up here, I’m going to start palpitating and acting like a love-sick school girl. Go ahead, call him. I need to know what he has done on their computers anyway. Until he gets here, I’ll go over there and talk to your payroll guy and see what he has to say on the subject,” she walks out of the room and Wade looks to Weston.

“Well, I never saw that coming,” Wade says.

“Not in a million years. Let’s see what happens. I think she will be working with us much longer this time to get through all of this. Maybe we need an in-house lawyer and she can move her practice to our offices. We clearly have a new office set up, no one will think anything is out of order if we add in one more person,” Weston smiles. “Second floor maybe?” Weston is thinking of his old office which is still empty. “Make sure everyone knows she is a lawyer, kind of like our inhouse compliance employee.”

Wade smiles back and makes his call, “Hello Conrad, we have the lawyer here today. Can you come up in a few and discuss with her what you’ve seen so far?” Wade asks.

“Sure. I’ll be there soon,” he says softly.

“Conrad?” Wade asks in concern.

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“In pain today. Phantom legs giving me problems. I’ll be there soon. I promise,” he says.

“I’ll go get him,” Weston says. “If he is in pain, moving that chair by himself is harder, even electronically. This would be amazing if we could find him a woman who cared about the rest of him.”

“Yeah, she sure is a strong one but when she talked about him, she definitely tripped on her own tongue, or heart. Kind of like me with Maddy. Speaking of which, I’ll be leaving in an hour for the airport. I’m so nervous I don’t know what to do,” Wade says.

“Be yourself, that’s the part she always loved anyway. I’ll be right back,” Weston leaves to get Conrad.

~ ~ ~

Maddy and her brother spend a couple of hours shopping for her new wardrobe, they laugh a little, cry a little and laugh some more. They even buy matching shirts and put them on for the rest of the day.

Now sitting down to have dinner Maddy is overcome with sadness. “What’s wrong Maddy girl?” he asks.

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“I’ve been gone for twenty-four hours and not one text from my husband. He either completely believes me that I’m at a client or he doesn’t care. I’m not sure which one is worse.” She looks down at her plate the waitress handed her a moment ago. The food looks delicious but her stomach has no interest in eating.

“OK, try this, send him a message to see what he says, or avoid disappointment all together and forget about him. The reason you are here is to leave all of him behind. You now have more clothes than you started with, much better ones too I might add, you always wore bland colors with him, always wanted to blend in, now you are going to be the brightness to everyone’s day,” he smiles at her.

“Shouldn’t it bother me that he never even acknowledged that I’m gone? That I left him food for one night but not for any other meal? I mean, I would question this. The suitcases were in our bedroom closet, hard to miss. Does he not see that I took them both to see a client? Sounds suspicious to me but obviously not to him. Ralph, this isn’t normal. I think he must have been waiting for me to leave,” tears begin to fall again.

“Or, he really is oblivious to all that you do for him and today at work he is eating out like he

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always does. He may notice when he gets home for dinner a second night and nothing much is there. In the meantime, eat, that looks yummy,” he smiles at her.

Maddy tries to eat, once the food hits her mouth and her brother starts telling jokes, she begins to enjoy her meal. She is happy that he is here with her, she may not have been able to get through these couple of days without his constant reassurances. As much as she felt unloved at home, her brother has helped her turn that feeling around. This will go a long way in helping her to heal. The fact that he took three personal days off to care for a family problem means so much to her as well. That maybe, somehow, she is worthy of love.

“Movie night tonight?” he asks.

“Let’s rent one at the hotel, you know the pay per view on the television and sit there and eat ice cream. A comedy. Maybe an old one from our childhood, where we can recite all the words from memory before the characters do,” she smiles.

Ralph smiles back at her, “Yeah, that sounds great. We can sit in pajamas and laugh all night.”

Getting back to the hotel with all of their packages has them receiving some very funny looks. Ralph even bought her new suitcases because she

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remembered, the ones she took, were her husband’s and she doesn’t want anything of his.

