

MY NEVER

Renée Swann

Volume One of the
MY NEVER
novella trilogy

My Never
By Renée Swann

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From Now On
By Renée Swann

First Digital Edition, 2014
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www.reneeshearer.com

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Also by Renée Swann

For Troy, because you believed in me.

August, 2010

Troy,

I dreamt I was with you last night. We were skipping pebbles across the river, holding hands. You turned to me and, for the first time, said you loved me. I will always remember your laugh, your smile. They are imprinted in my brain and forever on my mind. You will always be a part of my life. But I don't know if you will ever see me again. It hurts too much think of what could have been.

Love always, Mon.

May, 2013

1

My Never

My life is over. I'm turning thirty. And as if that isn't enough, I had a major fight with my best friend of twenty years. Katie should've known better, and I hate myself right now for feeling this way.

When I was twenty, I had my life all mapped out. I was going to open my own book publishing business and get married and have kids. I never thought I'd end up single, friendless and an editorial assistant.

This week was supposed to be fun. Kate and I planned to fly to Cairns for a joint birthday celebration — but I guess that's cancelled now. Maybe I'll go by myself and meet a hot guy who I'll have a fling with. A girl can dream.

My thoughts circled to my one true love — Troy. We were high school sweethearts and never would have broken up if we hadn't gone to different colleges, on opposite sides of the country. I remembered him as if it were yesterday. And I missed him. He's my never — the person who I should have ended up with, the one who shakes your soul, but timing was never right.

With endless possibilities for my solo vacation, I packed my bags and was on the next available flight to Cairns.

I stowed my carry-on in the overhead compartment and settled into my seat. *Cairns, here I come!* I thought. Two weeks of sun, sand and Kerouac. I tugged *The Town and the City* from my handbag and flicked to the marked page.

My mother was the first person I called when I landed.

"Monique," she said. "How was your flight?"

"It's was okay," I said. "Couldn't wait to have my feet on solid ground again."

"This thing with you and Kate, it's silly. Are you willing to let a little lie get between the two of you?"

My face crumpled at the thought of the friendship being over. "I don't know, Ma. And it was a pretty big lie."

"So what? It's silly!"

My finger punched the END CALL button. Now I needed a drink. Everyone I'd confided in thought I was being childish, irrational — but I can't stand liars.

I stalked over to retrieve my luggage then located the airport bar and hauled myself onto a stool.

The bartender floated over. "What can I getcha?"

"Whiskey," I grumbled.

He appraised me then arched an eyebrow.

"What?" I said. "Girls can't drink hard liquor?"

He poured me a shot, lips stretching into a lop-sided grin.

"Thanks." I flicked a stray peanut off the counter. Now that I was here, I just wanted to relax and forget about my crappy life for two weeks, if that were possible.

A man in his sixties occupied the adjacent stool. He eyed me then removed his black fedora. "You look like you've been put through the wringer."

I nodded. "Feels like it."

"Been there myself," he said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure."

He caught the bartender's attention. "Another, for the lady, and a gin and tonic for me." He swivelled. "What's a pretty girl like you doing here all alone?"

I sniffled. "I'm on holidays. I was supposed to be travelling with a friend but—"

"You had a fight?"

"Yeah." I gnawed on my lip.

"Cheer up, Love. Nothing's ever as bad as it seems."

I hoped not. But right now, it felt pretty awful.

I pushed through the glass doors of the resort, towing my suitcase behind me, and stepped up to the reception desk.

"Can I help you?" said the receptionist, Kaley, with a saccharine smile in place.

"I have a reservation under Cullen," I said.

Her fingers clicked on the computer's keyboard. She stared at the screen for a beat then said, "Oh, you're already checked in." She slid a key card across the counter.

Huh? How was it possible that I had checked in? Unless ...

I rushed to the elevator and punched the UP button until the doors opened. I jumped in then rode it to the fifth floor. As I entered room 512, a flash of blue caught my attention. A slender blonde traipsed into the living area.

I dropped my suitcase and stalked over to her, my features hardening. "What're you doing here?"

