

New Number

Moisture seeped through her shorts and crept up her legs. A shiver stole through her body. Zoe took that as a sign it was time to stand up and let the pile of sand slide through her fingers, watching the grains fall down to join their brethren. Toes now sliding through the grains of sand, Zoe searched the dimly lit shoreline for her fluff ball, her closest friend, Sky. The border collie chased after the waves as they fell away and ran back, barking in indignation, as they chased her back to the shore.

Zoe's phone pinged. She opened the email.

Dr. Noolan (boss): *Dear Zoe,*

Should we expect you back this upcoming week? I know it's only been a few weeks, so take all the time you need. Just know we're all here for you. We've got Alex covering until you get back.

Sincerely,

Dr. Noolan

Zoe stared at the screen until it turned off. She slid it back into her pocket.

Sky came over, sand spraying up in every direction as her paws hit the ground.

“What’s up, girl?” Zoe knelt to scratch behind Sky’s ears. “You liking all the new smells? I know I’m enjoying them.”

Sky licked her face.

Zoe’s phone pinged again. Sighing, she pulled it back out. Why were so many people up at this ungodly hour?

Sandy: *Hey sweetie, just thinking of you...*

Those ellipses. The different generations often seemed to have vastly different languages.

Zoe's thumb hovered over the notification. It wouldn't take too long to type out a quick message.

But then she'd have to think. That's a problem for Future Zoe.

Sky pulled away, rushing back out to the waves. Zoe's hand dropped to her side.

Sandy: I'm here if you want to talk.

Sandy: I can just listen if you need.

Zoe stared at the screen until it turned black again. Sand coated her fingers. She couldn't very well clean them off on her sand-covered clothes. It would be too hard to type out a response right now anyways.

Peeling off her outer layer, Zoe discarded her phone with her clothes and waded in after Sky. Sky splashed over. Thoroughly drenched now, Zoe went deeper to where the water helped carry her weight. Each wave lifted her feet off the ground, water swirling around her body in a cold caress. Zoe closed her eyes and ducked under.

Drifting, she heard distorted barking. Zoe pushed back above the water and turned to smile at her dog, wiping the salty droplets from her cheeks.

“I’m right here, Sky,” she called.

The water was beginning to numb her further. She moved back towards shore with the waves, savoring each moment of weightlessness. Sky came out to meet her and they walked back to the clothes together.

“You all done?” Zoe asked down to Sky. Sky looked back, eyebrows seeming to raise. “Perfect, me too. People will start coming out soon anyways.”

Yet another ping came from her phone as she forced the sandy clothes over her wet skin.

Julian: I need your help. Zach you remember Zach right he finally asked me out!!!!!!

Zoe clipped on Sky's leash. She held her thumb over the notification.

Another ping.

Julian: *When will you get back? why'd you even go? you never wanted to*

Zoe turned the phone off and slid it into her back pocket.

“Come on, Sky. Let’s go get some of that continental breakfast.”

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Why had she even answered the phone call. Had she honestly thought it was going to go any differently? Zoe pinched the bridge of her nose and sighed.

“I’m not running away from anything.”

“Yeah, well you hate sand. You hate how it gets everywhere and the way it sticks on your skin.”

“I know, Julian.”

“So why are you there?”

Zoe pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t know but,” she sighed, “honestly is that even what this is about?”

“What do you mean.”

“You don’t check in til whatever’s going on with Zach. I get it. You wanna show off.”

“God, Zoe.”

“So you don’t deny it.”

“What, you think you just won something?”

“I know I did. Now have fun tonight. I hope this one’s *the one* and it’s romantic and all that other bull crap.”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.”

“I don’t really mind.” Zoe pulled the phone down and rushed to press the “end call” button. Why would Julian think she was even sort of in the mood to gush over an honestly below average guy with everything Zoe was facing? Not really the perfect Julian’s fault. To her, Zoe’s imperfect life was a thrill. However, Julian clearly found Zoe too boring at the moment.