They both showered and are sitting on the couch in their pajamas with a movie in front of them. Maddy’s old phone buzzes with a text. *‘how much longer are you at the client? We have guests coming for dinner and you need to be home to cook. I told you they were coming tonight, very rude you’re not here.’*

Now she knows they were coming early to get her join them the next day. She shows the text to her brother. “Give me the phone,” he writes back to him, *‘Clients pay Yuri, your friends don’t. I didn’t invite them, you did, so either order out or cook yourself’*

‘They are coming to talk to you, bitch. If you weren’t such a prude, I wouldn’t be embarrassed to bring you places, so stop this nonsense and get home. You know and I know your clients don’t require so much care. Who are you out with? Scratch that, probably no one, you wouldn’t know what to do with any other man but me and you’re lucky enough to have that. Now get home, they will be here in an hour, still time for you to cook.’ Her husband writes

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First, Ralph forwards that the previous texts to Maddy’s lawyer, then he writes, ‘no’ and leaves it at that. He was going to write more but chose not to acknowledge the rant. Next, he tells his sister, “I’m keeping this phone now. You are done with him from this point on. I will send it inside the suitcases when I send it to the house along with all your old clothes. I plan on including a note that says, ‘I’m done with anything that has to do with you.’ Simple and no explanation past that is necessary. Ok?” he asks looking over at the sad face he hates to see.

“Ok but wait until the lawyer tells you when to send it. He has your number now. You sent him the conversation, didn’t you? You also didn’t show it to me, thank you for that. I don’t want to know. I’m going to turn on the other phone now.” As soon as she does, she sees two messages from Skippy.

‘checking in on you, hope you have a reason to smile today.’

Then the next one *‘hey, you didn’t answer yesterday, call me. Skippy’*

She writes back a quick message *‘doing well, my brother Ralph is with me. We are working with a lawyer and things will work out. Don’t wait up for me, I’ll get a hotel room near the airport, I saw there are a few there.’*

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Now a call comes in from the lawyer on her disposable phone, “You ok?” he asks.

“Yeah, my brother has my phone, he won’t let me see the messages but I’m sure there is something there that I don’t want to know about, let’s keep things that way,” she says.

“Keep this phone on now then. Let me speak to your brother.” She hands the phone to Ralph and he walks out of the room and into one of the bedrooms of the suite, he closes the door.

Maddy watches the door, she wants to know how her life has become filled with so many secrets. So much mess. She sits down and thinks of Weston and Skippy. Wondering how they will accept her once they see how foolish she has been in not being able to see what is going on right in front of her. They will lose respect for her, she is confident of that. This is the part she will have to work on the most. They are too important to her. Her brother walks out of the bedroom laughing still on the phone, “This one is for you,” he says grinning.

“Hello?” she says.

“Maddy, oh thank God, you sound normal. Your text scared the daylights out of me.” Wade takes a deep breath. “Things have been so topsy turvy here the past day and a half, but don’t think I

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forgot you’re coming. I cleaned my whole apartment. Conrad knows your coming by the way. I need to warn you about him. He was in an accident shortly after we left. He is in a chair because he can no longer walk, face has some scarring from windshield glass as well. Oh, and missing half his legs,” he takes another big breath.

“Skippy, I heard about the accident, but no one ever told me the extent of the damage. I look forward to seeing him, Conrad always made me laugh. I’m pretty sure he hasn’t lost his sense of humor. He isn’t depressed is he Skippy? That would hurt so much to see him sad,” she says.

“He is in a good place now. A year ago, maybe not so much. In fact, we are working with a lawyer now and unbeknown to Conrad she is head over heels for him. I can’t wait to see how that works out.” Skippy is happy to have this conversation but he still is hurting, worrying about the reason she is running. Her brother wouldn’t explain but he assured him there is no physical abuse, that is a comfort at least, maybe. However, Wade knows, from watching Conrad, that emotional scars can last longer, are cut deeper.

“I’m going to have breakfast with my mom tomorrow and she is going to take me to the airport.

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I’ll probably be there around 1:00 even though the flight isn’t until 3:00 but how long can you push a brunch? I hope you’re not disappointed in me when you see me,” Maddy hangs up so Skippy won’t hear her cry.

“That wasn’t necessary sis, he won’t be disappointed. You did nothing wrong,” he sits down and changes the movie so they can both take their minds off of what is coming up in the morning.

Wade looks at his phone. Things may not have been physical but the emotional toll is quite large, he is sure of this now. He knows how emotions can take a toll from watching Conrad these past couple of years. The rest of his life, he will keep her safe, the rest of their lives. Together, as he promised her years ago, those words hold true now more than ever.

~ ~ ~

In the morning, Maddy and her brother open all of her clothes, take off the tags and fold things nicely in her new bright blue suitcases. Ralph insisted they be bright, no more darkness for her. He throws out her hairbrush and toothbrush as well. Everything new. Instead of giving the clothes back to her husband, they decided to put them nicely folded

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on her bed with a sign that reads ‘free, please take or donate somewhere’, they hope the cleaning crew take some, they’ve been very nice to them both, almost as if they sense something.

Maddy showers as does her brother and they come out wearing matching colors. When he had brought her car to his place, he ran in and packed clothes for two days. Without knowing what each other was going to wear, they laugh when they see each other.

