

Hannah – 12:21PM

World War Three.

Caroline was in the office on a Sunday, because all of the partners were. They'd had a meeting this morning regarding several of their big cases and their intern program as well, and because the upcoming weeks were going to be so hectic for all of them, they couldn't all make any reasonably timed meeting during the work day.

So they'd met in the office for a meeting over brunch. Caroline had then decided she would take the bagel she hadn't even had time to eat over their brunch meeting – that had lasted over two hours – back to her office and finish some paperwork so that she'd be able to get home to her girls for a reasonable dinner time every day this week. Six thirty at the latest.

She had a lot on her plate right now at work, trying to get all of said big cases settled – or the work divvied up to other partners, all discussed over “brunch” – before she left for a two week honeymoon in Italy in less than a month.

The thought alone sent butterflies fluttering through her stomach.

She looked down at the ring on her left finger. A thin, golden band with a classic, princess cut diamond.

She, Caroline Parker, was getting married to Hannah Dalton in twenty-two days.

Her lips curled into their inevitable grin at the thought. It didn't matter what else was going on during her day – work, traffic, a disagreement with someone in her family – nothing could truly wipe this smile from her face.

Except for, she supposed, Hannah's text.

Caroline frowned at it.

World War Three?

It had been sent over forty minutes ago, but Caroline had her phone on Do Not Disturb during her meeting. Hannah hadn't called, though, or even texted again, so she didn't think it was a real emergency.

Still.

Caroline – 1:07PM

Just got out of my meeting. What's going on??

She went to bite into her bagel, placing her phone face-up next to her laptop so that she wouldn't miss any calls or texts coming through.

But the door to her office slammed open before that happened, shocking her, making her heart leap into her throat, and her free hand gripped the edge of the desk. Hard.

Caroline stared at the intruder with wide eyes for only a moment, before they narrowed.

“Michael. What can I do for you?” She deliberately kept her voice calm and controlled, and was unreasonably glad she hadn't jumped as much as she'd wanted to.

In fact, even though her appetite scattered with his startling appearance, she picked up her bagel and took a bite as she stared at him expectantly.

Hannah's text had to be about this, she was *certain*.

Because Abbie had spent the weekend at Michael's – the first weekend visitation he hadn't cancelled or rescheduled in three months, for some reason or other – and Hannah had been planning to pick Abbie up around lunch, so...

Yeah, that all tracked.

Michael's face was red, that vein in his forehead was throbbing, and all of the muscles in his shoulders seemed to be bunching up. She had to hold back the comment that wanted to escape about why he looked like a terribly CGI-d Hulk.

In the last three years, since Hannah and Abbie had moved in with her and essentially cemented the fact that she would be tied to Michael forever, Caroline had made concentrated efforts to be... civil... to Michael.

And honestly? The best part of it was that the less rattled, upset, angry – anything – that she appeared, the *more* of all of the above he got.

"You stole my wife—" he began.

"You cheated on her repeatedly and she left you, long before we got together," Caroline coolly corrected. For a dozenth time.

"— I let you move in with her and my daughter without bringing up the custody arrangement," He continued, stalking closer to her desk, his voice shaking with fury.

"You do not *let* me do anything, and I have a suspicion that you did not revisit the custody arrangement because you know you would never have a standing case to change it. Not against Hannah's lawyer, anyway." She couldn't keep her self-satisfaction from creeping into her voice at that.

Michael continued like she hadn't spoken at all. "But I will *not* let you take my daughter like this. You need my permission, do you hear me? And I won't fucking give it."

Caroline leaned back in her chair, folding her hands over her stomach as she tilted her head up at him. "I'm a bit lost."

She was actually far more than *a bit* lost.

"Oh, don't act like you didn't want this. Like you haven't been angling for this since back when we worked together. This has been your goal the whole fucking time, hasn't it? You always wanted everything that was mine – my cases, my promotion, my wife, my daughter. It's not happening, not this one. There's no way even you can get around this law."

"I'm sure I could."

"So you admit it!" He slammed his fist against her desk and Caroline's stomach clenched.

She hated that it clenched, but it did. Because Michael when furious... toed the line. And Caroline did love pushing him even further.

