

Rennillia 2

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Sitting at the kitchen table, I recalled the hollow look in Erin's eyes when she left. Barely coherent as I agreed to join The Society, a vacant smile revealed her approval. Anxiously waiting for Hert to return, I glanced at the clock above the bar. My thoughts turned to Ms. Herterand and her episode. Mr. Roberts's death had disassembled all of us. Riddled with guilt over the ungrateful last words I spoke to him, I looked beyond myself. Striving to be the woman I needed to be for my husband. I vowed to live up to every new obligation thrust upon me.

Chapter 1

The door opened and Jackson walked in. I noticed the wide scar right above his eyebrow first, then his smile.

Sitting down at the table with me, he asked, "Did you just get home?"

Nodding at him, I replied, "Yeah, I picked Sophia up from your mom's, she's taking a nap."

Jackson laughed a little, asking, "Was it everything you thought it would be?"

"It was worse! The stupid pin ceremony was ridiculous. I actually had to vow, 'I, Mrs. Rennillia Marie Herterand swear to uphold the decree set in place by The Society and to conduct myself with superior decorum in every aspect of my life.'"

Jackson motioned to the pin, saying, "Pretty fancy."

I removed the S shaped diamond pin from my strap as I grumbled, "The S should stand for sadistic back stabbers," before setting it on the table.

"What do you mean?"

"They were all uppity and they all talked about each other. I don't ever want to go again," I complained.

Shaking his head at me, Jackson shared, "Sounds like the office right now. Since Hert took over and set up an accounting department, I have people in and out all day telling me how other people aren't doing their job."

Smiling at him, I offered, "Hert should be home anytime now. Do you want to have dinner with us? I'll make Emerson sit outside if he doesn't behave."

Jackson had avoided all contact with Emerson after that day at the hospital. It seemed as though their fight ended their friendship. His relationship with Hert, however, had greatly improved. They still weren't friends in a technical sense but there appeared to be a mutual, professional respect. Our relationship was also different. He was different. Mr. Roberts' death had a greater impact on us than I ever could have imagined.

Smiling the smile only he could, Jackson leaned back in his chair.

"I'll have dinner with you, but Hert's not going to be home for a while," he informed.

With a heavy sigh, I replied, “Of course he won’t,” before I continued with, “At least you and Telli are there. If y’all weren’t, I’d never see him.”

“Yeah, I felt bad leaving. I’m sure Telli’s wife wants to see him, but Hert said for me to go and see how your Society thing went.”

“Don’t tell him I said it was awful. He’s got enough to deal with, okay?” I urged.

Smiling wide, Jackson stated, “I won’t. Between the office and Roberts, your man has his hands full.” My eyes questioned his comment. I knew how stupid Emerson was behaving here at the house, but I couldn’t believe he would act like that at the office too.

“He’s worthless. He doesn’t do anything. Hert has been trying to get him involved but he won’t help out at all. Finally, Hert told him today to go home and not to come back until he was ready to work. It’s about time too. Everybody else has been working like crazy and you’d think if anyone, he...”

“I’m mad at him too, but he’s not worthless. He’s just having a hard time,” I snapped.

Jackson snapped back, “You know, if you would stop making excuses for him you would see he needs to grow the...”

Quickly ending the argument, I stated, “Okay, Jacks. I don’t want to argue with you. I don’t know where Em went when he left the office, but he’s not here. So let’s not talk about him anymore.”

I brought Sophia downstairs to play in the kitchen while I fixed dinner. Glancing at Jackson, sitting in the corner with her, trying to get her to

high-five him, it was funny how much fun he seemed to have playing with her. He really was her Uncle Jacks.

We ate dinner and cleaned up the kitchen. Jackson smiled and thanked me for dinner, leaving the minute Emerson showed up. Truth be told, the only reason I put up with Emerson was because of Sophia. No matter how he acted towards me, he was always very sweet to her. Walking into the kitchen, Emerson greeted Sophia with the same endearing tone as always.

“Are you hungry?” I asked him.

With a hateful glare, he informed, “I don’t need anything from you.”

It was a test of patience every day with him. I thought ‘fine I hope you starve to death’ as I picked Sophia up and carried her to her room. Doing my best to keep things as calm as possible, I kept Emerson’s idiotic comments to myself and tried to remember what he was really like. Hert was rarely home. I didn’t want to waste our time on him.