Zoe moved to set the phone down, but paused. She opened up the email.

Zoe: Dear Dr. Noolan,

I really appreciate you checking in with me. I don’t know when I’ll be back, and I’m honestly not sure if I will. Please know that I have loved my time working for you, and it will be a position I look back fondly on. Please consider this my letter of resignation.

Zoe

Zoe tossed the phone onto the bed. Sky lifted her head to follow the movement. *We’re not playing fetch right now, sorry Sky.* Zoe flopped onto the bed, huffing as she sat up to hit the strange bumps and poking springs. Maybe. If she just hit hard enough she could fix this blasted bed.

Another ping.

“Dr. Noolan responded already?”

Non-listed number: *Hey, honey. I’ve given you space but it’s time for you to come back.*

The world seemed to pull in. She could suddenly see the whole room as if she were floating in the corner. How had he gotten her number? Another ping.

Non-listed number: *I know this is hard. It’s hard for me too.*

Zoe couldn’t look away from the screen. Instinctually, her mouth parted slightly to make her breathing quieter. Another ping.

Non-listed number: *I’m starting to get worried. This can’t be healthy, nugget.*

Her hands started to shake. A cold, wet nose squished against her arm. Zoe jerked and looked over to Sky.

“It’s alright.” Zoe held Sky’s gaze. “We’re safe.”

Zoe knelt and hugged Sky tight as her heartbeat slowed and her breathing returned to normal. Ignoring the millions of fearful rabbit holes she could run down, Zoe called upon the ever-glowing pit of anger.

Come wash out everything else. Please.

And it answered. Memories clicked by. Him forcing her into those ridiculous dresses. His sneer as he passed down his self-hatred. Him dragging her along to conventions as an ice-breaker, a cute distraction that drew in the ladies. His hard glance back as he left the room, blondest, bustiest yet thinnest lady in tow. His hard glance returning no matter what she did while he was preoccupied. His unspoken threats of what he might do if she stepped out of line...

Not that.

As she got older, the constant pushing. Not the kind pushing of a parent with ambitions. The pushing of a parent who was constantly disappointed in themselves. Disappointed that they weren’t in fact the most brilliant, the most powerful, the most impressive. Taking that out on those under his control. Frustrated by anything he couldn’t control. Especially when they were content. When they sullied his image.

Zoe glared up at the hotel room’s ceiling. “How dare you leave me here with him.”

Sky pulled away.

Zoe cheeks were stinging, her lips tasted salty. “How dare you! Did you just decide it was enough? Just when it was getting better? We were happy. We were safe. And now you up and ruined that. And him... he thinks the door is open now. Just when we were done.”

Zoe collapsed down screaming into the pillow. She didn't mind the lumps and poking springs anymore, leaning into the feeling they brought with them. The stupid sand that crept in everywhere. Zoe sat back up and tried her best to clear her face of the grains. Hands shaking still, Zoe shoved them under her legs and took a deep breath in.

Sky jumped onto the bed and lay beside Zoe. She shoved her nose under Zoe's arm. Zoe let out a sigh. A little tune popped into her mind.

Doggos are better than people.

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A letter slid under the door. Zoe looked up from her book to glance over. Not a letter, a few sheets of paper. Huh.

Zoe rolled her eyes to the ceiling, searching for support. Finding none, she set the book to the side and pushed off the couch. Sky's nails clicked on the kitchen area floor as she came to inspect what her human was up to. Zoe bent and picked up the papers.

Move in Resident Inspection

Zoe flipped to the next page.

Instructions for Paying Rent Online

Zoe flipped to the next page.

Community Events this Month

Walking into the kitchen area with Sky in toe, Zoe crumpled the last page and tossed it into the wastebasket. Casting a longing look at her discarded book, Zoe surveyed the first page. Grabbing a blue pen from the countertop, Zoe started checking the boxes. Glancing around the room with each item, Zoe saw the foggy windows, the chipped walls, the cracked ceiling, the

scuffed flooring. It was tempting to be harsh, some part of Zoe reminded her that she shouldn't be unnecessarily mean and should be grateful for the safety and freedom she got here.