Kate's eyes drifted to me. "Celebrating my thirtieth. Didn't think you'd come." She ripped open a chocolate wrapper and took a bite.

I sighed, clamped my eyes shut. I couldn't bear to spend two weeks with her, let alone another moment. "Why must you ruin everything for me?"

"You're doing this to yourself, Mon. I only said that I'll consider us moving in together because I didn't think you'd stay long."

Anger bubbled inside me. "You think I can't commit to something?" I wanted to reach out and slap that smug grin off her far-too-innocent face.

"I never said that. You're twisting my words again."

I snatched the handle of my suitcase, shaking my head.

"What?" she said.

"You can take your house and sh—"

Her phone chirruped. She put it to her ear. "Hello?"

My teeth gnashed. Katie had always been the same self-absorbed girl since she was young. She will never change. Why bother continuing with the friendship?

I rode the elevator back down to the lobby then marched over to the reception desk. "Can I get another room?"

"Sorry, all booked," said Kaley.

Absolutely perfect.

I trudged outside. The sun was setting and I was starving. I didn't know where to go. I was three thousand, four hundred and forty-four kilometres from home.

As I lumbered down the street, the scent of cheese and beef invaded my nose. My eyes searched for the source — a pizzeria, half a block away. I ordered a pepperoni pizza and a beer then slid into the booth by the door.

Where was I going to sleep tonight? I didn't know.

A few minutes later, my greasy dinner arrived. I nibbled at a slice as I people-watched out of the window. I felt a hand on my shoulder and swivelled.

"Well, well! What's Moni Cullen doing in the Sunshine State?"

I gazed up at the handsome man with sparkling blue eyes. "Troy?" I must be hallucinating.

"In the flesh." He sat opposite me. "So. What brings you here? Last time we spoke, you

were pretty much in love with your perfect book publishing career in Perth.”

I shrugged, dropping my eyes to the table. “I’m here celebrating my birthday.” I drew invisible patterns on the laminate.

His eyes assessed me. “Well, you look happy,” he teased.

I picked off a chunk of pepperoni and dropped it into my mouth.

He arched an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

I always was an open book to him. “Everything.”

“It can’t be that bad, surely.”

I met his eyes. “It’s Kate.”

“You want me to go kick her?” he said.

I managed a laugh then filled him in.

“Hmm, now I really wanna kick her.” He smirked. “So, what’re you gonna do?”

I picked up another slice. “That bitch has the hotel room. I’ve got nowhere to sleep tonight.”

He thought for a beat. “I have a house on the next block. You can stay with me.”

I nodded. “Okay.” At least I wouldn’t be sleeping on the street. “Have you eaten?”

He shook his head. “No, I’d just walked in when I saw you.”

Lucky me. My lips pulled into a tense smile.

“So how’ve you been — besides this thing with the-girl-who-shall-not-be-named?” said Troy.

I let him snatch a slice. “Not bad, I suppose.” If not living my dreams counts as that. “Okay, my life is crap. Thought I would have my own publishing business by now and be married and—” I paused. “I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

“Just a little. I think it’s cute.” He took a swig of my beer. “I’ve always liked that about you. But I bet some lucky guy has you on his mind.”

“Not that I know of. What about you?”

“Nah, who would want me?”

I do.

Sitting here with him reminded me how awesome Troy was. How sweet he could be.

“Guess we’re both unlucky in love.” He signalled the waitress for a beer.

“Yeah.” What was the chance of us getting back together? I figured I had a better shot with Matt Damon.

He held up the last slice. “You want it?”

I shook my head. “Go for it.”

He ripped off a chunk with his teeth. “How’s your mum? You guys getting along yet?”

“Nope. Right now, she thinks I’m being silly, making impromptu decisions because of Kate,” I said. “My solo vacation, for example.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t think so. I found you, didn’t I?”

His lips stretched into grin. “Yeah, you did.”

I missed that smile. I wanted to lean over and kiss it. But I couldn’t move. Why? Fear that the relationship wouldn’t work again? Or that it would?

Troy finished his beer. “I could go for some ice cream, how about you?”

“Sure, yeah.” I was going home with him anyway, so I may as well try to enjoy what’s left of this crappy night.