As it got later, I gave up waiting on Hert to arrive home and finally put Sophia to bed. After whispering, ‘I love you, Goodnight’ to her, I went to my room. Considering ways to make things better, I changed into my pajamas. Lying across my bed, I decided to stop trying to figure things out and just hope tonight would be different from every other night since Hert took over the company. I missed my husband so much. Most of my time waiting for him to come home, late at night, was spent thinking of his

hands and imagining what all they could do. I fantasized about him taking me somewhere anywhere, or just plain taking me. Our married life had been reduced to quick kisses at hello and goodbye.

Determined to keep a pleasant disposition, I cheerfully smiled when Hert walked in our room. He smiled back heading straight for the shower. I was practically drooling when he came out to get dressed. He slid into bed and kissed my forehead.

“How was your Tea?”

Lying through my teeth, I answered, “It was nice.”

He smiled slightly sitting up with a familiar expression. I knew that look. It was his I have to go out of town look.

Before he had a chance to speak, I asked, “How long are you going to be gone?”

Appearing a bit surprised, he answered, “A week.”

“When do you leave?”

Now laughing a little, he replied, “At the end of the week. I have a favor to ask you too.”

Playfully, I said, “Now you know if I do you a favor you’re gonna owe me.”

“I will owe you. You’re not going to like the favor,” he confessed.

“What is it?”

“The office is finally in order. Well, it’s at the point where Jackson and Telli can handle it. What I need from you is to come with me to some meetings,” he stated, explaining, “There is a certain

approach to things and we have to meet with other heads of companies and investors.”

I took a moment to make sure my tone and expression stayed pleasant.

“Sure. If that’s what you need me to do. When do we start?”

With a surprised look, he stated, “Tomorrow morning.”

Smiling my best smile, I kissed his cheek, saying, “We better get some sleep then, I love you. Goodnight,” and quickly rolled over.

This whole being a good wife thing was altogether disappointing. I hardly got to see my husband and when I did, I forced myself to go along with whatever he needed. Apparently sex wasn’t going to be the reward for my good effort since it was becoming a distant memory. Being patient and pleasant all the time was killing me. However, I was determined to keep my word. To be the wife Hert needed me to be. Keeping Erin at the forefront of my thoughts helped. When the frustration and difficulty of being Hert’s wife seemed unbearable, I would think of her. Erin had spent years by the side of the man she loved sacrificing her time for his benefit. She never complained and always put his needs first.

I had great difficulty sleeping and there was no need to pretend for Hert’s sake. It took no time at all for him to fall asleep. Lying there, I recalled all the nights he refused to stay in my room, claiming there was no way to keep his hands off me if he did. Sadly, the blame was equally distributed between the two of

us. There were things I could do; measures could be taken in order to have my way with him. I wanted him just as badly as I did that night in the dining room. Unsure if he still held the same desire for me, I was unwilling to initiate, fearful of the outcome. If he were to openly deny me, I would be devastated. Falling into my routine, I reminisced on the beginning of our relationship until I fell asleep.

Chapter 2

In the morning, I packed Sophia's diaper bag. Mrs. Thomas arrived early to pick her up. Careful not to wake her, I placed Sophia in her car seat while she was still asleep. I lightly kissed her forehead and whispered 'I love you' to her as she smiled in her sleep. I placed my finger in front of my lips, cautioning Hert to be quiet as he walked in. Nodding, Hert slowly lifted her in her car seat. Holding out his other hand, he picked up the diaper bag and walked out of the room. I followed Hert into the hallway, glancing at him as he continued down the stairs with Sophia before I stepped into our room.

After taking a shower, I stood in the closet looking for something to wear. I grabbed a pair of slacks and a nice blouse. Although I always tried very hard not to look, I could not help glancing up at the metaphorical death box Hert left me the last time he went out of town. Normally, I would be curious, anticipating what was inside, however, recalling Hert's words 'If anything happens to me' caused me to have no desire whatsoever to reveal its contents. Quickly turning around, I felt Hert tap me on the shoulder.

Handing me the phone, he informed, "It's Mrs. Roberts."

Nodding, I took the phone, answering, "Hello."

"Rennillia, I know Scott will be in meetings all week. I am not trying to tell you how to behave, however, I thought you could use some advice."

Beyond appreciation, I replied, “Oh, yes, ma’am. Anything you can tell me. I’m so nervous, Erin.”