Satisfactory. Satisfactory. Satisfactory...

She filled in the comments section every now and then; being nice didn't mean wanting to be billed for damage she did not cause.

“Why’s there a second page to this? It’s not like there’s that much going on in here.”

Sky went and laid down by the window. She kept one eye open and trained on Zoe. Zoe ignored it. Signing the page, she scanned for instructions.

Please return to the office on the basement level when completed.

“God. Guess I gotta put on pants now. And on my day off too.”

Sky raised an eyebrow.

Pulling open the door, Zoe slid on her shoes and motioned for Sky to sit and stay. Zoe squinted angrily at the sun before plodding down the walkway and down the stairs. Laughter pierced her ears from the children playing in the grass below, and she quickly ducked around the corner to avoid looking at the happy families.

What had they done to get that? Nothing, probably. The world is cruel. But maybe there was something she could have done. Maybe if she'd stayed closer to home she would have noticed something was wrong. *I would have given that all up if it would have saved her.*

No one answered. Of course not. Honestly, what did she expect? Zoe crouched and slid the inspection paper underneath the Manager's door.

“That you, Ms. Klassen?”

Zoe sighed, then put on a smile. “Yessir.”

The door flew open. “Thanks for filling this out so fast!”

So much energy. “My day off, so might as well.”

“Of course, of course. How is the new job going for you? Third week now?”

Zoe nodded. “All good.”

He beamed. “Wonderful! You said it was some fancy office job, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Look at you! And the room is all good? I mean, you may not feel comfortable telling me what’s wrong with it. But don’t worry, kid, I’ve got thick skin.”

Zoe caught herself before rolling her eyes. “No, it’s great.”

“Hmm well just don’t hesitate to come to me if you need anything! I know how hard it can be creating a new life for yourself. When I first moved here, oh when was it, maybe 30 years ago now, wow probably before you were even born!”

Zoe nodded, letting her mind drift to other matters while he rambled.

“You know what those are?”

“Huh?”

“Rotary phones.”

“Yeah, my godmother had one.”

“Oh I love that! My kind of woman. Will she ever come out this way?” He winked.

Holding back a grin at the thought of him trying to woo Sandy, Zoe said, “She might.”

“Well, if she does introduce her to me please!”

“That all being said, I know the world is a very different place now, what with all this technology and internet friends, but this little complex has a lot of events. It really has a great community. Feel free to come out to them whenever. You got the list of ones for this month?”

Zoe’s cheeks reddened, thinking of the crumpled paper. “Yes.”

“Oh no, I don’t mean to pressure you. All in good time, whenever you’re wanting to.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll let you get going now. I’ve got plenty of work to keep me occupied anyways. Oh, you said it was your day off, so you don’t, but hopefully you find something to pass the time.”

Zoe smiled and nodded.

The door closed behind her as she escaped back around the corner, only to once again be accosted by sunlight and laughter. As she climbed back up the stairs, Zoe’s eyes trailed after the little legs toddling to their parents’ arms. A set of cranky teens sat in the shade from the building. Stern looks were cast here and there, but even that brought a lump to Zoe’s throat.

Zoe blinked hard. Frowning, Zoe rushed the rest of the way back into her room. She leaned back against the door. *I would trade places with you in an instant*, she thought towards the grumpy teens. *Only then, I wouldn’t waste that precious time.*

Sky looked up from her sanctuary by the window. Zoe slid off her shoes and went over to sit down beside her dog.

“Would you go back if you could?”

Sky blinked.

“I wish I could. I’d give up this job, this place in an instant. I don’t even think I like what I’m doing anymore.”

Zoe’s phone buzzed in her back pocket.

“If we’d lived in a different time, maybe this wouldn’t have happened. Or a different place. Think about it, all those chemicals must have made it way worse. I wouldn’t mind going without a phone if it meant she’d still be here.”

Zoe's phone kept buzzing.