“Perfect, Mom is going to love that outfit Maddy girl. So is Skippy. You ready to go?” he asks.

“Yeah, the outfit helps, it’s too cheery to be sad when you wear these colors. Come, we don’t want Mom to wait,” he says. “She’ll get even more nervous.”

The drive out to see their mother is quiet. When they get there, their mother is already sitting in their favorite booth, she sees Maddy and jumps up to hug her. “Oh baby, what’s wrong?” she whispers in her ear.

Sitting down Maddy says, “What makes you think something is wrong?” she asks.

“Well, first off, I’m your mom. Second, your brother is here and third that is a brand new outfit that I’m sure he picked out for you because you only

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buy dark colors for yourself. I took the liberty of ordering us two specials so sit down and talk to me before I explode, the food will be out soon, Ralph be a good boy and tell them to make one more,” their mom says.

Maddy gives her the condensed version of the story. She ends with, “Skippy is taking me in until I can get settled.” Maddy’s mom looks at her and quickly understands why she said not to bring her husband,

“Daddy is going to kill him. I’m afraid literally,” she says.

“Hence the reason I said not to bring him. Ralph will talk to him later tonight. After we speak to the lawyer and he tells us what to do. He will be here soon Mom, I’m sorry, but we had to do this here,” she says.

“Am I late?” the lawyer asks.

“No, please sit down. I’m Maddy’s mother,” she holds out her hand to shake his and scoots further into the booth. She signals to the waitress to bring one more special.

The food is brought over shortly after he arrives. “Thank you. This looks amazing. I’ll have to bring my fiancé over here one day. I have the divorce papers ready. We had a judge sign off on

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them easily enough when I presented him with all of my findings. The papers will be served at 4:30 this afternoon at your soon to be ex’s office. It takes thirty days to be official through the state though.

You will be on the plane by 3:00 and all of this will be behind you. I’ll be in touch with your mother and your brother, we will only contact you if something requires your decision or signature. I want to make this as painless as possible for you. Can I get you to agree to let your mother or brother make decisions or do you want to still make them?” he asks.

“I didn’t want to do any of this, but I suppose I should be adult about this whole scenario. If I need help deciding, I’ll call one of them. How much will there be?” Maddy asks.

“I am still waiting for the private investigator to get back to me on a few things. I’m afraid your husband may be involved in some illegal activities. But I already have the proof that you knew nothing about this, your leaving is strictly about the divorce and not the business practices. The investigator also has proof of this he told me. This part we will prosecute on our own. You will not be involved, you don’t have to be,” he pauses a moment, “This food is really good by the way.” He looks around at the

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three people before him, she is going to make it, he thinks to himself. So many don’t have such support.

Ralph speaks for everyone, “Does he have room to argue on this? I mean can he contest this and make a problem for her? Can he prove she was part of his illegal activities?”

“Not really, once he sees how many items she is not personally charging him on, he will hopefully be grateful. At least a normal man would be grateful, we will see. Generally speaking, presented with what we have, no one has ever contested a divorce such as this,” he says. “This one is a clean break, actually some people accept that easier and don’t argue for fear that they will have to pay if they do.”

“What else do you have? Besides the infidelity that is,” Maddy asks.

“Do you really want to know?” he asks.

“Well, when you ask like that then I suppose I don’t,” she says.

“If there are no more questions, I’m going to leave. Maddy, here are your divorce papers. Do you want to hold on to them or have your brother do that for now?” he looks from one to the other across the table.

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Ralph speaks up first again, “I’ll take them. We want my Maddy girl to leave here unburdened. She is meeting an old friend and I think the situation will be better without her having to look at this. For a long time to come,” he looks at his sister.

All she feels right now is love, all these people love her, they want her to have happiness. “Ok Ralph, you can file it with our other papers you have at your place. Mom, are you ok with this? We aren’t pushing you away, are we?” Maddy says.

“I only want to know how to tell your father? Do I wait until tomorrow?” she asks.

“I’ll tell him with you Mom. I’m going to have to keep him from running for his gun. Together we will tell him. Maybe late tonight. We’ll call Maddy afterwards so he can hear her voice that she is doing fine,” he says.

“Good, that works for me. Thank you, for all you’re doing for our girl. You send the bill to me please,” Maddy’s mom says as she puts her hand out to the lawyer. He shakes her hand and walks away.

“Thank you, Mom, I didn’t even think about how I was going to pay for this. I mean I guess I knew I had to, but then I needed to save all my money because I don’t know where I’ll be living or when I’ll get a job,” Maddy says.

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“This is my pleasure, we always take care of our kids. Now Ralph tell me about this new girl you’ve been dating,” she says to change the subject.