There was a hint of cheer in her voice as she advised, “Be polite, not friendly. Be sure to pay attention to Scott every time he speaks. When you are addressed as Mrs. Herterand, do not offer an option. No one is to call you by your first name.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You will do fine,” she assured before ending our conversation.

I set the phone down on the dresser and got dressed.

Smiling at Hert as he stepped out of the shower, I noticed he appeared concerned.

“Are you alright?” As I nodded, he stated, “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

Taking a breath, I shared, “I’m really nervous. I know this is important.”

Hert smiled as he enlightened, “There’s absolutely nothing to worry about. All you have to do is stand next to me and look pretty.”

I smiled back unsure of how to take his comment. It was mildly offensive. Mulling it over in my head, I decided, it was implied that I looked pretty and that was the closest I had come to hearing a compliment in a while.

Informing, “Hey, I’m going to call the driver. Come downstairs when you’re finished getting ready.” Hert walked out of the room.

I started feeling better about the day when I grasped all I had to do was be there.

In a much better mood, I stepped into the hallway. Unfortunately, Emerson did too.

Looking me up and down, he shook his head, saying, “Aww, such a good little wifey.”

“I am a good wife!” I snapped back at him.

With a condescending tone, Emerson mocked, “Of course you are. You’re the best wife ever.”

Irritated, I gave a loud exhale and continued on my way. Yelling at him in my mind, I was startled to see Telli standing in the living room with Hert. Giving a half-hearted smile, I joined them. The driver arrived and the three of us left for the meeting.

I remained silent the whole way. Not only because I felt anxious about the meeting but it also gave me a chance to overhear Hert and Telli discuss the office. Apparently, Hert setting up the in house accounting department was cause for concern amongst some of the other companies and investors. The purpose of our week of meetings was to assure consistency and to confirm that, while things were changing, MR Industries was stable. I understood the importance of it, however, I could not see how my presence was at all necessary.

When we arrived at a small building, I was expecting something a little more impressive. As it turned out, the building was only a rendezvous point. After it was clear everyone had arrived, each driver followed the first car to pull away. We ended up at a familiar upscale hotel. Knowing there was a reason this was the hotel he brought me to when I left, I looked over at Hert as we pulled up to the front. Telli

stepped out first. Hert followed, stopping until I was out of the car also. Feeling a sense of déjà vu when we passed through the lobby, I remained at Hert's side as we entered the conference room.

Inside the room, we walked to the head of a long table. Pulling out the chair to his left, he motioned for me to be seated. Telli seated himself on Hert's right. Hert remained standing until every other person was seated. Taking his seat between Telli and me, Hert started the meeting. Sitting up straight in my chair and with my hands folded in my lap, I focused on Hert. It wasn't a difficult task. Hert's voice and demeanor commanded attention. He spoke for a little over an hour before opening the meeting for questions. At first I didn't want to look away. Not wanting to appear rude, I glanced over at the first man to ask a question. Instantly upset, I scanned the room finding, although everyone was seated, it was obvious I was the only wife not wearing a dress. From that point on all I could do was mentally look through my closet, thinking of every dress I owned. The longer the meeting went on the more uncomfortable I felt. Out of place and inexperienced, still I should have known better. Erin had spent her whole life preparing to be the perfect accessory to her influential husband. Here I sat, unrefined. Never putting that much thought in how others perceived me, I was suddenly concerned. Not for myself, but for my husband and how I would most certainly reflect badly on him.

As the meeting came to an end, I was extra anxious. Hert stood. Telli stood. Hert placed his hand on my back giving me a light smile. I took my cue and stood with them. The three of us walked to the doorway. Each man shook Hert's hand and gave me a polite 'Mrs. Herterand'. As I gave a smile and nod in return, I noticed none of the wives seemed to acknowledge me at all. It could have been proper etiquette for this engagement, however, knowing I was improperly dressed, that was not the way I perceived it. By the time everyone left, I wanted to cry.

Since we were close to Amila and Telli's house we stopped there before heading home. Amila served us coffee. I loved being at her house. It always felt more like a home than our house did. Standing in the kitchen with her it was no surprise Hert and Telli sat in the living room.

Amila cheerfully asked, "Did everything go okay?"

"I think so."

"Romero never talks about work at all, but I could tell he was a little nervous this morning," she shared.

Shrugging, I confirmed, "Hert doesn't either."

