

**01:**

*God must hate me.*

“Moooooom! She won’t stop touching me!”

“I’m not touching you! Moooooom! Make him stoooooop!”

*God must really hate me.*

“Gimme back my toy! Moooooom! Krissy’s taken my toooooooy!”

“It’s mine!”

“No! It’s mine!”

“No! Mine!”

*One...two...*

“Moooooom!”

She spun around and barked sharply, dark green eyes flashing with impatience and irritation. “If you both don’t quit it right now, you’re never going to Chuck E. Cheese’s ever again, do you hear me?”

The twins froze in mid-fight, their red-faced features becoming worried at the notion of never going to their favorite place ever again.

“Now sit down properly and give me that toy!” came the command that was obeyed quickly.

Seven-year-old Karl handed over the Transformer toy he had won, trying not to pout as he watched it tossed to the front seat. He glared at his smirking sister, sticking out a tongue in response. Luckily, their mother had turned back to face the traffic and didn’t notice or he was sure he would have gotten another scolding.

Lena took a deep breath to calm her frazzled nerves, fingers tightening around the steering wheel until her knuckles were white with the effort. Today was a Sunday, a day she had decided to finally take the twins out to have fun. Unfortunately, fun had involved chasing after the kids most of the time as they did their utmost to get into trouble as much as possible. Her parenting skills weren’t exactly the best. Even she would have told you that.

She was a working mother – a CEO of a fashion/media company that required her presence every day. Her children were once cared for by a governess that cost an arm and a leg on a monthly basis, and yet the woman had done little to teach her children any proper manners. Lena wished she could have a husband to blame, but the douche bag was currently in Greece with his girlfriend (some bimbo half his age), and couldn’t care less about the children he left behind.

Good thing she had not signed a prenup and ended up with over half of his assets.

*Payback was a bitch.*

“Mom?”

She looked into the rearview mirror, and winced as she noticed her daughter flinch at the expression. Sighing inwardly, Lena positioned her features into a smile. “What is it, honey?”

With eyes as green as her mother’s, Krissy was as beautiful as her brother was handsome. Unfortunately, they had inherited their father’s red locks, but besides that, they could be mini-versions of their brunette mother.

“Are you going to work tonight?” Krissy asked quietly.

Lena was about to nod her head in the affirmative, when she noticed the sad looks that filled both children’s eyes.

*I really am a terrible mother, aren't I?*

"Why do you ask?"

"You promised you'd read us a bedtime story," Karl mumbled.

"And tuck us in," Krissy finished. "Remember?"

When had she said that? Oh yeah...yesterday morning over breakfast when she had promised to do those things, if they'd only stop yelling so she could concentrate on the business section of the papers. *Shit*. She had also promised to meet up with Bobby and Vanessa at the office in regards to the new designs for the fall fashion season.

Not good.

"Well..." She tried to come up with an excuse, but it died on her lips as she took in their expressions again. "Fine, fine. I'll read your dam...your story and tuck you in, okay?"

"YAY!" came the joyous cries from the backseat that brought a reluctant smile to her face. They really could be adorable when they chose.

As she pulled up to the driveway of the impressive mansion in their quiet neighborhood, she noticed that the maid's car was no longer there. Good. The last thing she wanted to do was deal with any of the help this evening...but then again, maybe she could use the extra hand. The kids were already unbuckling themselves and dashing out of the car. They met up with Mr. Thomas, her gardener, who was approaching with Daisy, their golden retriever.

"Welcome back, Ms. Hollowell," Mr. Thomas hailed with a tip of his hat.

"Hello, Dave," she greeted, stepping out of the car and stretching her arms over her head to ease the tense muscles of her back. She was dressed rather casually today. In a pair of jean shorts, a simple pink t-shirt and sneakers. Her usual severe bun was in a loose ponytail, which made her look younger than her thirty-one years. Anyone seeing her for the first time assumed she was still in her early twenties and would never believe her to be the mother of two precocious children.

"Any visitors?" she asked as she leaned down to stroke Daisy's head, before making her way towards the front door, not before tossing the keys to Dave to park the car in the garage behind the house.

"None, Ms. Hollowell," Dave replied, laughing softly as he noticed Daisy frolicking between the twins happily. "I'll just be driving this back then."

"Thank you, Dave."

It was still a beautiful evening and it seemed almost too good to be wasted being indoors so soon. She sat on the top step leading to the porch and watched her children and the dog playing on the lush green lawn. There was something so idyllic about it all. Here she was...a successful woman, rich beyond her wildest dreams, with two beautiful children...and a dog...and yet...

*I'm lonely.*

She shook her head as if trying to block away the thought. She hadn't dated or needed another man since the divorce from Steve almost seven years ago. All her energy had gone into making *LENA* the leading name in fashion all over the world. She had proven to everyone that she could do it without Steve's financial backing. Wasn't that why they had gotten married in the first place? Nothing more than a business venture. He had wanted her smarts and talent. She had wanted the money to get started.

Lost in her thoughts, she almost missed the black car that pulled up to the curb. With her peripheral vision, she caught sight of the lean figure that stepped out of the vehicle.

At first, Lena wondered if they were heading for the house next door, but was bemused as the person seemed to be approaching her driveway instead.