The three of them stay at the booth until it is time to go to the bank. No one in the restaurant seems to care. When they leave, Ralph leaves a large tip so the waitress doesn’t feel she lost any money on them for staying so long. First stop is the bank so Maddy can make her withdrawal, some in cash, some in cashier’s check.

The drive to the airport is slow and quiet. Ralph stays with them until this point. They help Maddy as far as they can but then she reaches the point where they can no longer follow her without a ticket. “Go Maddy girl, send my love to Skippy and the gang. We will come out to see you as soon as all of this blows over and you’ve had time to get situated there,” Ralph says. “I’ll bet Dad brings you a new necklace,” he jokes.

“Don’t worry about Daddy, I’ll keep him out of trouble. He will be sadder for you than he will be angry at your husband. I’ll give him your new number in a couple of days so he won’t bother you. We love you Maddy,” her mom hugs her and pushes her through security so she can go on with her life.

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“Mom, Skippy is here. He told me his plans were to come in last night, he is on her flight. He said he wanted to make sure she got on the flight to him. She doesn’t know this yet. Nothing to worry about now. She will be safe,” Ralph puts his arm around his mother’s shoulder and they walk out together, feeling better knowing she is not alone for more than a few minutes now.

Maddy sits down at the gate and fiddles with the items in her new purse Ralph insisted on buying, another colorful piece. Part of her feels like a coward, that she couldn’t confront him face to face. How could she stay? She couldn’t even look at his picture the last day she was in the house. Couldn’t smell his cologne without gagging about who he is with now or who actually bought it for him because she hadn’t and he hates shopping.

“Is this seat taken?” a voice says above her. Maddy looks up and begins to cry. Skippy is looking at her and smiling, he came for her. He said he would and he did.

He sits down slowly next to her. The urge to pull her in for a hug is huge but he doesn’t know if she wants to be touched. Without knowing what else to do, he lays his hand on top of hers which is on the arm of the chair. “I couldn’t wait any longer. I

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looked at the itinerary and booked myself a flight last night. I met a client this morning so at least I got work done today, how about you?”

Maddy finds her voice, “I had breakfast with Mom and Ralph, they both send their best to you,” then she leans her head onto his shoulder. You know this is wrong Maddy, she says to herself, but he feels so right. So much wasted time, what did her husband have over Wade back then to make her walk away. Right now, she can’t think of one thing.

~ ~ ~

Maddy and Skippy spend the whole flight catching up on each other’s lives. Nothing about her current state of affairs. They both want the flight to be without stress. Although he did tell her about the whole fiasco with Mel.

“Wow, all of this happened this week? So why are you here? You have more important things to deal with than me,” Maddy says.

“No Maddy, I don’t. Nothing has or ever will be as important as you are to me. That river runs too deep,” Skippy looks deep into her eyes. Does she think I came because we are only friends? Then I’ve

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made a very big fool of myself with saying that. He thinks to himself.

Maddy stares back at him. I gave this up, so many years ago, I walked away from the only man who probably ever really cared about my welfare, about me in general. Well, maybe Weston and Conrad, but nothing like this. I’ve never felt this before. Is this rebound? Do I really feel this or is this simply convenient coming to me at a time I need love most? Maddy shakes her head from all her thoughts and looks back at Skippy and says, “Not all swings are fun you know,” then she puts her head back down on his shoulders and waits for a safe landing.

Skippy heard what she said and is trying to process what a phrase like that could mean. Is she giving him a clue? How can a person swing other than being at a park? He asks himself.

He sits quietly enjoying the feeling of having her next to him again. He tried to fight with her to get her to change her mind about marrying that guy but he never told her the real reason. That he is the one who will always love her, that he is the one who wants to make her happy the rest of her life, to have beautiful children with her and become the family he always knew they could be. Now he is not sure what

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will be but he is going to try his hardest to be her friend first. Listen to why she is running from her life, help her, then work as hard as possible to convince her to stay with him. Forever. He won’t lose her again. Not to anyone.

Maddy is trying to keep herself calm. Part of her wants to cry and tell Skippy everything, but she can’t do this on a plane. She doesn’t want the rest of the world to judge her for what she has done. Some might say it is a cowardice way to leave a relationship. By now her husband would have received and hopefully signed the papers. There is a part of her that wonders how he took the information. But then again, depending on how this went, she could either be very hurt or very vindicated. She doesn’t want to take the chance in knowing. For this, she is happy to be ignorant about.

~ ~ ~

Maddy’s brother and mother sit at her table waiting for her husband to get home. She had called and asked him to come home before 4:30 today. She didn’t want him to get a call from their son-in-law demanding any information. Or worse, for him to show up at his work and start screaming accusations in public.

