

EXCLUSIVE SNEAK PEEK:

10 years after the end of Good Faith...

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Blair:

Blair tried to stay motivated, cycling to nowhere on a Wednesday morning in May. She hated the damn bike, truth be told, but she couldn't imagine starting off at the butt crack of dawn every day without it. Habits formed early in her attempt to craft a new life stuck with her—all for the good, she reminded herself when the super-fit lady with the perfect hair and makeup on the screen in front of her demanded she ride like she meant it.

"But I don't mean it." Her sweat dripped onto the handlebars. "Fuckin' bitch." She and the instructor had an understanding. Blair could cuss her out all she wanted, but she couldn't slow down or stop. Thirty minutes later, she lay on her yoga mat staring at the ceiling.

"Okay, good," she said out loud, reminding herself yet again that the torture was worth it, if only to force her to get out of bed and face the day. After her shower, tumbler of milky iced coffee in hand, she stood, looking out her first-floor window. She smiled and waved to her across-the-street neighbor, a grumpy old guy she'd met when she moved into her turn-of-the-century house in one of the oldest areas of Louisville. He always waved back but never smiled. It was comforting in its consistency. She sipped, watching the street come to life.

Coffee finished, a quick glance at a black-and-white photo stuck in the corner of a mirror completed her morning routine. She touched it, letting her fingertips linger over the familiar faces, then headed out the door.

Within half an hour, she sat at her desk, earbuds providing her with music and privacy as she studied menus for a couple of events they had coming up. She made a spreadsheet-organized shopping list of ingredients to source herself the next few days—the busiest of the year, in a town hosting the world's most famous horse race. Spent a few more minutes placing a food order online, then leaned back and stretched her arms.

One of her favorite things about coming in this early was the tranquility she experienced in the calm before the storm atmosphere of an empty restaurant. She loved being all alone in the still, quiet space she owned. The fact she had reservations booked well into the next quarter didn't hurt her peace of mind. Having full control of her life and the success of this place was both terrifying and gratifying. She picked up the mug of French press coffee and heavy cream—a decadence she'd learned to appreciate while living in Paris, married to Alain.

Blair closed her eyes and sent her daily, silent message to the man, asking for his forgiveness yet again. She'd been such a silly, spoiled child when they'd met. And all he'd done is to be the wrong guy at the right time for her to deal him the ultimate heartbreak. She wished she had the nerve to seek him out, send him a message, find him on social media. But she never would, and she damn well knew it.

She sipped her coffee and surveyed her world—squeaky clean chairs upended on equally clean tables, all on top of the sort of floor even she would eat off of. One of the first things she'd asked every candidate for general manager had been, "How do you feel about restaurant cleanliness?" She'd hit a double jackpot with her new hire. If it were possible to be more anally retentive about the place being clean than she herself was, Grace Davenport was that person.

A key rattled in the front door, startling her out of her musings. She stood and took her empty cup back to the kitchen, irritated at whoever was invading the few quiet hours she had.

She cursed when the mug slipped somehow from her fingers and dropped onto the red tile floor, shattering into a million pieces. Tears threatened as she stared down at the giant mess she'd made. Annoyed at her overreaction, she swiped at her eyes and took the two steps from the sink to the broom closet. Her nose collided hard enough with someone coming at a run around the corner to make her stumble back. "Ow, shit."

"Holy crap. I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

She glared through the curtain of her hair. Her sous chef, Noah Fredricks, stood staring down at her, his face flushed. He took a half a second to yank his long blond hair back with an elastic, then guided her to a chair in the break area. "Sit. Let me get ice."

"I'm fine," she said, checking her fingers and noting the blood. "Damn. You've got one tough chin or whatever it was I ran into."

"I think it was my shoulder. Hang on a sec. Don't move."

"Watch out for the glass." She leaned her head back, hoping not to bleed on her clean shirt.

Noah returned with a small bag of ice. "I'll do the cleanup. Never fear, Chef." He gave a low bow with a flourish of his hand, like a salute. She smiled and pressed the ice to her nose. Noah was something this side of a God send, appearing one night in her kitchen a week into an unproductive search for a new assistant. Her previous sous chef had left in an egomaniacal snit. "I'll do anything to work here," Noah had claimed, while her staff ogled him behind his back. "I love this concept, Ms. Freitag and I want to be a part of it."

She'd been desperate, but it had worked, thank heaven. It was a big step up for him to a job with such responsibility, but so far he'd been a perfect fit. The staff had weathered the seismic tremors his appearance had caused thanks to, in no particular order, his looks, charming personality, and apparent ability to seduce both men and women with alacrity. Blair watched him whistle his way through brooming, then vacuuming, then mopping up after her clumsiness. Once she was certain her nose was okay, she got up and emptied the ice bag into the sink.