Troy paid then hijacked my suitcase. We walked out into the balmy air.

“So,” I said, “how long have you lived in Cairns?”

“A couple years.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah, I do.” He stowed my luggage in his car then draped an arm over my shoulders. “I

remember,” he said as we ambled down the street. “Your favourite used to be mint-choc-chip.” He smiled down at me.

“It still is.”

“Good to hear. I won’t be spending an hour waiting while you try to make up your mind.” He smirked again.

I elbowed him. “Be nice.”

“Oh c’mon. I know you better than anyone.” He winked. “Triple scoop with caramel sauce and sprinkles, right?”

He knew me too well.

* * *

I awoke to the scent of bacon and eggs. I threw back the covers and padded into the kitchen.

Troy’s head swivelled at my approach. “Hey, Mon.” He shot me a smile. “Sleep well?”

“Somewhat,” I said.

He slid a plate of pancakes, bacon and eggs towards me.

“Thanks.” I chose a barstool.

“Figured I’d better feed my house guest.”

“Hm, about that — I’m going to try and find another hotel today.”

His face dropped. “Mon, you’re welcome to stay as long as you need.”

“I don’t want to impose.”

“You’re not.” He sat next to me. “So, what’re you thinking of doing today?”

I shrugged. Sightseeing and celebrating my birthday no longer sounded appealing.

“Well, I’ll see to it that you have a good time,” he said. “That’s my mission.”

“You’re a great guy.”

“So I’ve been told. Usually tailed by *it’s not you, it’s me.*”

“Been dumped a lot?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “The only one that stung was yours.”

I cut a triangle of pancake. “Hm.” I hated hurting him.

“It’s all good now.” He slid a mug across the counter.

“I saw an article about your book a while back — it said you were the new up-and-comer.”

“That was last year. My publisher dropped me a couple months ago.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really? I thought it was good.”

He faltered. “You read my book?”

I nodded. “I heard it was dedicated to me.”

He met my eyes. “The only woman I ever loved.” His phone vibrated on the table. “It’s Patrick. Excuse me for a sec.”

“Tell your brother I said hi.”

Five minutes later, Troy returned. “I’ve gotta go out for a bit.” He fished his keys from the bowl by the phone. “You need me to drop you somewhere?”

“No. I’m good,” I said, following him into the hallway.

He cupped my cheek. “Do me a favour?”

“Yep?”

“Live a little. And don’t worry about this thing with Kate so much. It’ll all work out.” He touched his lips to my temple.

“I’ll try,” I said. “Can’t guarantee I will.”

He stole a final glance at me then closed the door behind himself. For a beat, I stood in the silence of the house.

I missed him already.

Two hours later, I heard the front door click shut. Troy wandered in. “Hey.” He sat next to me on the couch.

I cut my eyes to him. He smelt like cigarette smoke. “Where have you been?”

“Pat needed a ride. He was at this dingy little pub and had drunk too much.” His hand moved to rest on my arm. “How was your day? Did you go somewhere?”

“Nah. Was a total couch potato.”

“We gotta get you out and about, Mon. Can’t stay inside forever.” He draped an arm over my shoulders.

“Don’t want to go out – might run into her.” I slid closer and felt his lips press to my hair.

“Hm. It’s a big city.”

“Not a chance I want to take today.”

His fingers brushed up my arm. “I missed you, Mon.”

“Same here.” I shifted my eyes from the TV to his.

“I mean, I *really* missed you.”

“You could have called,” I said.

“True.” His lips skimmed over my cheek. “Same goes for you.”

After a moment, I touched my lips to his. I felt him respond, curling his fingers into my hair. It felt too right, too comforting — like coming home.

I pulled back. “Sorry. That was totally out of line.”

“Shh.” His hands cupped my face as he lowered his head to kiss me. “This time, I’m not letting you go.”

* * *

A movement tore me from my dreams. My eyes flashed open. A young girl with long brown hair and Troy’s blue eyes stared at me, her nose pressed to mine.

“Wha—?” I pulled myself up, my eyes tracking her movements.

“Rubes, Ruby?” whispered Troy from the hallway. He peered into my bedroom. “You shouldn’t be in he—” He froze.