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She made his favorite pie to serve him when he gets home, then she will break the news to him. Ralph will help. The rest of the siblings will never find out the truth, that has already been decided. They will be told simply that there was infidelity and that Maddy has chosen to move away for a while to get her life back on track. They will receive the new number, only after some time has passed and they should only contact her via e-mail for now.

They hear the front door open and Maddy’s mother begins to cry. This is so big; her poor daughter is the bravest person she knows to leave with her head held high. To go back to the man, she had hoped her daughter would have married to begin with.

Her husband walks into the kitchen seeing his son holding his wife’s hands, he smells pie as well. “Ok, I’m willing to eat the pie first before you tell me whatever is going on,” he tries to smirk to soften the mood in the room.

Ralph smiles at his father and walks to the oven to pull out the pie, he serves out three servings and brings the plates to the table. He watches as his mother doesn’t touch hers but he and his father have no problem eating fresh pie, ever.

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With his last bite taken Ralph quietly tells his father what has been going on the past couple of days. He ends with what is about to happen and why they wanted him home so he knew before his son-in-law called him to try and get any information from him.

With a deep sigh his father looks across the table at his son, “You’ve always been her best advocate. I’m proud of you. You handled this very well. Had I known, I would have stayed with her myself at the hotel. We would have eaten a ton of ice cream and watched old movies.”

“Funny, that’s is exactly what we did,” Ralph says smiling.

“So now we wait for her to get to Skippy’s and contact us? We wait for the lawyer to let us know he signed the papers, and then what?” his father asks.

“The lawyer says once the papers are signed, which he may do calmly, because they have a lot of other possibilities that she can charge him with legally and prove to him she only wants out and that she is doing him a favor by not pushing these other charges. He appears pretty confident that the jerk will sign and move on. How could he not? The lawyer won’t tell us what the other charges are that

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his investigator found out about, he says we don’t need to know. He says those he will prosecute himself with the help of a prosecuting attorney from the courts. Let’s hope he signs and slithers away.” Ralph looks at his parents, they are holding hands and crying together. This is a life he wants. To have that closeness with a life partner. Someday, his day will come. He hopes that Maddy and Skippy find their true passion for each other this time. It’s always been there. He hopes Skippy will actually admit to Maddy his feelings. In his call at the hotel, Skippy admitted he never made that revelation. A shame.

At 5:30 Maddy’s father receives a phone call. “Hello,” he says calmly seeing who is calling.

“Hello! That is all you have to say for yourself is hello?! Where the hell is she? Where are you hiding your daughter? You allowed her to walk out on me?! Me?! The only man who would marry her, the only one who was willing to put up with her working from home which we all know is a crap job anyway. I’m the only one to put up with her prudish ways! You hear me?!” he screams. Everyone hears what he has to say.

Very calmly Maddy’s father says, “For one, I don’t have to allow my daughter to do anything. She is an adult and has her own life and certainly her own

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mind. As for her job, if you’d take any interest in what she does, you would have seen that she probably makes more money than you do. You claim to work at a prestigious place, that you are so important, but we all know you are but a peon there. You haven’t even gotten yourself past first tier of sales, let alone management and you’ve been there for seven years. And as for where my daughter is, well, I simply can’t tell you because I have no idea. She called my wife today to say she will be gone for a while on business and will miss our monthly dinners together. Please don’t call me again. Ever really,” he finishes and hangs up.

“Well said my dear, well said,” his wife says holding his hand.

Ralph sent a few texts to all of his siblings not to answer any calls from Maddy’s husband. He is grateful that most of them don’t know Skippy by any other name and if they slipped and said she was with him probably, there is no way of finding him by that name.

Ralph has received numerous texts of support for her and he forwards those to her so she will see she is loved and supported from back here as well. His phone rings, “Hello,” he answers coldly.

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“Don’t hello me Ralph. We all know you and your sister talk about everything, where the hell is she?” he screams.

“She is your wife, you tell me,” he answers, still in a very cold voice.

“As if you didn’t know she left me. Had some hot shot lawyer that isn’t even from around here show up at my office and hand me divorce papers, but you probably knew that too. You know everything about her don’t you. So do her other siblings, I’ll get my answer sooner than later, I know how to get information from all of you. You think you’re so close and yet you all have secrets from each other. One secret revealed and I’ll know all I need to know,” his cocky voice coming through the phone is making Ralph sick to his stomach.