Appearing somewhat surprised, she questioned, "Really?"

"I've tried asking questions about the office but I just kinda gave up after a while."

With a thoughtful look, Amila inquired, "Are you okay? You look sad."

I glanced into the living room, making sure Hert was occupied before saying, “I just... I want to be the right wife for Hert.”

Amila appeared confused. Before I had a chance to go into detail, Hert walked over to us asking if I was ready to go.

Giving a half-hearted smile, I said, “I’ll call you tomorrow,” to Amila as we left. Hert placed his arm around my shoulders as we walked out to the car.

On the way to the house, I leaned against him, resting my head on his shoulder. The moment we arrived, I rushed upstairs. Flipping through the clothes in my closet, I pulled out dress after dress. Laying each one out on the bed, I stood there staring at them. There wasn’t a single one that appeared suitable. Feeling panicked, I walked back to my closet checking again to make sure I hadn’t missed one.

“What are you doing?” Hert asked as he entered the room.

Trying not to reveal how distressed I was, I replied, “I need a dress for tomorrow.”

Nodding and smiling, he stated, “Okay, Jackson will be here with Sophia in a little bit.” Promptly leaving after his announcement, he didn’t even give me a second thought. I had no time for hurt feelings. I needed to find a dress for tomorrow’s brunch.

I could only think of one logical next step. Call Erin. The phone was still sitting on the dresser from this morning. I picked it up and dialed her number.

“Roberts Residence,” she answered, sounding a bit sleepy.

Doing my best not to shout in a panicked tone, I said, “Erin I need your help.”

More alert this time, she asked, “What is it dear? Is there a problem?”

Admitting I was more than likely making a big deal about nothing, I said, “No, ma’am, I just...All the wives at the meeting today had a dress on, except me. I have looked through every dress I have and I cannot find one for the brunch tomorrow. The Store is closed now and I will not have time in the morning to get a new one. What should I do?”

I could hear the smile in her voice as she consulted, “I have a dress in the closet at the house. You are more than welcome to it.”

Slightly hesitant to enter her old room, I asked, “Are you sure?”

“Of course, dear,” she assured before saying, “I will call you tomorrow, Rennillia. Goodbye.” Erin hung up before I had a chance to thank her.

I took a deep breath and walked out of my room. Standing in front of the Roberts’ old room was a bit unsettling. It made me feel like I was intruding on Erin’s privacy. As it turned out it wasn’t Erin’s privacy I was intruding on at all.

I opened the door, and blurted, “Oh!” when I saw Emerson sitting in the chair by the bed.

Giving me a less than welcome look, he griped, “Go away.”

“Erin told me I could get a dress,” was all I could say as I walked to the closet.

Realizing she must have left it for me, I found one dress hanging in the closet with the tags still on it.

Stepping out of the closet, I informed, “I got it,” and started to walk out.

“Stay a minute,” Emerson suggested.

Shocked by his mild tone, I sat on the edge of the bed facing him.

Feeling nothing aside from compassion for him, I offered, “Is there anything I can do?”

The resentment returned to his eyes as Emerson snapped, “Yea, you can quit acting like you’re something you’re not.”

“What am I acting like?”

Narrowing his eyes at me, he stated, “Something you aren’t.”

Jumping to my feet, I defended, “I’m acting exactly like what I am. I’m Hert’s wife. And you’re a lazy worthless ass that needs to stop feeling sorry for yourself and grow up.”

Leaving the room, I experienced a twinge of guilt realizing I used the same words I got upset with Jackson for saying. Back in my room, I hung my dresses back in the closet. Looking over at the one Erin gave me, I hung it from the top of the closet door before heading downstairs. By the time I made it down, Jackson had arrived with Sophia. Rushing over, I took Sophia from Jackson, holding her tight. Assuring her that I had missed her, I sat down on the

couch with her. She snuggled close and I knew she had missed me too. Jackson left after informing me he would attend the brunch with us tomorrow.