I arched an eyebrow at him. Was this his daughter?

“Hello,” said Ruby, her hand reaching up to stroke my hair.

“Sorry, Mon,” he said. “C’mere little monkey.” He bundled her in his arms.

“Is she ...?” My heart pounded.

His eyes pleaded. “We’ll talk when I get back from dropping Ruby at school.”

“Okay.” A kaleidoscope of thoughts flooded my brain. Was he married? Divorced? Why didn’t he tell me he had a child? I sunk back into the pillows. What have I gotten myself into?

It seemed an hour had passed. But it had only been a fraction of that. I chewed on my thumbnail as I waited for his return. I struggled to keep my thoughts straight. Would I mind if he’d had a kid? Why hadn’t he mentioned her before?

I heard gravel crunch in the driveway, then the front door opened.

He found me in the kitchen. “Mon,” he said, “have a seat.”

I realised I had been standing in the same spot since he left, a bowl of mushy cereal in front of me. I moved to a barstool. “Ruby’s your daughter, isn’t she?”

He sighed and dropped his gaze to the floor. “Yes.”

I narrowed my eyes as I recalled him kissing me. “Are you married?”

“No. Lauren — Ruby’s mother — was a runaway bride.” His brow creased. “She decided she wanted to raise Rubes by herself — guess I wasn’t good enough for her.”

I reached for his hand.

He let me take it and tugged me closer. “I’ll understand if you wanna find a hotel.”

I shook my head. "You can't scare me away now."
He returned my smile. "You want coffee?"
"Always," I said. "Can I ask you something?"
He stood. "Anything."
"Do you like being a father?"
"I love it — she's my world." His smile widened.
"Can I ask another?"
He nodded.
"If we hadn't gone to colleges on opposite sides of the country, would we have stayed together?"
His brow furrowed again. "I think so, yes."
My forefinger traced invisible patterns on the wood grain Formica. I'd known the answer, but it was comforting to hear it from him. "One more. Why didn't you tell me?"
He thought for a beat. "I had a baby with a woman I didn't love even half as much as you. I wanted this for us."
"I wanted it, also."
"So, I'm guessing you're okay with the me-having-a-daughter part?"
"Yeah. Being a single parent doesn't make you a bad person."
He nodded, his features grave.
"Hey." My fingers tried to smooth out the lines on his brow. "Cheer up. It's not all that bad," I teased.
His face softened. "Thanks for being so understanding, Mon." He gathered me into his arms.
"Always have been."
He released me. "And I stand by my promise." He scooped coffee beans into the grinder.
"Uh, what promise?" I wanted to hear him say it again.
The corners of his lips jerked into a smile. "That you're stuck with me now."
"I can live with that." I had never loved anyone more.
He handed me a mug. "Ruby's dying to see you. She begged me not to take her to school."
"Really?"
He nodded. "She even tried to bribe me."
"Takes after her Dad." I smirked.
"She sure does." He tugged a bag from the top cupboard and offered me a cookie. "Don't tell her I have these. Ruby's a sugar addict."
"Oh? Well, my lips are sealed." I took two and dunked one into my coffee.
His eyes assessed me. "You seem in better spirits today."
I tried to forget. "Your daughter kind of distracted me."
"Yeah. And she's so adorable."
"Just like her Daddy." I touched my lips to his.
He chuckled and brushed back my hair. "You're one-of-a kind, Mon."
"I get that a lot."

That afternoon, Ruby bounced into the kitchen. "Hi, Moni!"
"Hey there." I stirred cream and sugar into my coffee. "How was school?"
She climbed onto a barstool. "Tayla brought her pet rabbit to Show and Tell."
"Is she your best friend?" I said.
She nodded. "My very best friend."
Troy's fingers twisted her ponytail. "You hungry, Kiddo?"
"Yes."
"Moni made you an extra special snack," he said.

Her eyes widened.

“You wanna know what it is?” I said.

“Tell me, tell me!” She clapped her palms together.

I skipped over to the fridge. “Hope you like apple pie.”

“I love it!” She leaned forward, watching me cut slices.