Still, she merely – calmly – stared up at him. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, and even though I’ve been determined to keep things civil between us for years, you cannot walk into my office and cause a scene. I won’t allow it, and if *you* think that this could possibly reflect well for you in any way, I think you really have taken one too many ski vacations lately, and the lack of oxygen up on the mountains have started eating away at you.”

As soon as Michael’s fist hit her desk again, Caroline made sure to keep her hand and voice steady as she held eye contact with him and picked up her desk phone. “Security? Yes, Caroline Parker. I have a man in my office who needs to be removed. Thank you.”

She was sure the litany of words Michael held back as she leaned back in her seat were extremely colorful. Still, he rammed his finger against her desk, “Don’t you dare think we won’t be talking about this again.”

“I hope next time you’ll call first. I’ll bring you a bagel.”

He whirled around on his heel and stormed back toward the door.

And, especially now that security was just down the hall, she couldn’t resist. “Tell your parents I said hi.”

Oh, yeah. She definitely notched up his blood pressure with that one.

It hadn’t been a fun or easy road between herself and the Daltons, but at the end of the day – they loved Abbie deeply and so did Caroline. She wouldn’t be joining them on vacation any time soon, but they did have the occasional dinner after Abbie’s events. Which happened a decent amount more, this past year, now that she was officially on the high school soccer team. One of the only freshmen, too.

As soon as Michael was out of her view, she leaned back in her chair and blew out a breath.

Well, then. That was confusing.

As she walked through the door into her home shortly after – no way was she focusing at the office after that – she had no idea what to expect.

But it honestly hadn’t been what she actually *did* walk into.

“– and you’re seriously saying I have to apologize to him? *Seriously?!?*” Abbie’s screech hit Caroline’s ears as soon as she walked in.

Her eyebrows hiked up on her forehead – that was... odd.

Abbie was fourteen, and they’d been living together for three years, so, yes. Caroline had heard Abbie’s occasional arguments. Rarely with her – and never screaming with her – and even fairly rarely with Hannah. Definitely rarer than Caroline believed many other teenage girls had with their mothers. They were very lucky with that.

Rare enough that this was a surprise to walk into, even despite what had happened at her office.

“I’m *saying* that sometimes I would like you to think before you speak sometimes, Abigail. And that perhaps instead of doing what you did today, you could speak to me, first,” came Hannah’s somewhat heated reply.

Hannah never screamed; when angry, her words just got sharp.

Eyebrows furrowing, Caroline slowly dropped her briefcase in the foyer. They were close by, according to their voices. Near the kitchen?

“Um... hello?” She called out, lightly, as she started in that direction.

She shouldn’t have bothered. Abbie came barrelling out toward her, quickly followed by Hannah.

Abbie’s bright blue eyes fixed on her instantly, and before Caroline could even get a word out, Abbie’s arms were thrown around her neck in a quick, tight hug.

What the hell was going on? She wrapped her arms around Abbie in return, confusedly patting her back.

Abbie pulled away in only seconds, though she kept her ground right next to Caroline as she faced Hannah. “I bet *Caroline* will be on my side!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Hannah folded her arms across her chest, “Because of what happened today, your father showed up at Caroline’s office and had to be escorted out by security.”

Abbie gnawed on her bottom lip, seeming cowed as she turned to face Caroline. “Did he, really? I didn’t mean for *that*.”

“What did you think was going to happen when you told your father that the next time you saw him, you were going to present him with the papers you’d get drawn up for you to legally change your name?” Hannah’s exasperation was all over her tone.

Caroline’s eyes went wide as she shook her head, trying to wrap her mind around what the hell was going on. “What?”

“*You* are going to take Caroline’s name as soon as you get married! Why can’t I?” Abbie challenged, but her tone had lost its screechy anger and was replaced by a youthful dejection that, as always, inspired Caroline’s own sympathy.

“You want to change your last name?” She wheeled the conversation back to the topic, staring at Abbie in confused wonder.

Abbie held Hannah’s gaze for a few more beats before she looked at Caroline. They were the same height already, and Caroline would bet Abbie still had a few inches to go in the next year or so. But Abbie would always look like the little girl with the braids and a missing front tooth to Caroline, even as she was growing into such a beautiful young woman, it made Caroline so proud to be a part of it all.