I went upstairs to get both Sophia and I ready for bed. I rocked her to sleep while Hert went to our room to take a shower. As I rocked her, the pressures of the day and urgency to prepare for the next drifted away. Holding Sophia, there was no need to pretend or be anything I wasn't. I was her mom and she was my daughter and that was enough to seal my unconditional love for her. Laying her in her crib, I slowly let go. Knowing she was the most precious gift I would ever have the privilege of receiving, I stood there staring at her. Feeling a bit sleepy, I decided to go to bed. Walking to my room, I opened the door. Hert was already asleep. It wasn't like I had any plans for bedtime, but still, it was a little disappointing. Even though I had made a wardrobe error at the meeting, I had served my purpose. Once again, with no benefit in sight and only the knowledge of another day of unrewarded efforts, I fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Waking earlier than expected, I hurried to Sophia's room. She was crying. I quickly lifted her in an effort to calm her down. Her little face was red and wet with tears. Holding her close, I patted her back, assuring her whatever was wrong would be okay. I sat on the chair and continued rocking her. She would stop crying for a minute then start all over again. Feeling terrible for her and worried because I wasn't sure what was wrong, I continued rocking and consoling her.

Hert walked in, asking, "What's wrong?"

Keeping my voice low, I replied, "I'm not sure. Will you go make her a bottle?"

He nodded and quickly walked out. I felt her head and noticed she felt very warm. After taking her temperature, I gave Sophia some Tylenol and she almost instantly fell back asleep.

I sat in the chair rocking her as she sniffled in her sleep. Hert walked back in with her bottle. Placing it on her dresser, he walked up and lightly patted her.

Being as quiet as possible, I said, "I think she's better now. I gave her some Tylenol and she fell asleep."

Nodding, Hert suggested, "Don't forget to send it to Mrs. Thomas' with her."

Saddened by the fact that I was going to leave her, I replied, "She can't go anywhere if she's sick."

"Then I'll have Mrs. Thomas come here."

Nodding at him, I continued rocking Sophia as he left the room.

I rocked her until Jackson and Mrs. Thomas walked into the room.

Giving me a confused look, Jackson fussed, "You're not even dressed yet."

Mrs. Thomas quickly popped him on the arm, saying, "Hush up, Jacks, her baby doesn't feel good." I shot him a 'ha-ha' look as Mrs. Thomas walked up to me and touched Sophia's forehead.

"I told Jackson to tell you, when he brought her home last night, I think she's teething."

I nodded with a bit of relief. Feeling more secure that Sophia would be alright, I handed her over. Mrs. Thomas took my spot in the chair rocking Sophia.

"Thank you for coming here to watch her," I appreciated.

She laughed slightly, saying, "I remember what it was like to be a new mommy and how worrisome it can be," then seemingly on purpose she teased Jackson, saying, "Jacks was always cryin' about something. He was such a picky baby. I guess he's still picky because I don't have a daughter-in-law yet."

Smiling wide, Jackson replied, "That's because I'm not picky, mom, I like 'em all."

"Well then you need to start being picky and settle down. I want some grandbabies," she informed.

Laughing a little, he said, "I know, mom, you're the only one without grandkids."

She smiled giving him a slight nod as we turned to walk out.

Before we were out the door, Mrs. Thomas cheered, “Oh, good luck at your meeting, honey, I love you!”

“Love you too, mom,” he laughed, shaking his head.

Jackson and I stepped into the hallway going our separate ways. I headed to my room as he went downstairs.

I got ready thinking about Jackson and his parents. I hoped Sophia and I would have the same relationship when she grew up. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas were the most normal people I had ever met. They were always cheerful and funny. One could definitely tell Jackson was their kid. Most of all they seemed happy to be around each other. I remembered the first time I met his parents and how I enjoyed being around them so much that I was sad when it was time to leave. Sitting in Jackson’s truck as he drove me home, I wished my family was like that. Suddenly, it dawned on me, mine could. Not the family I grew up with and lost but my family now. Hert, Sophia and I could be the family I always wanted. Not only did we love each other, we were both completely devoted to Sophia. I finished getting ready, pleased with myself for coming to such a wonderful conclusion. If I just kept working as hard as I could at being the right wife for Hert, he would be happy too and it would all come together perfectly.

Hert’s voice reminded me to hurry up and come downstairs. Both he and Jackson appeared frustrated with me for taking so long as I made it downstairs

just in time to leave. We followed the same routine as the day before. When we arrived at the hotel, I was more self-assured than the previous day. Standing tall beside my husband, nothing could shake my confidence. Until I found out the brunch was for the wives while the men continued on to the conference room. What was I supposed to do? I knew none of the wives and from my impression yesterday, they did not want to know me.