Non-listed number: *This is ridiculous. You can't just drop off the face of the earth.*

All the thoughts rushed out of Zoe's mind.

Non-listed number: *I am your father. I should at least be able to know that you're safe.*

All sounds faded away as blood pounded through Zoe's ears. Her breath was short and uncertain. Thoughts began to creep in. Maybe she should tell him. He might be worried. She was being unfair. He was her sole guardian now, or would be if she was still a kid and he'd still been around. He might have grown. People did seem to love him. If he had grown, shouldn't she encourage that? Didn't people grow best with positive reinforcement? If he was with someone else now, she didn't want to be the reason he got mad. He'd get so angry.

Sky nudged the phone out of Zoe's hand. It fell easily to the ground.

Zoe pulled Sky onto her lap and buried her face in her fur. There were four things she had to remember.

1. "You can't take responsibility for his actions," her mother had told her. The two had held each other tight after a particularly long night. "It's not your fault, and it's not mine."
2. "Sometimes there are situations you just can't be in anymore." Zoe's mother had been unpacking boxes, setting up their room in Mamma Sandy's house. "No matter how much you're trying to be a good person or love someone, you just need to get yourself out."
3. Turning off the TV to shut off his voice, Zoe's mom had reminded her "We got very, very lucky that he gives up so easily. All you have to do with him is just make it a little too hard. He's never been known for his work ethic."

The phone buzzed again. *It was time for a new number.*

And item number 4. Zoe thought back to the last time they'd talked about him, in those last few months. When her mother had stopped even wearing the wigs.

4. “Remember, my little star, he cares most about how people see him. More than anything, that’s what he’ll go for. You may need to remind him of that one day.”

Zoe pulled her head back up. Sky took the opportunity to lick the salt off her face.

“I wish he’d been the one to go. That’s how it should have been. If the world was right.”

Sky let out a little bark. *Lunch time.* Zoe looked into Sky’s dark brown eyes.

“Why’d she go?”

Sky offered no response.

“It should have been him, or even me. She was doing so much good with her life. What am I doing? I would have done anything if she’d just been able to stay.”

Sky wagged her tail ever so slightly.

Zoe just sighed and went to fill Sky’s bowl.

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The phone chimed. Zoe frowned. She still needed to set up her old ringtone and alert sounds. She followed the sound into the bedroom and tried to pick it up off the bed. It fell to the floor.

“Fuck muffins.”

The metal was slippery and new. Her fingerprints added smudges to places there’d never been smudges before. The phones just kept getting bigger and bigger and never fit in her hand anymore. Some of the newer ones didn’t even have buttons. How did people manage that? How did they turn it on? Luckily, she’d stuck to one of the older versions.

Zoe didn’t see any cracks.

“I’ll get a case.”

Sky didn’t move.

Zoe shuffled over to the couch and sank down into it. The phone chimed again. Zoe watched the fan blades lethargically marching in circles on the ceiling.

With a sigh, Zoe pulled up the phone and held it in front of her face.

Julian: *Hey, I’m sorry. We’ve never gone this long w/o talking, almost 4 months now???*

Julian: *I know i fucked up im sorry Zoe [GIF of sad cat]*

Zoe swiped those messages away.

Sandy: *Do you want to do anything for your birthday?*

Sandy: *I’ve been itching to travel so I could come to you or we could go somewhere?*

Tears welled up in Zoe’s eyes. Her phone dropped to her chest.

Nails clicked against the floor. A warm body pressed against Zoe’s legs. Zoe pulled her legs up and curled into a ball on the couch.

Zoe brushed the crust from her eyes. Holding back a yawn, she took in the long shadows cast through the window. She pulled her feet out gingerly from beneath Sky. Sky yawned and rolled, but stayed asleep.

Taking a deep breath in, Zoe opened up the messages from Sandy.

Zoe: *That’d be great, but only if it’s no hassle.*

Sandy: *No hassle at all! I’ve been dying to adventure some and I’d love to see your place!*

Zoe’s thumb hovered over the power button for a moment.