As he is talking Ralph is typing each word into a text on his mom’s phone to send his siblings to show how little he thinks of them as well. “If she left, I’d assume she had her reasons, but no, she never discussed them with me. We don’t talk about each other’s personal lives after marriage, this is an understanding all of us have with each other. Try if you must, but no one will tell you a damn thing.”

“We will see about that. Your baby sister has always been attracted to me, I’ll take her out for

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drinks and get all the information I need,” again, his voice is quite confident, “and even more from her,” his voice oozing with sleaze. “She will be easy to please.”

“Why do you need to know anyway, she’s gone. Let her go,” Ralph says and hangs up.

His phone rings again, “I’m attracted to him?! Is he out of his mind?!” his baby sister yells into the phone. “he is going to do what with me? Oh my, I’m going to be sick.”

“His ego is quite large obviously,” Ralph says.

“Answer me one question, did she go to him?” she asks referring to Skippy.

“Yeah,” Ralph says.

“Thank you, Ralph, I feel better now. You’re the best. How’s Dad holding up?” she asks with concern.

“He has his right hand sitting next to him. They will be fine. Right now, we all need to be is her support, she has always been ours,” he says sternly.

“I agree, I’ll let the rest know,” she hangs up.

~ ~ ~

Around 1:00 in the morning local time, they get to Skippy’s apartment. He carries her suitcases to his second bedroom and sets them down. He takes a deep breath before going back out to see her

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standing in his living room, a sight he didn’t think he’d ever see.

“Maddy?” he looks to her wondering what she is thinking. She turns around and he sees tears running down her cheeks, she isn’t even wiping them off, she is letting it fall from her eyes, her hands down, looking at him very scared.

Slowly he walks to her and he puts out his arms, Maddy almost falls into him and he holds on quite tightly. He stands there and lets her cry and cry, her whole body shaking. At some point he walks her to the couch and they sit together. There they fall asleep.

Wade’s phone buzzes in his pocket and he realizes he is still dressed, he pulls out his phone slowly. “Yes?” he asks.

“Hey, Razy is dying to meet Maddy, are you two up for company yet?” Weston asks.

“Fell asleep on the couch, not much talking but a lot of tears. I think I can rouse her awake. Sure, bring breakfast I forgot to do shopping yesterday,” Wade says.

“We’re bringing Conrad too,” Weston hangs up.

Wade looks down at Maddy, still asleep in his lap. He strokes her hair, once, twice, then

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because he can no longer hold it in, he bends down to kiss her cheek.

Maddy begins to stir and rolls onto her back, she blinks her eyes once or twice and looks up. She sees Skippy staring down at her with eyes so full of love, she finds herself melting on the inside. She grins at him and says, “I think I should go change.” He helps her sit up and then watches as she walks down the hall to her suitcases.

“Shower is the door to the left of your bedroom,” he calls to her, she turns and smiles at him.

Maddy gets to her new room and finds her purse, she pulls out her phone. *‘sorry Ralph, we got here at 1:00 in the morning – Skippy surprised me by being at the airport and flew with me home. Home? Yes, I just wrote that. I feel more at home these past few hours than I have in weeks in my old place with my husband. We fell asleep on the couch. Love you, love to Mom and Dad, and thank you for sending me all those messages of love and support from our siblings. I think I can do this now Ralph, I think I can.’*

Maddy stands in the bathroom looking in the mirror, how can she love this man so deeply already when her own husband never felt this way? How is it

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possible that an old friend means more to her than the marriage she walked out on only moments ago? Trying not to think too hard, she gets in the shower and lets the water wash away her old life. She feels the shampoo run off of her and pictures the past five years washing away with the bubbles. When she is done, she steps out and gets dressed in an outfit full of color and life. As she is all put together, she walks back out to the living room of this apartment and finds Skippy standing there looking at her with more love than she has ever seen or felt before.

“Weston, Razy and Conrad are on their way, they will be here shortly. Too excited to wait to see you. I hope you’re ok with that,” he smiles at her, he has never seen her in such vibrant colors, it suits her very well.

“Ok,” she says thinking that maybe this is for the best, she will tell them all together and watch their collective responses to see if she is really part of the group any more.

“Weston is most likely bringing breakfast too. I was so busy with everything at work and cleaning this place, I kind of forgot about food. I don’t have much here. Do you still drink hot chocolate in the morning?” he asks.

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“What’s a day without chocolate?” she asks as she used to say to him all the time when he would ask why she doesn’t drink coffee like the rest of the them. Wade smiles and walks into the kitchen to make her a hot chocolate and a coffee for himself.

The knock at the door has Maddy holding her breath. Skippy answers the door and Weston rushes in, he pushes past Skippy and scoops her up in his arms as if she was a small child. He holds on almost as tightly as Skippy did. “Oh Maddy, we’ve missed you so much,” he whispers into her ear before he puts her down.