She wasn't panicked per se, for he didn't look dangerous, and besides, if he looked threatening, Daisy would have growled in warning. If anything, the dog was still too busy with her children to be concerned.

The visitor was dressed in a comfortable pair of black pants, a blue oxford shirt...and a black fedora. As he came closer, he took off the hat, revealing curly black hair, some of which fell over his forehead. His eyes were dark, yet warm and inviting. He broke into a smile that was instantly infectious and on closer inspection; Lena (who had seen more than her share of models over the years) could tell that this man had the build of either a dancer or a model of some sort.

Good grief. Bobby hadn't sent a model to her, had he? No one was supposed to know her personal address unless she specifically gave it out!

"Good evening," he greeted politely, almost bowing – something men in this day and age just did not do. Lena felt herself being charmed by this stranger/model person and she nodded softly in greeting.

"Hello. How may I help you?"

It was then that she noticed the thick book he had clutched in an arm including the colorful flyers/booklets that could only belong to one religious group.

*Oh, God no.*

"Before you say anything else," she interrupted before he could open his mouth to respond. "I am not interested."

"Oh..." He tried to mask his disappointment by flashing another small smile. "I understand. I should be the one apologizing for wasting your..."

"MOOOOOOM! KRISSY'S CALLING ME A BABY!"

"KARL CALLED ME A BABY FIRST!"

"DID NOT!"

"DID TOO!"

"DID NOT! DID NOT! DID NOOOOT!"

Daisy barked enthusiastically to add to the cacophony and Lena closed her eyes, pressing her fingers to her temples to stop the headache that was fast overwhelming her.

"Ma'am?"

*Ma'am?! I'm not that old!*

She opened her eyes all the same to stare into the stranger's friendly visage. "What? Do you want to buy them? I can sell them for really cheap."

The man laughed softly, a sound that sent a shiver of awareness down Lena's spine. It was a sensation she hadn't felt in over...in *years!*

"Do you mind if I talk to them for a minute?" he asked.

"Uh...sure...."

She watched wide-eyed as he walked towards the bickering kids. He stooped to his haunches and reached out for Daisy, and as he stroked the dog's head...

*Daisy NEVER responded to strangers that quickly!*

...the stranger spoke to the children in a voice so soft; Lena was finding it hard to understand what was going on. Whatever he said though, had Krissy and Karl rapt, and to her chagrin and amazement, they soon burst out laughing.

"You're it!" Karl cried. "Now start counting, Ryan!"

*It? Counting? Ryan?*

Lena could only stare dumbfounded as the man did as he was told. He placed his hands over his eyes and obediently counted; messing up the numbers on purpose as the kids tried to hide in either the bushes or behind one of the many large oak trees that surrounded the property. Five long minutes of being unable to reach twenty, Ryan gave up and rose to his feet.

“Ready or not, here I come,” he said. “Daisy, can you help me find them?”

All too happy to join in the fun, the large dog skipped towards the giggling Krissy and began to tug her dress playfully. Karl was found soon after and the game had to begin again.

Lena sank onto the porch and watched them in stunned silence. She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

*Who was this man? Really?*

“Whoo,” Ryan panted in exhaustion as each kid pulled on each hand leading him towards the house, half-an-hour later. “As much as I'd like to stick around, I really have to go.”

“No,” Karl whined. “I wanna show you my Transformers collection!”

“No! I wanna show him my Barbie collection!” Krissy cut in.

Ryan looked up at Lena helplessly. “I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...”

Lena shook her head quickly. “Oh, no, no, there's nothing to apologize for...” She rose to her feet. “I should be the one thanking you. Karl! Krissy! Let him go, okay? Ryan's got a job to go to.”

“Will you come back?” Karl asked with a pout, still not releasing the man's hand. “Please?”

“Pretty please?” Krissy begged.

“Well...” Ryan caught Lena's eyes again, and it wasn't her imagination, but he seemed to be blushing. “If your mom thinks it's okay...”

“MOOOOM!” came the simultaneous cries from the twins as they finally released him to tug on her hands.

Lena was caught in a trap and she felt powerless and frustrated that the situation was gradually slipping from her grasp. With a heavy sigh, she finally gave in. “All right. Ryan can come back again, if he wants.”

“YAY!”

She turned to Ryan. “Why don't you give me your phone number and I'll give you a call.”

“No problem, Mrs....”

“Miss. I'm divorced.”

“Oh...” He caught her gaze and this time, it was her turn to blush. Why did she have to say that? Talk about too much information.

“Here you go,” he said, handing her the required information. “It's my cell phone, so you can reach me anytime.” He tipped his hat and then smiled warmly at the children. “I'll see you kids soon, okay? Be good to Mom as you promised.”

“Okay!” The twins waved as he turned away to make his way to the car. He gave another parting salute before driving off in a cloud of smoke.

Good grief, Lena thought. He really did have to get a new car.

It wasn't until he was completely out of sight that Lena finally looked down to see what he had written. His handwriting was uneven and careless...as if it was a kid

scribbling in haste. However, it was what he had written that brought a reluctant smile to her face.

*Ryan Joseph Ellis*

*555-713-2584*

*Thank you for checking out the booklet as well.*

*I have no doubt you'll find it a wonderful read.*

*Smart guy*, she thought wryly. In the end, he still managed to get her interested after all.