Zoe: *When do you want to come out?*

Sandy: *How about next weekend? If you don't mind me staying too long...*

Zoe looked around the room, eyeing the empty bottles lined up on the counter, the second trash bag hanging beside the trash can, the mail and bills cast wherever.

Zoe: *It honestly would be nice to have some company*

Sandy: *Perfect. Well, I for one am very excited. Is there anything you'd like me to bring?*

Zoe: *I can't think of anything but I'll let you know*

Sandy: *I've still been holding onto a few of your mom's boxes. Do you want those?*

Zoe stared at the phone for a moment. She turned it off and set it down. Zoe scratched behind Sky's ears.

“You wanna go out?”

Sky leapt off the couch and ran over to the door.

“I wish I had your energy.”

Sky wagged her tail.

Zoe bent down and clipped on the leash. Sky licked her hand. Zoe slid on her shoes and pulled the door open. The sunlight assaulted her eyes.

“Good afternoon, Zoe!” A man down the way waved as he unlocked his door.

She waved back and walked down the stairs.

Another voice came up from the courtyard. “Hey, Zoe, how was your day?”

“Hi, Mrs. Sharma. It was fine, how was yours?”

“Oh, it was alright. I took the boys out for a quick ride today, and they fell asleep almost right away! Best nap time we've had in weeks!”

“That's amazing. I wish you'd been able to get some sleep then too.”

“Oh, so true. Are you guys headed out on a walk?” Mrs. Sharma knelt and scratched behind Sky’s ear.

“Yeah, I think we both need a little fresh air.”

“Right! Well, just so you know, I’m having some people over for a potluck of sorts in a bit. You don’t have to bring anything, but you can if you want. But you should come. There will be lots of great food.”

Zoe tried to smile. “Thanks, Mrs. Sharma. I’ll come if I can.”

Mrs. Sharma pursed her lips and looked her up and down. “Alright, well it’s at 8 tonight so just pop on by for as long as you can!”

Zoe nodded and tugged on Sky’s leash. They walked around the block, Sky stopping once to poo and a few times to mark her territory. As they walked back into the courtyard, Zoe heard her name and paused.

“I’m honestly a little worried about her.”

“Yeah?”

“She seems all alone! She just goes to work and hangs out in her apartment. Have you ever seen anyone go over to her place?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“And I’ve never seen any family or friends come visit her.”

“Maybe she goes to spend time with them?”

“That might be it, but I’m not sure. She’s never gone for long besides work.”

Zoe considered speaking up. But what would she say? *You’re right, but don’t worry.* No, they’d just see when Sandy came. For now, she’d go back to her room. *I guess it’s sweet they’re*

worrying, Zoe thought to herself as she tugged on Sky's leash and they walked towards the stairs.

At her door, she looked back over her shoulder. Mrs. Sharma waved up from the courtyard where she was chatting with Mrs. Asjes. The other woman smiled.

Zoe pulled the door closed and checked the clock over the oven. She had enough time for a quick shower. And while Mrs. Sharma said she didn't need to bring anything, maybe she'd bring a few liters of soda and some chips.

Zoe glanced over at the latest pile of mail. Pulling out the events calendar, she smoothed it out. There's today, the potluck. She searched around for the tape, pulling off a piece and sticking the calendar up to the fridge. She smiled and took a quick shower.

Smelling fresh and feeling clean, Zoe grabbed her pile of soda and chips. She cast a quick glance at the fridge to double check the room number and shuffled out the door, struggling not to drop anything.

A few moments later, Zoe was knocking on the door. It swung open and a warm glow accompanied by a rich smell burst into the dark night. Zoe blinked into the light and clutched her bags of old chips. After a moment, her eyes adjusted. She saw Mrs. Sharma and smiled.

Mrs. Sharma's eyes flicked down to the soda and chips in her hand. "Perfect! I was just commenting that somehow no one thought to bring any drinks! Come on in."

