

## Chapter 187 Not Coming Back

Alexander

“I really can’t be sure,” the doctor said. “Iris frequently complained of headaches when she first arrived, but there was no apparent trigger that I could determine. She hasn’t called for a refill on her pain medication, so I must assume she is doing better. I last saw her about two weeks ago. She seemed quite well.”

These comments supported Fiona’s hypothesis that Iris really had no more need for medical care here at the palace. My wife arched an eyebrow at me from across the room. I had the doctor on speakerphone so Fiona could listen in.

“Pay Iris a visit today please,” I instructed. “And call me back after you’ve seen her. I’d like to know if she has been using the meds at all. And tell me what you recommend in terms of any other continuing care.”

Fiona was walking out of her dressing room, pulling on an oversized sweater as I hung up with the doctor. I motioned for her to come over to where I was sitting at the table. As soon as she was in arm’s reach, I pulled her onto my lap.

She smiled slightly as her body settled down on top of mine, bringing her hands to the sides of my face and stroking the scruff along my jaw. “Thank you for dealing with this,” she said quietly, her tone serious.

“I’m just sorry that it took so long.”

My phone rang. It was on the table right next to us. Fiona and I looked down at it simultaneously.

And in the next second, she was leaving; she slid off my lap, squeezed my shoulder, and hurried across the room. She disappeared into the nursery as I swiped my thumb across the screen to answer the call. This time I held the phone to my ear. Fiona didn’t want to hear this person’s voice.

I turned the volume all the way down, too.

“Conrad.”

“Alexander, good morning.”

“What can I do for you, uncle?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, I’m sorry to bother you, nephew. But I’m afraid we’re overdue for a meeting—I’ve got a lot of paperwork for you to sign, routine things. And, uh, of course with all the activity lately, I’ve got some client concerns I’d like to run by you as well.”

“What’s your schedule like today?”

“Free whenever you are.”

A vicious part of me wanted to retort, ‘Yes, you’d better be deferent and accommodating, you insubordinate bastard.’ What I actually said was, “Noon. I’ll meet you at your apartment.”

Another pause. I got the feeling he’d been hoping I’d meet him at the office. Around witnesses.

“Very good,” he finally answered. “I’ll make us lunch.”

I finished my coffee and washed our empty mugs before I went to find Fiona in the nursery.

She was putting a fresh diaper on the baby. She didn’t turn around before asking, “What does he want?”

“Needs me to sign some paperwork, and wants to talk about some business matters. I’m going to meet him at his place in a few hours.”

“I heard.”

“Are you still… feeling the same way about what I should be doing with him?”

The question came out clumsily, but Fiona knew what I meant. I had asked her if she wanted Conrad to face any repercussions for his crime. I told her I would do anything she wanted me to.

“Yes. For all of our sakes, the best thing to do is act as though nothing has happened. You should advise Conrad to do the same. And you should make sure he covered his tracks well enough.” She paused. I watched her throat move through a heavy swallow. “I don’t want to know anything about that, though. Here, will you take her please?”

I took Lexi from Fiona’s extended arms and brought the baby close to my chest.

Fi made very fast work of tidying the changing table. I could tell she had more to say, so I waited patiently and watched her work. Finally, when she ran out of tasks to preoccupy her eyes and hands, my wife turned to face me and said, “Alex, there’s something I must tell you.”

“Of course. You can tell me anything. What is it?”

She took a long, slow inhale and exhale, holding eye contact with me the whole time. Then said, “I’m sorry Alex, but I have decided I will not be returning to work at your company. I resign.”

“Oh.” I had to readjust my hold on the baby and tear my eyes away from Fiona’s. And I started pacing.

I don’t know why this took me by surprise. Of course Fiona would not want to go back and work with Conrad after what he did. With everything going on, I just hadn’t stopped to think about it yet.

Fiona followed me into the bedroom. “I loved my job there very much, Alexander,” she said. “And I’m so grateful for the opportunity.”

Her voice had a neutral, professional quality to it, giving me the feeling that she’d been practicing this resignation speech. Thinking about that made my stomach turn.

“But I could never work for Conrad again. What he did to my father, and especially the way that he involved me in it… it’s just changed everything. I could never trust that man again. To be completely honest with you, I would rather never see him again at all.”

“I can understand that,” I muttered, running a hand down my face.

Fiona squinted at me, as if against a spotlight glare. “You’re angry,” she observed calmly.

“With Conrad, yes. I’m very angry. But not at all with you, sweetheart. I really do understand why you would make this decision.”

She nodded glumly.

I moved to the foot of the bed and sat, huffing out a heavy sigh. “You know, I had been envisioning a future in which you and I would lead my mother’s company together. Conrad wanted to retire soon.”

This apparently surprised Fiona. “Did he?”

“Yeah. But it doesn’t matter now. With one unwise action, he both betrayed my trust and chased away our best employee, who could have become his replacement. So yes, I’m angry with Conrad. And with myself, for not keeping him on a shorter leash.”

Fiona paced over to me. Her hands circled my neck and her ice blue eyes beamed right into mine. “I really am sorry, Alex,” she whispered.

“Don’t, Fi. Don’t be sorry. This is not your fault.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s not yours, either.” She leaned in and kissed me lightly. The taste and feel of her soft, sweet lips cut right through my anger.

Lexi wriggled in my arms and made a few squeaky sounds. We looked down at her and found that comically inquisitive expression on her face – eyebrows furrowed, eyes narrowed, lips pursed – that she often made when Fiona and I were discussing something heavy in front of her.

“It’s okay, baby,” Fi whispered, reaching down to take Lexi out of my arms. “Nothing for you to trouble your sweet little head over, princess…”

Conrad had the paperwork laid out neatly on one end of his dining table. There was an open bottle of wine and an empty glass on the other end, between two place settings. My uncle was in the kitchen pan-searing steaks.

I did the paperwork first to get it out of the way. Conrad plated our steaks while I signed the forms and sorted them neatly. I handed him the stack of completed paperwork and he carried it into another room.

I poured myself a glass of wine and began indulging in both the food and drink offerings without waiting for my host to return to the table.

He finally joined me and we began our conversation. Conrad caught me up on goings-on at the firm, brought some big concerns to my attention, and listened respectfully to my decisive replies.

We were finished eating and polishing off the last of the bottle when my uncle asked one last question. “Has Fiona told you when she wants to return to work?” He kept his eyes on his wine glass, focused on swirling the burgundy liquid inside it, while he spoke her name.

“She’s not coming back, Conrad.”

When he whipped his eyes up to meet mine, his mouth was ajar. He wiped it with his hand and averted his eyes again. “You told her.”

“Of course I told her. She deserved to know.”

Conrad frowned. “Her clients will be very disappointed. Losing her permanently will be a big setback for the company, Alexander.”

I nodded, glaring at my uncle. “Oh, trust me. That has already occurred to me. And we have you to thank for it.”

He hung his head. “I’m sorry, son,” he grumbled. The unmistakable sincerity in his voice threatened to ebb Fiona at my anger.

I threw back the last mouthful of wine in my glass, swallowed it down and made a decision.

I was still furious with Conrad. But he was also still my uncle. He and I had been working together for a decade to solve the mystery of my mother’s death. I had to tell him what Fiona had recently uncovered, those details Iris finally shared about my mother’s demise.

“I have news, Conrad.”