“Yes, and I don’t understand why I can’t. Or why I need *his* permission,” she nearly spit out the pronoun. “Or why Mom is mad at me about it!”

“I’m not mad at you, honey,” Hannah’s voice softened its sharp angles from before. “I’m upset with the way you chose to throw it in your father’s face today instead of talking to me about it. Or Caroline. So that we could help you through it.”

“Maybe I don’t *want* you to help me through it.” Abbie crossed her arms, as she huffed out a breath and stormed over to sit heavily on the bottom step of the stairs.

Caroline watched Hannah close her eyes, pinching at the bridge of her nose, and she knew that this argument had been going on for likely at least an hour, in some way. Ever since Hannah had picked Abbie up, she would imagine.

Luckily for her family, Caroline was a great mediator.

“All right,” she spoke in a soothing but firm tone before any other inciting words could be said. “Hannah, love, why don’t you take five and get something for your headache, so I can have a few minutes with Abbie.”

Her fiancée’s gray eyes looked up into hers, searching. Caroline held the gaze and gave her a reassuring nod, and the relief that washed over Hannah’s face made her feel *so* proud. It took them so long to get to a place where Hannah trusted her to really step up and be a *part* of it all.

But she did. She really did. It was in the way she let out a little sigh as she turned for the kitchen.

Caroline watched her go for a few seconds, before she turned her eyes toward Abbie. Who was picking at a hole in the knee of her jeans, and she didn’t look up at Caroline until Caroline walked closer to her, setting herself carefully down on the step with her.

“I hate when she defends him,” Abbie muttered, anger heating up her voice. “Why does she do that? Why does she ever try to make things smoother for *him* when he treated her the way he did? I wasn’t young enough that I don’t remember. Because I do remember what it was like when we were there.”

She turned to look at Caroline, big, blue eyes beseeching. Genuinely looking for an answer, she could tell, even through the anger there.

Caroline nodded slowly, rolling her lips as she thought of the right words. Abbie trusted her because she talked to her like an adult, generally. She’d told her so a handful of times over the last few years. And so –

“Ab, I think something you really need to think about for your mom is that... she’s never forgotten those years, either. Dealing with Michael, for your mom, is never what she *wants* to do, but it is something she *has* to do. Legally speaking, she has to.”

“Only because he’s my stupid father.” Abbie rolled her eyes, but her voice became more morose and less pissed.

“Yes,” Caroline placidly agreed. “She does deal with him because he’s your father, and it’s not that she wants things to go smoothly for him, Abbie.” She turned, tugging her bent knee

up onto their step so she could fully look Abbie in the eye. She really, really wanted her to get this. “Your mom is never trying to smooth things over for *his* benefit.”

Abbie stared at her for long seconds as she realized what Caroline was saying, and a lot of the tenseness in her shoulders dropped, as she frowned, deeply, tugging at the hole in her jeans again. “But I don’t want it to be smooth between us. It’s not smooth, anyway, because he’s a piece of shit.”

Caroline bit her lip, *hard*, to make herself not smile. God, she knew Hannah wouldn’t like that, even if Hannah knew that and agreed more than anyone.

Abbie eyed her out of her peripherals. “I know you think so, too.”

Caroline carefully schooled her features as she nudged Abbie’s shoulder with her own. “Regardless of what I may or may not think on that front, he is... your dad. And until you’re eighteen, your mother has to legally abide by the custody arrangement. Making things as easy as possible between all parties involved isn’t a fun job for her, either. So, even though Michael might be... himself, even though any of us might not enjoy it at times, he’s there.”

Sometimes she made herself bite back from saying aloud.

“Barely,” Abbie scoffed. Impassioned once more, she looked at Caroline. “But, if he *wasn’t* – if he would just sign the papers, I don’t have to be! That’s what I was trying to do today! He doesn’t even *want* to be my dad.”

The words were like a little arrow straight through Caroline’s heart, especially with the undercurrent of dejection in Abbie’s tone.

“So, I read online that he doesn’t have to be, *legally*, my father.” The dejection was quickly gone, so was she used to it by years of being hurt, and she perked up as she told Caroline her news, “He can give up his parental rights!”