Mrs. Sharma took the bottles from her arm and pulled her in. The door slammed behind them as Mrs. Sharma called out to the group, "Look who saved us! We've got drinks!"

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Sandy held up the events calendar. "We're going to this one right?"

Zoe glanced over. “Yeah, that’s the one at Mrs. Sharma’s place. She hosts most of the events actually.”

Zoe’s phone buzzed once.

Messenger - Julian: *I miss you. i sent you a bday present, sandy told me your address*

Zoe sighed and looked up at Sandy. “You told her where I live?”

Sandy looked up from her computer. “Who are you talking about?”

“Julian.”

Sandy frowned. “Well, she asked for your address. I figured she wanted to surprise you with a gift.”

Zoe pinched the bridge of her nose. “Alright.”

“Hey, Zoe, what’s wrong. Did something happen between you two?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing.”

Sandy left her work and came around the counter. “It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“It is,” Zoe said. Sandy raised an eyebrow. “It isn’t.” Zoe sighed. “A few weeks after I came here she texted, for the first time since the funeral.” Zoe’s eyes burned and she shut her eyes and took a deep breath.

Sandy nodded.

“And it was about some guy.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Sandy pulled Zoe towards her. After a moment, Zoe let out a sigh and leaned into Sandy.

“I miss her so much.”

“I miss her too.”

The oven dinged and Zoe pulled back.

As Sandy went over to pull out the food, she looked back at Zoe. “You know, I understand if you’re not there yet, but she probably just didn’t know what to say. I hardly even know what to say or do or how to be there for you.”

“Yeah.”

Sandy put the brownie down and cut into it. A burst of steam rose up from the crack. “Regardless, it sounds like she’s trying to make amends.”

Zoe just stared at the countertop.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I almost got your mom expelled?”

Zoe’s eyes widened. “What?”

Sandy laughed. “Yeah, she didn’t forgive me for a while.”

Zoe smiled. “Mom’s sure could hold a lot of fury in her tiny body.”

“You think you’ll text her?”

Zoe nodded and flashed the screen. “Just did.”

Sandy smiled. Then frowned. “Have you heard from him lately?”

“Nothing.” Zoe smiled.

“Good. Let me know if he ever does?”

“Thank you, Sandy.”

Sandy nodded and cast a glance at the clock. “We’ve gotta get going! That little one’s party is happening soon, isn’t it.”

“It is. Brownies all ready?”

“Yes, I might just need your help carrying. They didn’t quite all fit on one plate.”

Zoe stood and called Sky over. “Of course.”

“She’ll come?” Sandy asked.

“Mrs. Sharma’s kids love her and she loves playing with them.”

They both grabbed a brownie plate and slid on their shoes.

Sky followed them outside and down a few doors. Zoe knocked and the door swung open.

“Come in! Oh these smell delicious!” Mrs. Sharma grabbed the plate out of Zoe’s arm.

“And you must be Sa-- Zoe’s godmother; it’s so nice to meet you!”

Sandy stuck out a hand. “Mrs. Sharma, I assume?”

“Call me Melek.”

“Sandy.”

Mrs. Sharma ushered them back into the kitchen and they set down their plates.

Zoe looked around. “Did we get here early?” Sky followed her nose out of the kitchen.

“Oh, no, no, everyone’s just in the other room. You wanna go see them? I’ve gotta finish up a few things in here.”

Zoe furrowed her brow and looked over at Sandy. Sandy smiled and nodded towards the other room. She and Zoe exited and rounded the corner and --

“Happy birthday to you.” The lights flipped on revealing smiling faces.

“Happy birthday to you.” Mrs. Asjes put a birthday cone lopsided on her head.

“Happy birthday dear Zoe.” Zoe turned and narrowed her eyes at a grinning Sandy.

“Happy birthday to you.” Mrs. Sharma came out from behind them, holding a cake with 24 candles and Zoe’s name calligraphed onto the top. Everyone cheered and the kids ran out from the group to get a closer look at the cake. Sky raced behind, tail zipping through the air.

