

Chapter 188 Energy Tornado

Fiona

I'd known for a while now that I would not be returning to work at Alexander's company. But it felt real and final now that I'd told him. Now that I'd officially resigned.

I had to put the baby down again after he left, because I was feeling exceptionally lousy.

I felt like I was in mourning. I was mourning the future I'd imagined for myself at the venture capital firm. I really had loved that job so much, and I'd worked so desperately hard to prove myself there, to establish a reputation and set myself up for a long-term career. And now it was just... all over.

Lexi summoned me back to her with the beginnings of an attention-seeking cry. I said my final piece in my mind—said goodbye to Crescent Ventures and goodbye-for-now to my finance career—and returned to my child.

She provided me with a full-time job for the time being, anyway. And a very important one. Being a mother was work I already took very seriously, and not having to return to the office meant I could devote myself to it fully.

Of course, I didn't want to be a stay-at-home mom forever. I already missed the fast pace of corporate work, the adrenaline of deadlines and ambition and the satisfaction of using my hard-earned skills and knowledge to make things happen. But finding a new career opportunity was a matter for another time. While Lexi was still so young, it was best to focus on her anyway.

"What are you up to today, Nina?"

I'd called my friend after visiting her room at the palace and discovering that, unlike most days lately, she wasn't there.

"I'm running some errands in the city. What's going on with you?"

"Not much. Been an unusually quiet morning for me. Alex is in the city right now too, doing some business."

I stopped myself before adding, 'with my father's murderer.' My ill will toward Conrad was something I needed to work on letting go of, if I were going to follow the good advice I'd just given to my husband on the same matter.

"You and Lexi doing okay? You need me to come back tonight?"

It kind of surprised me to hear her ask this. No, I didn't need her help tonight, but she'd practically been living here lately. And I preferred it that way—knowing that Nina was safe and nearby at night. But she was a grown woman, I reminded myself, and did have a life outside of our friendship. One she'd probably neglected a lot recently to be here for me.

"Nah, we're all good here. Lexi's being easy today. Just thought I'd see if you wanted to hang out with us."

"Aw. Well, you girls enjoy your mother-daughter time. I need to take care of some stuff at my place after I finish running around downtown. Take the mail in, clean out the fridge probably. It's been a while since I've been home. Figure I'll stay the night in my own bed while I'm at it."

I was comforted a touch. At least it didn't sound like Nina was staying away tonight for the purpose of working. I liked the idea of her being indoors come nightfall, even if it wasn't somewhere quite as safe as the heavily guarded fortress in which I lived.

My friend and I chatted a bit longer, then I got Lexi changed into some warm layers and took her out for a little walk. It was a bright, blustery day. The season was just beginning to change this week, the days growing cooler and shorter. The leaves were reddening on the branches of some trees, threatening soon to fall.

Alexis loved to be outside.

She loved the feeling of fresh air on her sensitive skin. Her eyes went round and wide and I felt joy and wonder emanating from her tiny body every time she caught a wafting scent of flowers or evergreen trees. I wrapped her to my chest in her baby sling, facing outward so she could enjoy the view as we walked, and headed for the nearest rose garden.

It was a beautiful afternoon. The wind drew the smells of the forest out and across the courtyard. Lexi and I both felt soothed by the cool kiss of the crisp breeze, and the smell of the roses hit our noses before we even reached the edge of the garden.

But when we turned the corner around a hedge wall and walked a few paces down the garden path, everything changed.

I felt her strange, heavy energy in my body at the same moment that I saw her with my eyes. Iris.

She was in the open center of the garden, standing before an easel and holding a paintbrush in her hand. She turned at the sound of my footsteps and we locked eyes.

Neither of us were happy to see the other. The smile Iris plastered onto her face was delayed and terrifically fake. I met it with one of my own.

"Fiona. What a nice surprise." Iris set her paintbrush down on the lip of the easel and turned to face us.

I wish I could have just turned and walked away. But that would not have helped anyone. I took a few hesitant paces in Iris's direction, attempting to be polite, but felt dismayed when she did the same.

Iris smiled broadly at the baby. "Well," she said breathily, "who is this beauty?"

"This is our daughter, Alexis."

"Alexis? A girl... how sweet. And her eyes are just like yours. Wow."

"Yes. Well, we're sorry to disturb your painting, Iris. We were just on our way back to our room anyway," I lied, taking a step backward.

"Oh. Alright. Well, um, it was nice to finally get to see the baby. Um, actually, do you think that I could hold her, maybe? Wow, she looks so much like you, Fiona. Her hair, though, it's just like Alexandra's." Iris's eyes were absolutely glued to Lexi now, fixed on her in a way I disliked. She took another slow step toward us.

"I'm sorry, Iris, but no." I took another step back. "She is still so young, and perhaps this may sound overly protective, but I am not letting anyone hold her just yet. I hope you understand."

Of course, the truth was that I simply did not trust this woman with my child. And in addition to that, the thought of Iris touching Lexi at all was something I knew immediately I could never allow.

I had touched and tapped into the emotions of several strangers by now. Iris, Simon, the entire lot of Alexander's pack. And Iris's energy had been, by far, the most disturbing one I had felt.

And unfortunately, it really seemed like my daughter might share my empathic sensitivities. I'd begun to change my behavior a bit lately to test this theory, avoiding direct contact with the baby when I was upset in any way. She was certainly crying a lot less than before I'd begun making this effort.

So no, I could not subject my sensitive baby to being touched by an energy tornado like Iris. Absolutely not. Not today, not ever.

"Oh. Alright, sure. Of course. No problem, Fiona." Iris's face melted into a frown.

"I really am sorry, Iris. It's nothing personal." Another lie. "Please forgive me for being an overly cautious mother."

"Sure, sure." Iris twisted her frown upside down, forcing an expression she perhaps thought resembled a smile. An unpleasant, greenish aura began to buzz around the woman like a halo.

"I'll see you around, Iris. Take care."

I walked at a deliberately casual pace until we were out of sight from the garden, from which I made quite sure Iris had not followed us. And then I rushed back to the bedroom.

I unwrapped Lexi from her sling and sat her on the bed, propped against some pillows, then started removing my shoes. The baby had a rather serious look on her face, boring holes into me with her piercing blue, unblinking eyes.

"What are we going to do about that woman?" I asked her.

Lexi just stared, and stared, and stared at me. Then blinked a few times. Then went back to staring.

I sighed. "I know. I don't have any good ideas, either."