She looks up to him and finds a tear in his eye matching hers. Then she looks to his side and sees Conrad in his wheelchair, she runs to him and bends down to hold on to him. He gives her an equally tight hold as well. However, these two have a harder time letting go. She had always loved Conrad and she is telling him with her hug that she still does. When she releases him, she is standing there looking at him, “Still as handsome as ever,” she says kissing his cheek.

“Still a lousy liar,” Conrad retorts but he is smiling. He sees the pain in her eyes and is hurting deeply for her.

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“I have breakfast, let’s go sit down and eat, so we can talk at the table like normal people,” Razy says.

Maddy turns to see that she is as beautiful as she always knew Weston’s wife would be. Before she says anything, Razy says, “I can’t meet people on an empty stomach, come on,” she indicates to everyone to sit at the table.

They all follow her. Without warning, Maddy begins to talk. She knows she has to say this sooner than later or she will never get the information out. What better way than to say it when they are all here so she doesn’t have to repeat herself. This time as she tells her tale, she feels smaller and smaller, how can she have been so stupid for so long? Thousands of dollars taken from their account and she never really focused on it, years of infidelity and she never knew to what extent, gifts all over her house from his ‘friends’ and she allowed all of this to happen. All of it. With a deep sigh, she finishes her story and looks at her lap. “Thank you for your hospitality, I will find a hotel for tonight,” she stands to walk away and surprisingly the first person to grab her is Razy.

She holds on tightly in a hug she never expected to get from her. Razy pulls her to the bedroom where her luggage still sits, unpacked. She

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pushes her to sit down on the bed, quickly closes the bedroom door and turns to Maddy. “I left a relationship that was both physical and emotionally abusive. I’m so glad you had the strength to leave when you did. It would have become physical, your story sounds like mine did, only it took me longer to leave. I snuck out of the hospital after he had beaten me because I wouldn’t participate in his sick little sex games with the men and women he brought home that night. We weren’t married, so at least I had that going for me, but we did have a joint account and I had to walk away from everything. I called my father in the middle of the night and he ran to get me. He brought me clothes and we left in the cover of darkness. The doctors and nurses knew the story and allowed us to leave although officially they had to mark me down as leaving against medical advice so it would be harder for him to find me.

I flew home with my father that night, saw a doctor that the hospital doctor knew in my home town. Months later I met Weston. I never told him the full story, but watching you tell your story this morning I squeezed his hand so hard I think he finally realizes what I had to walk away from. Maddy, I hope you don’t mind if I call you that, you are the bravest person I know. You are also probably very

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aware that there is no way those men out there are going to allow you to leave this town or this home now, ever. Wade holds you in his heart so deeply that if you leave him again, it may take us years to put him back together,” she pauses and looks at Madeline in the eye. She is so hoping she hasn’t ruined this new friendship already.

“I always knew Weston would pick the most beautiful woman around. Both inside and out,” she pauses, “How can I look them in the eye after telling them how stupid I’ve been all this time? I mean who doesn’t know their husband has been unfaithful for years? When it’s son the damn calendar! How did you know it was about sex games?” she asks cautiously.

“When a person has been taken advantage of as you have, it has nothing to do with the intellect of the person scammed. The deceiver is always three steps ahead to make sure you don’t find out. The nature of the beast. The best part is, is that you hit him where it hurts the most, his ego. *You* left him. You showed him you’re bigger than he is, you took your money too which is also a hard pill for him to swallow, I’m sure he will notice that right away and when he does he will really feel what you’ve done to him. You deceived the deceiver, you won. Now the

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three men out there are processing all that you said and, if I know my men at all, they are all plotting to see how they can ruin him even further. So, before they come up with anything that will land them in jail, maybe we should go back out there,” Razy smiles. “Oh, and don’t worry, I’ll never tell them what I deduced. I only did that because the story sounded too familiar. How bad was that part?”

“I never saw, I discovered that his monthly meetings were swing parties. Parties he never thought were against the rules of being married. Parties he spent a hundred dollars on each month. I couldn’t even look at my own home anymore because he displayed gifts from his friends all over the place. Thank you for accepting me so quickly,” Maddy says.

“I’ve been waiting to meet you for almost three years now. Thank *you* for allowing me to be so close so quickly. You’re not alone Maddy, not anymore,” she smiles at Maddy, the two hold hands and walk back out to the kitchen table where the men still sit, no one is moving. Maddy notices that no one has eaten either.

Skippy sees the two women together. All of a sudden, he puts each piece of the puzzle together. Swings that aren’t fun, infidelity, swinging sex parties.