Walking to the outdoor area where our brunch was held, I noticed all the other wives were seated at tables in little groups. None of them seemed to acknowledge my presence, so I took a seat at an empty table off to the side. Truthfully, it was much easier this way. I could sit there quietly imagining how perfect my family would be and not worry about impressing anyone.

It was working perfectly until I heard a voice say, "Excuse me, may I sit down?"

Quickly looking up, I answered, "Of course."

A very thin, pleasant looking woman with short blonde, noticeably graying, hair sat down.

"I'm Angelina; my husband is the lawyer for MR Industries. I'm not sure if you realize but you are being very rude," she stated in a mothering tone.

Horrified, I shook my head apologizing, "No, ma'am, I wasn't trying to be."

Angelina took a deep breath and assured, "Well, you are."

Feeling my eyes welling up with tears, I replied, "I know I made a bad impression yesterday. I should have worn a dress but..."

She swiftly cut me off saying, “No one here cares what you have on. All we care about is that you are doing your part.”

Nodding, I defended myself, “Mrs. Roberts told me what to do and I thought...”

Angelina interrupted me again, “We all toler...respected Mrs. Roberts for who she was. You are not Mrs. Roberts. Your job is to make sure your husband’s life away from the office is simple and pleasant so he can handle his responsibilities without worrying about his home life,” she then paused, taking another deep breath before informing, “We all know a bit about you and believe it or not, we are hoping you succeed.”

Before I could respond, Jackson walked up.

Smiling wide he pulled up a chair and sat down. He glanced at me then turned to Angelina.

She smiled at him, asking, “Well, how did you come out?”

“Pretty good,” he replied, before Angelina turned back to me saying, “I will leave you to it then,” and returned to her table.

I whispered, “You know her?”

With a peculiar look, Jackson replied, “Yea, that’s Seminol’s wife.”

“He’s the lawyer for the office,” I clarified.

Nodding, he said, “We had a little break so I thought I would see how you were doing out here. Why are you sitting by yourself?”

I shrugged my shoulders at him, saying, “I don’t think they like me very much.”

Jackson smiled, quietly sharing, "It's probably because you're so much prettier than all of them."

It made me smile as I assured, "Yea, I don't think that's why. I'm pretty far out of my element here."

With a thoughtful look, Jackson offered, "There's really no need for me to be here anymore, I'm done. Do you want me to take you home?"

"No. I don't want Hert to think I can't do this. And don't tell him I was sitting by myself, okay?" I pleaded, shaking my head.

Rolling his eyes, he said, "Alright, see you when the meeting's over then."

Smiling slightly, I gave a little wave as he walked back inside.

I felt a little disappointed in myself. Regardless of what I should do or what was expected of me as Hert's wife, I was fixing to be myself and hope for the best. Taking a deep breath, I stood up and walked over to the table where Angelina was sitting.

Clearing my throat as they looked up at me, I asked, "Is it okay if I sit with y'all?"

Four of the ladies appeared shocked, while Angelina smiled, motioning for me to pull up a chair.

Angelina introduced them to me, saying, "Rennillia, this is Brooke, Nadine, Pearl, and Benetta."

Pearl raised an eyebrow, instantly asking me, "So you're pretty friendly with Jackson Thomas?"

"No, no, he's the boy Mrs. Roberts used to talk about her bringing over to their house," Brooke said.

Pearl argued, "That was Scott. Jackson's the one she dated," then looked at me, asking, "Isn't he?"

Shocked, I replied, "Um, Yes."

Pearl smirked at Brooke, saying, "See."

I sat there baffled, wondering why this was conversation worthy.

Thinking to myself, 'well Erin was quite the little gossip', until a guilty feeling reminded me she was more than likely just talking about Emerson and his friends like most mothers would. The question of why they were so interested in Jackson was quickly revealed once Nadine spoke up.

"That boy is somethin' else. If I was younger..."

Pearl laughed, "Not that you're married, though?"

"Oh, please," Nadine replied. "Like you wouldn't."

Angelina broke in saying, "Y'all are both being tacky," then glancing at me, she slyly questioned, "What about you?"

I blurted, "No!" adding, "We're just friends."

All five ladies stared at me for a moment.

Nadine asked me, "So you and he never?"

Wide eyed, I shook my head.

"I'm surprised. I heard he has quite the reputation," Pearl stated.

Benetta who had been very quiet up until that point, said, "Remember how Mrs. Roberts used to go on and on about her and Emerson."

They all looked at each other nodding.