“Did you want it warmed up?” I said to her.

“Yes, please.” Ruby bounced in her seat.

“I like mine warm, too.” I passed a plate to Troy.

He slid it into the microwave.

“Are you Daddy’s new girlfriend?” she said.

“Uh.” We hadn’t had a chance to talk about it. What should I say? What was appropriate?

I caught his eye.

He nodded once.

“Yes, I am.” I covered the remaining pie with plastic wrap.

Her face lit up. “Awesome!” She stretched across the counter and whispered, “I think Daddy’s a bit lonely.”

“Is he?”

She nodded. “I like you, Moni. More than Smelly Melly.” She rolled her eyes.

“You got all the goss, have you, Rubes?” I said. “What else can you tell me?”

“I’m standing right here,” said Troy. “And Melanie was always nice to you.”

Ruby picked at her pie and shrugged. “Moni bakes. She’s a keeper.”

Troy smiled. His arm curled around my waist. “I think so, too.”

* * *

The next evening, I returned to Troy’s with a bag each of books, clothes, shoes, food and half a dozen cupcakes.

Ruby bounced into the hallway. “Moni, Moni! Guess what?”

“What, Sweetie?” I said.

“Daddy says we’re going out for dinner!”

“Ooh, aren’t we lucky?” I let her carry one of the bags and followed her into the kitchen.

It was my birthday. I was thirty. It’s what I was trying to avoid all year. And yet, it feels no different than twenty-nine. Maybe it hadn’t kicked in yet. Or maybe I was too busy trying to distract myself to notice.

“What’s in the box?” she said.

I flipped open the lid.

“Cupcakes!” She clasped her hands under her chin. “Can I have one, pretty *please*?”

“Go ask Dad.”

She hopped off the barstool and sprinted into Troy’s office. A moment later, she returned, towing him behind her. “Can I Daddy, please?”

“Okay,” he said. “But just one.”

“Can I have the pink one?” She released his hand. “I love pink!”

“Sure.” I peeled off the wrapper then passed it to her. “Here you go.”

She took a bite. I offered the box to Troy. He smiled and selected one.

Ruby giggled. “These are awesome.”

They were the best cupcakes I’d tasted, too. The icing was just right and melted in my mouth.

“How ’bout you go and wash that face of yours, Missy?” he said, swiping at a pink smudge on her lip.

“Okay.” She skipped out of the room.

Troy constricted his arms around my waist. “Are you having a good birthday? I can see you went shopping.” He eyed the bags.

“Yeah, shopping, sightseeing — all is good.”

“Did you bump into Kate?”

“Nope.”

“See? What’d I tell you? It’s a big city.” He brushed his lips across mine.

I heard Ruby giggle. We cut our eyes to her.

“Are you two getting married now?” she said, smiling.

Troy and I exchanged panicked glances.

While he explained to Ruby why we weren’t getting married — yet — I packed away my shopping then concentrated on picking an outfit for dinner. I extracted a slinky red dress from the shopping bag. Hmm, too sexy for a dinner with Troy *and* Ruby. My fingers grasped purple chiffon. Perfect.

“You girls ready yet?” Troy said through the bathroom door.

“Just a minute,” I said as I braided Ruby’s hair.

She passed me a butterfly clip.

“There we go.” I secured the braid.

“Thanks, Moni,” she said. “You’re better at this than Dad.”

I chuckled. “You’re welcome.” I opened the door.

Ruby pounced at Troy.

“Hey, Kitten,” he said, “wow, you look pretty. Did you thank Moni?”

“Yes,” said Ruby.

His eyes appraised me. “You look good, too.”

“Thank you.” The bottom of my dress flared as I twirled.

He ushered us out. “C’mon, we’ll be late.”

“Were you always this bossy?” I said.

He smirked. “You bring it out in me.”

Ten minutes after, Troy pulled into the restaurant’s parking lot.

“Is this your idea of getting me to have fun while I’m here?” I said.

“Yep.” His head swivelled in my direction. “Is it working?”

“A little. Some bruschetta would help further.” I grinned.

“We’ll see what we can do, right Rubes?” he said.