“We did good,” Mrs. Sharma said to Sandy, glancing over at Zoe.

Zoe tried to narrow her eyes further, but a smile pushed its way through. “So you two were the masterminds? And I’m guessing it’s not Zahir’s birthday.”

Mrs. Sharma mussed the boy’s hair and he grinned up at them. “Not for a few more weeks, but he was happy to be in on it, weren’t you.”

“Yeah, Mamma. We got you Ms. Zoe.” He pointed at the cake. “Can I blow out the candles?”

“No, it’s not your birthday, it’s Zoe’s. Come here, come here.” Mrs. Sharma positioned Zoe in front of the cake. “Don’t forget to make a wish.”

Sandy’s phone flashed as Zoe closed her eyes tight for a second and then blew.

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There was a sharp knock on the door.

“I’ll get it.” Sandy nodded, not glancing up from her struggle wrapping the toy truck they’d gotten for Zahir’s birthday. Zoe motioned for Sky to sit as she walked to the door.

The door swung open. Zoe dropped the cup. It shattered over the floor. Shards of glass littered around her feet.

“Sky stay!”

Zoe couldn’t move. Her heart raced. Her eyes fixed on the man sitting before her.

“Oh my.” Sandy came to the door. The scissors still dangled from her fingers.

“I’m glad to see you’re alright.” He smiled.

Zoe’s grip tightened on the doorknob.

She heard the crunching of glass and felt Sandy’s hand press against her back.

“What do you want.”

“Really Sally?”

“It's Sandy.”

“Yeah, Sandy. Am I not allowed to come check up on my own daughter?”

“I don't think I even need to answer that.”

“Well, why don't you let her speak for herself.”

“I'll speak for her if she wants me to.”

Sandy cast a glance sideways and Zoe nodded.

“Well, I still deserve to know that my daughter is alright. She just lost her mother, for goodness sake. She should know she's not alone.”

“I do know that.”

Sandy nodded.

“But it's not because of you. Mom is gone, now, for good. And she's not coming back.”

Zoe swallowed hard. “But I've got plenty of people in my life, like Sandy and my neighbors here.” She gestured and he turned, noticing the parents in the courtyard. Mrs. Sharma waved and Zoe waved back.

Her father's lips pursed and he took a step back. “Your mother clearly passed down her hatred of me to you.”

Zoe's mouth fell open.

Sandy took a step forward. “Whether that's true or not, Zoe clearly doesn't want you here. And look, you're starting to make a scene.”

Her mother's voice filled Zoe's mind. “Remember, my little star, he cares most about how people see him. More than anything, that's what he'll go for. You may need to remind him of that one day.”

Zoe let go of the doorknob and crossed her arms. “I’m really doing alright without you. And I think you’re doing better off without me than you would with me.”

His eyes hardened and Zoe’s heart started thumping faster. Taking a deep breath in, she spoke again. “Do you really want the drama of the estranged daughter of a well-renowned businessman coming out with unsettling claims? You know people will eat it up.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“I think we’ll all be much better off going our own ways.” *Wait. Breathe. Give him time to come to a conclusion, make an assertion, and walk away feeling as if he’s won the argument.* “You’re just like your mother.” He threw his hands in the air. “At least I know you’re alive and safe. That’s all you had to tell me. Then, I wouldn’t have had to come all this way.”

Zoe nodded.

“You’d be happy to know that I’m marrying again.” He paused. Zoe nodded. “I was going to tell you once we were catching up, but might as well now. We’re very happy. She’s even got a kid too, a few years younger than you.”

Zoe felt bile rising in her throat and swallowed hard.

He stared at them both a bit longer, then started walking away.

He turned and swung his arm in an arc. “Good luck with all this.”

Zoe waited until he was out of site. She waved down at Mrs. Sharma who smiled back up. Zoe closed the door.

Sandy let out a sigh. “That poor woman.”

Zoe nodded. She looked down at the shards of glass. “I’ll go get a broom.”