How on earth could anyone think I was the rude one? These ladies were unbelievable. If the Jackson conversation wasn't bad enough, now they were moving on to Emerson. No wonder Erin advised me not to be friendly. However, I was a little curious about what she used to say about me.

Looking directly at Benetta, I asked, "What about me and Emerson?"

"Oh you know, she thought for sure you and he would get married," she replied.

Angelina chimed in, saying, "She also thought Emerson would be running the company."

"Ha, that's what she gets for what she did to poor..." Nadine sneered, stopping as Angelina said, "Shhh, here they come."

Incredibly interested, I was disappointed to see Hert and the other men coming out to collect us. Hert walked up to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. Smiling through my disappointment, I looked up at him. He gave a nod and a smile to the ladies at the table then to me after all five of them smiled back. As I stood up, Hert placed his arm around my shoulders.

Walking back through the hotel, he removed his arm from around me as we continued out to the car.

As he opened the door, Hert informed me, "Jackson is going to ride home with you. I have to run to the office before I go home."

"Oh, okay," I responded, hoping my sadness wasn't noticeable.

Leaning forward, I reached my arm up and wrapped it around his neck. Hert gave me a slight hug then kissed my cheek, before turning and walking away.

Thinking, ‘what the hell was that?’ I opened the car door and slid in. Really wanting to get back out and yell at him for not giving me a proper goodbye, I crossed my arms and pouted.

The Society, Erin and the brunch ladies were all their own unique experience, but they had one thing in common. As Hert’s wife I should act appropriately so my husband could do his job. My next thought was interrupted by Jackson.

“Well, are you gonna talk to me or what?” he asked.

Shaking my head, I said, “Sorry, I was just...”

“What’s going on with you?”

Shrugging a little, I answered, “I’m trying to do my part. I’m supposed to be making Hert’s home life as pleasant as possible so he can do his job.”

Narrowing his eyes at me, he said, “What? Ren, Hert’s never once had a problem doing his job, no matter what’s going on. I’m not saying you need to be all crazy with him or anything, just don’t be somebody else.”

Pretending to agree, I nodded, quickly changing the subject, “You know you’re really popular with the wives.”

Smiling wide, he informed, “Too bad I’ve changed my ways,” with a wink.

“Jacks,” I griped, kicking his foot with mine. Jackson had a way of cheering me up that was funny and a little disturbing at the same time.

We laughed a little before Jackson's face grew serious. I was worried at first then I realized he was trying to be sweet.

"Marriage seems to suit you pretty well," he imparted.

Smiling at him, I nodded saying, "Who would have thought."

He smiled his smile and I knew if I ever had a friend, a real friend, it was Jackson. Despite the years of flirting and hidden motives, he was right. The day I was trying to avoid having a feelings conversation with him, he said 'you can still love someone without being with them'. It was true. We could and it took me until this exact moment to realize the real feeling behind the way I felt about Jackson.

Nudging him as we pulled up to the house, I declared, "You're a good friend."

"I'm the greatest," he laughed.

I laughed with him as we got out of the car.

Stopping the minute we walked to the back door, I saw Emerson sitting in the garage and wrapped my arm around Jackson's. For a second, I thought we would be able to ignore him and go inside. In the next second, I knew that wasn't going to happen.

Emerson spouted, "Awe, the perfect little wife is home."

Before I had a chance to respond, Jackson snapped, "Don't talk to her like that."

Emerson stood up, walking towards us, he questioned, "What? You're going to defend her like you did when I kicked your ass?"

“Put your hands on her again and you’re gonna be the one in the hospital,” Jacks informed. The closer they got to each other, the more I started to worry.

Standing in front of Jackson, I looked up at him reminding, “Jackson, your mom is here.”

“That’s right, your mommy’s here,” Emerson antagonized.

Jackson snapped back, “Where’s your mom? Oh, that’s right she left. Hert’s not here to save you this time either.”

Things were quickly getting out of control. Already feeling Jackson pulling me to the side, I was no longer between them. I gave one last attempt to stop them.

Hoping it would work, I stated, “That’s enough. Neither one of you will get to see Sophia again if this doesn’t stop right now,” then they both glared at me as I ordered, “Jackson, go inside, and you find somewhere else to go, Emerson.” Surprisingly, they both obeyed.

Walking in behind Jackson, I caught the door before it slammed shut. He was red faced and furious.