“Yep!” she said as she skipped at his side. “And a big ice cream sundae!”

“Ooh!” I said. “Sounds yum.”

Troy pressed his lips to my cheek and held the restaurant’s door open. He let Ruby and I pass.

The hostess appeared in front of us. “Table for three?”

Troy nodded. “What do you want to eat, Rubes?” He pulled out my chair.

“Pizza!” she said.

He sat opposite me. “Okay, how does that sound, Mon? Split a pizza for dinner?”

“Sure,” I said, my eyes roaming over the drinks menu.

The waiter appeared in front of us. “You guys ready to order?”

“Yeah,” said Troy, “Mon, you go first.”

“Uh, I’ll have a beer and the bruschetta,” I said.

Ruby pointed to the drink she wanted.

“We’ll have the pepperoni pizza and I’ll have a beer also.” He grinned at me.

The waiter left.

I turned to Ruby. “How was school?”

“Boring as. Mrs. Browne gave us a tonne of homework.”

“Which you’re going to do when we get home,” said Troy.

She rolled her eyes. “I know.”

I smiled. Troy was fitting into the father role well. This made me want to have his babies. Our drinks arrived.

Troy raised his beer. “Mon, glad we’re together after all these years. Happy birthday!”

Eyes clouded with tears, my smile widened. I *clinked* my bottle against his then to Ruby’s milkshake. “Thank you, both of you. I couldn’t imagine a better way to celebrate my birthday.” Definitely tops sharing a hotel room with Kate.

Ruby grabbed a slice as soon as the pizza hit the table.

“Manners, Rubes,” said Troy, his eyes on her. “It’s Monique’s birthday. She gets first choice.”

“Sorry.” Her face crumpled.

My hand combed through her silky strands. “That’s all right. I want you to have it.”

“So,” said Troy. “Do you have a birthday wish?”

I chewed a mouthful. “I might have.” My lips stretched into a grin.

“What is it?” he said.

“Yes, tell us, tell us!” said Ruby.

Troy chuckled at her enthusiasm.

“Well.” I curled a finger, motioning them to lean close. “I’ve always wanted to learn how to juggle.”

Ruby giggled. I shared a smile with Troy.

“Moni always had a sense of humour,” he said.

* * *

Ruby padded into the kitchen. “Can I have some lemonade?”

“Sure.” I abandoned the vegetables and opened the cupboard. “Which cup would you like?”

“The pink one, please.”

I should have known she would say that. I twisted the cap off the bottle then filled the cup with the clear liquid. “Here you go.”

She grasped it with both hands.

“How’s the homework going?” I said.

Ruby grimaced. “Math sucks.”

“Need any help?”

“No, thanks.” She carted the drink out.

Good. I wouldn’t know where to begin. My eyes darted to the clock. Hmm. Should I bring her a snack? Dinner was still an hour away.

I traipsed into the dining room with a plate of cookies.

But she wasn’t there.

“Rubes?” I stepped closer to the table, oblivious to the clear puddle that had formed on the light timber floorboards. “Ruby?” I set the plate down then swivelled.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion. My shoe slipped. My fingers reached out to grip the table. I missed it by a hair. The floor inched towards me. I thrust my hands out, but it was too late. I landed hard on my arm. “Shit.”

Ruby jogged into the room, a wad of paper towel in her grasp. Her blue eyes stared at me in shock. “Are you okay?” She dropped to her knees.

My arm throbbed beneath me. I tried to push myself up, but pain was shooting down it. A groan slipped through my clenched teeth. “I think it’s broken.” My right hand clamped onto the nearest chair. “Go get your dad.” I managed to pull myself up.

Ruby straightened then sprinted in the direction of his office.

* * *

“Need anything?” said Troy.

It’s been three days since I broke my arm. And Troy had been tiptoeing around me, bringing me hot meals and tea. I wasn’t used to this much attention.

“Nope,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Now, get back to work.” I pretended to shoo him. “Go and finish that novel you’ve been talking my ear off about. And stop worrying about me.”

He bent to press his lips to my temple. “Okay, but yell if you need anything.”

I wasn’t on my deathbed, he needn’t be anxious.