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Razy never fully explained what she ran from, the story hit her hard, two of the same. Skippy jumps from his chair he runs to Maddy and grabs her in his arms. “I promised safety and love forever a long time ago, that promise still exists. You will never go a day without being appreciated and loved. Oh, Maddy girl, how I’ve missed you in my life. Please stay, please,” he begs her and looks right into her eyes. No way will he ever mistreat her, ever try and fool her. He will spend the rest of his life loving her and thanking her for being his.

~ ~ ~

The following Monday everyone meets in Skippy’s office. Maddy sits down in the big chair across from Skippy. Yesterday everyone came back and they were talking all day. The hours passed so quickly neither of them noticed. Conrad stayed for a long time as well. Then Weston and Razy took him home when he had gotten tired.

Today, they are introducing Maddy to their business. She had made a few suggestions yesterday and Skippy wants to talk to her about them more clearly today. He prefers to talk business only at the office he and Weston try hard to avoid any

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conversations after hours. They introduce her to Major and Major smiles and gives her a hug.

Prissy walks in and doesn’t see Conrad, “Where is he?” she asks worried.

Skippy and Weston look at her, “Where is who?” they ask in unison.

“Conrad, he isn’t here, I checked downstairs, I called him last night he didn’t answer. So, where the hell is he, and why aren’t you running to find him damn it!!” she yells out of worry.

Weston walks over to Prissy. “This is Maddy, our long-lost friend. Two days ago, we found out she is running from a disgraceful person who calls himself a man. Conrad was with them for a long time both days. I’ll go get him. I promise,” Weston puts his hand on Prissy’s shoulder to calm her down.

“Ok,” her voice shakes.

Weston runs down the stairs and asks Major if he has heard from Conrad yet today. The answer was no. Then he says, “Don’t move, we won’t get there fast enough. Charlie lives near him, let’s call him first.” Weston looks to Major thankful that he can think under this kind of pressure. He nods.

The wait feels as if an hour has gone by, “Charlie says he won’t answer his door but he is home. He called to him that he is going to be late for

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work, Conrad says he doesn’t need a ride. I told him to stay at the door and if he hears anything funny, break it down. Now give me two minutes to wait for Harold to come to the front desk, then I’m coming with you,” he looks at Weston with authority.

“Got it,” Weston waits and Harold comes running quickly. The two men run out to Weston’s car and head over to Conrad’s place. Weston doesn’t give him the courtesy of knocking, he uses his key and lets them in. They find Conrad sitting on his couch looking at a bottle of alcohol on the side table.

Major speaks first, “Son, that’s not the way to combat this.”

Conrad looks up and for the first time in a long time, he begins to cry. He lets himself feel the misery that has been haunting him for a long time. He sees the love Weston has and now that Maddy is back, he sees his cousin fully in love with a woman he has loved forever. Major and Weston sit next to him and wait.

After a while, Weston says, “You have Prissy worried sick about you. She came in practically falling over herself. You can’t disappear on her, I’ve never seen her so frazzled.”

“She must have a client she is worried about,” he mumbles.

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“No, you damn fool. She is worried about you,” Weston explains what she said the first day she walked into their business only a few days ago. He waits to let this sink into Conrad’s brain.

“That can’t be true,” Conrad responds.

“Conrad, we’re here because of her. What were you planning on doing today? As soon as you didn’t show up, one of us would have been here, we came sooner because of her worry,” Major says. “Listen soldier, we’ve all had our personal hell to deal with, maybe you’re not quite over yours, but there is a woman out there who wants so badly to be a part of your life it’s making her heartsick, my advice to you is to take it one day at a time and see what will be. What would be so bad about that? Personally, I’d love for my wife to help me in the shower with or without being stuck in a chair,” he teases.

This brings a smile to Conrad’s face. “I can’t go looking like this,” he says. “I sent the aide home this morning without a shower.”

“We’ve got this,” the men say in unison.
~ ~ ~

When the three men get back to Skippy’s office, Prissy is the first one to run over to them, she kisses Major, then Weston, then she looks at Conrad

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and yells with tears in her eyes, “If you ever pull that crap again, I’m going to kill you.” Then, she bends down and kisses him right on the lips, she lingers there a long time. She waits until he responds by putting his arms around her neck and pulling her down to him.

Skippy puts his arm around Maddy’s shoulders and pulls her in. This, this is good. She leans her head towards him and allows herself to be pulled into his love. Things will work out, she still has some recovery to go through, but at least she knows there will be happiness around her.

One more time Skippy whispers to Maddy, “safety and love forever.”

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