Caroline blinked down in surprise at this, because – just, on the list of things she hadn’t expected today... “It’s not that easy,” she spoke, slowly.

Abbie nodded, excitement seeming to poke through her otherwise dark cloud. “If I get adopted, in the state of Massachusetts, that is a reason a parent can terminate their rights. And... you’d adopt me. Right?”

The words hit Caroline right in the chest, her heart so full, she could burst in that moment, as tears, warm ones, shocked ones, stung immediately at her eyes as the words registered.

“I would. In a heartbeat,” the words were hushed, because her throat felt so tight with these emotions, slamming through her.

Abbie leaned in closer to her, head falling to Caroline’s shoulder. “I knew you would. I knew it.” Caroline’s arm automatically wrapped around her shoulders. “And then, I could just change my last name, and none of us would have to deal with him anymore. And she’s so mad at me about *that*?”

God, Caroline loved this girl so much. So much. Overwhelmingly so.

“I’m not going to lie, I love that idea. I would *love* it,” she put all of her conviction into the words. Because it was so, so true. She closed her eyes, though, sighing out a very heavy breath. “Unfortunately, it’s not all that easy. If I could do that, I would. In a heartbeat. But your father would have to voluntarily give up any parental rights and... I’m not sure that’s going to happen.”

In fact, Caroline was fairly certain it *wouldn’t*. Regardless of how little Michael wanted to be involved, she knew with certainty he would never give up whatever control he had. Even if it was as the non-custodial parent.

“But... he could. You’re the best lawyer, we could do it!”

Caroline grinned at that, squeezing Abbie against her, affectionately. “I am the best. But, unfortunately, in this case with your father... it would be nearly impossible to force him to do it, legally.”

Literally impossible, given how much money and connections Michael had, and that he had never – thankfully – been a physically unstable threat to Abbie. She hoped she wouldn’t have to get into the nitty gritty of the law with her stepdaughter, though.

Abbie bit the inside of her lip and nodded, her head dropping a bit. “Did he really come to your work?”

“Sure did.”

Her bottom lip poked out in a pout. “I’m really sorry.”

Caroline shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. I can handle an argument with your dad, any time. And I will happily have those arguments so that you don’t have to. And I believe that’s exactly the point your mom was trying to make, too.”

“It is.” Hannah’s voice, soft but confirming, came from the kitchen archway. Both Caroline and Abbie turned to face her, and Caroline was relieved to find that the dredges of stress and anxiety were gone from her face. “Honey, I only want to make your life easier. If I *could* grant you this, I would. I really would.”

The raw honesty in her voice was present in spades and... it made Caroline’s heart lurch in her chest. Maybe it would burst? She wasn’t quite sure.

Abbie leaned forward into her mom’s hand when Hannah rested hers on Abbie’s bent knee and rubbed softly. Disappointment was clear on her face, but she nodded after a few seconds.

They sat for another few moments, before Abbie huffed out a long sigh and clapped her hands on her knees before pushing herself to stand. “Well. I guess that was our family drama for the month. It’s been real.”

Typical Abbie. Taking even the hard things in stride.

“We’ll talk more about this in a few days, when we’ve had some time to think on it,” Hannah said with a nod.

Abbie nodded in agreement, swiping at her eyes. “Okay. Yeah. I should go finish my homework, though, before Norah comes over.”

Caroline looked up at Abbie as she started ascending the stairs. “By the way, I think that was enough for the rest of the financial year, at least.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Abbie loftily said over her shoulder as she ascended the stairs. “But if it has anything to do with suing Michael for emotional damages, I’m in.”

Hannah huffed out a laugh as Abbie went to her bedroom, before she turned and fell onto the stair next to Caroline.

“What a day.”

“Tell me about it.”

She wrapped her arm around Hannah’s waist, stroking her hand under her shirt and tugging her closer. She lightly ran her fingertips over the soft, warm skin of Hannah’s waist.

“So... I know it’s not keeping the waters steady but... it is pretty cool, right?” She whispered, because – she still *felt* it, right in her chest.

Hannah turned her head so that her breath washed over Caroline’s neck, giving her goosebumps. And she could feel Hannah laugh.

“Yeah, Hannah and Abigail Parker would be pretty cool.”