Troy disappeared into his office. I threw back the blanket and ambled into the kitchen. I could relax and bake at the same time, couldn’t I?

Half an hour later, he wandered in. “I smell cake.” Troy’s eyes narrowed, suspicious. “Thought I told you to rest?”

“You did. I disagreed.”

“The doctor also told you to rest.”

The oven timer buzzed.

I bent to open the door. “Help me?”

He sighed, placed his mug on the counter and hauled out the cake. “At least rest as it cooks.”

I hoisted myself onto a barstool. “I’m trying to be useful.”

He refilled his mug. “But you don’t need to.” He touched his lips to my hair.

“Sure I do. Plus Ruby would love some after school.” I examined my nails.

Troy rested his forearms on the counter, pensive for a moment. “Mon, what’s gonna happen, with us, when you leave?”

“Well, I figured—” I took a sip of his coffee. “—I’d go home, give my boss my two weeks notice, sell my apartment and return to Cairns.” I studied his features for his reaction.

He lifted me off the barstool, into his arms, and kissed me. “That’s the best plan I’ve ever heard!” He dropped me on my feet.

I grinned. “Know any jobs available?”

Troy smirked. “I kinda need a publisher.”

The thought of opening my own publishing house entered my mind. Though terrified, I was intrigued. “Okay. Challenge accepted.”

“I’d better get back to writing that novel, then.” He winked.

“Good idea.”

Just after three, Ruby dashed down the hall, searching for me. “Moni?”

“I’m in the kitchen, Sweetie,” I said.

She skidded to stop in the doorway, eyeing the dessert. “CAKE!” Her eyes pleaded. “Can I have some Moni, *please*?”

“Only if you really want some.”

“I really, really do!” She clasped her hands in front of her chest.

“Okay.” I cut her a slice.

“What kind is it?”

“Caramel.” I slid the plate towards her.

“That’s my favourite.”

“So I heard.”

Troy wandered in. "Rubes. Your bag is still in the hall."
"Sorry, Daddy."
"Pick it up after, okay?" he said.
She nodded.
He sat next to her. "Does Daddy get cake, too?"
I smiled and cut two wedges. "How was school?"
She peeled off the icing and dropped it into her mouth. "It was okay. I got more homework."
"That's life," I said.
"I can't wait to finish school."
"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I said.
"A doctor."
"Oh?"
"I already have some books."
"That's pretty cool," I said.
Troy smiled and twisted her ponytail. "Doctor DeGaris."
Ruby rolled her eyes. "Dad, don't embarrass me in front of Moni."
His smile drooped. "Sorry."

* * *

The phone rang. Troy held it to his ear and listened for a moment. "Ruby, it's Mum."
She jumped up from her chair and stretched for the receiver.
Troy sat opposite me. "She couldn't wait five more minutes for Ruby to finish her dinner?"
"I take it you two aren't on such good terms?" I said.
"No."
Ruby approached and held out the phone. "Mum wants to talk to you again."
He grabbed it and marched into his bedroom, shutting the door.
Ruby finished her mashed potatoes then yawned. "G'night, Moni." She constricted her arms around my waist.
"Good night, Sweetie." I touched my lips to her cheek. "Sweet dreams."
When Troy hadn't returned within ten minutes, I knocked on his door. "It's me." I waited for an answer. There wasn't one. I cracked it open.
Troy was perched on the corner of his bed. His eyes burned with irritation, his mouth in a hard line.
"Is something up?" The door snapped shut behind me.
He took a moment to answer. "It's Lauren."
"What about her?"
He was silent.
I bent to meet his eyes. "Come on, Troy, you can tell me anything." My palm cupped his cheek.
He avoided my eyes.
"If you don't tell me, I'm going to have to start guessing — and we both know how horrible that turns out." I smirked then waited a beat. "Did she say something that upset you?"
He heaved a sigh. "Ruby was telling her all about you. Lauren didn't like that. She accused me of leaving our daughter alone with a stranger."
I gnawed on my lip. So this was my fault. And no doubt, he would have defended me.
"Come on." I pulled him up. "I'll get us some dessert. Did you want to watch something

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