Standing close to him, I rubbed his arm saying, “It’s okay.”

“That’s not okay, Ren. Why the hell would you put up with that? And how is Hert letting him stay here when he treats you like that?”

I had to confess, “Hert doesn’t know. He’s gone a lot and Emerson doesn’t act like that around him.”

“Why aren’t you telling him?”

With a sigh, I replied, "I can handle it myself and I would appreciate it if you didn't tell Hert. I don't want him to know."

Shaking his head, Jackson questioned, "And what happens when you can't handle it?"

"If that happens, then I will tell Hert and have Emerson move out," I assured him.

Before Jackson could say another word about it, I heard Sophia crying and darted out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

The second I walked in, Mrs. Thomas motioned for me to step back out. Quietly stepping back, she followed me into the hallway.

"I just got her back to sleep, poor baby. She slept for a while after you left. You can give her some more Tylenol in about two hours. Oh, and her teething ring is downstairs in the freezer."

Thanking her again, I replied, "I really appreciate you staying here with her."

"Oh, it's no problem. She is just so sweet, even when she's crying."

Nodding, I walked downstairs with her.

Jackson walked into the living room, asking, "Mom, am I bringing you home?"

With a laugh, she replied, "Well, I wasn't planning on walking."

Smiling slightly back at her, Jackson handed her the car keys, saying, "I'll be out there in just a minute. I need to talk to Ren real quick."

"Alright, son," she replied as she walked out of the room.

Not wanting to explain myself or my reasons for putting up with Emerson to him, I was hoping to avoid finishing the conversation.

“Will you be at the dinner tomorrow night?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

He quickly answered, “No,” then continued to say, “I don’t understand why you are putting up with Roberts.”

“It’s really not that big of a deal and besides if I tell Hert then he’ll be concerned and his job...” I replied before Jackson cut me off.

“His job is what? It’s not more important than his wife. He should be concerned. And why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“You’ll pick the stupidest things in the world to get upset about but when there really is something, like this, to be upset about, you just ignore it.”

In an effort to shut him up, I snapped, “Well, I don’t know why you’re minding my business when you need to be minding your own.”

I could instantly tell, by the look on his face, that I had hurt him.

Nodding, Jackson assured, “You’re right.”

“I didn’t mean it to come out like that,” I swore, trying to take it back.

“Yea, you did,” he said with a wounded look as he turned to walk away.

“Jacks,” I urged, wanting to make it right.

He continued walking away, saying, “I’ll see you around, Ren.”

He slammed the door hard and I heard Sophia start to cry again.

Back upstairs in Sophia's room, I tried to console her while watching the clock. Impatiently waiting for two hours to pass, I heard Hert calling me. I didn't answer, figuring he would eventually find me.

He walked in Sophia's room, asking, "Is she still not feeling good?"

Shaking my head, I replied, "Go downstairs and get her teething ring out of the freezer and bring it here."

Hert walked back out quickly returning with the frozen ring.

"Will you be alright with her? I'm going to take a shower."

Nodding, I watched him walk out of the room. The teething ring helped as Sophia sniffled and bit down on it. My heart went out to her. Mrs. Thomas was right she was sweet even when she was crying. Thinking about how happy she usually was, I thought of Jackson.

Jackson was usually happy too. I didn't like feeling responsible for his unhappiness. The more I dwelled on it the more I decided, maybe it wasn't about me. I hated thinking he was overreacting where Emerson was concerned, but he was. All Emerson was doing was talking mess and to be fair, I had caused a lot of trouble and he had every right to be angry with me. If they were still friends Jackson wouldn't think it was such a big deal. He would smile

and say ‘give it some time’ just like he did when I found out about my parents. As much as they seemed to dislike each other, they both seemed to be concerned about the same thing. How either of them thought it was better for me stay the same was beyond me. Jackson was different and I was happy for him. Just like him, I wasn’t pretending to be someone else. I was just being a better, more controlled version of myself. I made a commitment to be Hert’s wife and that meant that Hert was more important than my old friends having their old Ren.

Hert stepped back into Sophia’s room. He spent the next few hours with us. When I realized how late it was getting, I assured him Sophia and I would be fine and he should go to bed. Hert smiled and told us both goodnight. When he left the room, I decided the next time I saw Jackson I would apologize and leave it at that. The rest of my evening was spent alternating Tylenol, the teething ring and trying to get Sophia to eat a little bit.

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