This "concept," as Noah had called it, had been her idea start to finish. A self-sustaining, solar-powered, farm-to-table style restaurant with the hippest possible craft cocktails made by an assortment of capable people. The care and management of staff was a huge part of her business plan. She paid them above minimum wage, keeping tips optional. Her customers understood the staff preparing and serving them drinks and food earned a living wage and worked enough hours to qualify for medical, dental, and vision insurance. But they provided such great service, most of them still earned tips. Her father, who'd owned and run his own brew pub for decades, had told her she was well-intentioned but it was a recipe for financial failure.

That had been seven years ago. Now, her small enough to be manageable restaurant was in the middle of an expansion to double its footprint, and she was in early negotiations to purchase a farm on the outskirts of the city she'd called home for the past decade—Louisville, Kentucky. She had big plans for it, including renovating the original farmhouse into an events space, while using it as her source for both livestock and fresh produce, as well as everything in between, from eggs to herbs.

Her reservation book was mile long, with almost as many job applications. She chose her staff with care and made sure they got the support and positive reinforcement they needed from her and the entire management team. As a result, she had minimal turnover. She was, for the first time she could recall, at peace with her life.

Or she should be.

Brandis:

“Uncle Brandis! Uncle Brandis!”

The two boys ran straight at him the second he stepped down from his truck. He pretended to stumble under the weight of them when Henry, the oldest, grabbed his arm and the youngest, Max, latched onto his leg.

“I seem to have developed barnacles,” he said, walking with them attached. “Somebody help! Oh, wait, it’s just you guys.” He swung Henry around to his shoulders and peeled Max off his lower leg and up into his arms. “Better duck.” He tapped Henry’s knee as they headed up the front porch steps. “Hey, Shelly.”

The boys’ nanny stood at the door. “I see you’ve gotten your official greeting. Come on guys, it’s snack time. Henry, you have homework, and Max, you need to clean your room.”

“Oh, poop,” Henry said. Brandis set him on the porch’s painted floorboards. “I wanna play football.” He kept a death grip on Brandis’s hand.

“We can do that after your homework.”

“I wanna play too!” Max piped up. Henry gave him a guarded look.

“No, it’s just me and Uncle Brandis,” he said, giving the smaller boy a shove.

“Ow! No, me too!”

Brandis sighed when Max leapt up from where he’d fallen and launched himself at his older brother. He grabbed the kid by the back of his shirt and held him aloft, marveling at the vitriol coming from such a small human. “Chill.” He glared at Henry. “You too.”

“Fine. I don’t care,” Henry said, stomping into the house. Shelly shrugged at Brandis and followed the older boy inside, leaving him to calm the younger, who was acting like a kid-shaped rabid racoon, writhing around and making growling noises while Brandis held him at arm’s length.

“Damn,” he said under his breath, recalling his sister’s request the night before, begging him to come over to help so her nanny wouldn’t quit.

“She’s the third one in eighteen months,” Katie had said while her sons raised all sorts of hell in the background. “I can’t lose her. She’s good but these two are pushing her limits. Do you mind? If you have time? Uncle Brandis?”

Brandis didn’t really have time, but he didn’t mind. Katie and her husband were busy. She was a specialist obstetrician. Hugh was a neurosurgeon. They did their best with the kids. But Max had recently decided his brother was his mortal enemy for some reason, and Henry had never been the calm type. Hence, chaos. Katie and Hugh had plenty of money to throw at nannies and toys and gadgets, but precious little of their own time to spend on the problem. So it was Uncle Brandis to the rescue.

He tucked Max under one arm and headed back down the steps, hoping to distract him. After running across the acre of lawn, he reached the barn that had come with the property. It was in sore need of work, Brandis noted, his carpenter’s eye taking in all the water damage and rot.

“Let’s do hide and seek,” Max said, scrambling to his feet where Brandis had dropped him. “I found some mouse babies up there.” He pointed to the upper loft that looked like it would barely hold the kid’s weight. “Wanna come see?”

“Ew, no,” Brandis said, wishing they’d avoided the place, amused by Max’s short attention span. It was chock full of ways for the kid to get hurt, including rabies or whatever he might catch from rodents. He headed toward the wide open barn doors. “Come on, Maxwell, let’s do hide and seek out here.”

After a solid half hour of play time, he helped Max tidy his room, then figured he’d stick around for dinner. “Burgers,” he declared, after rooting in the freezer. “And dogs.” He held up both packages.

“Yay!” Max latched onto his leg again. Henry was at the table, doing homework and ignoring them. “Can I light the grill?”

“That would be a hard no.”

“I’ll fix a salad and some mac and cheese,” Shelly said with a smile he knew meant more than friendly overture. “Max, you may use your screen time now, if you want.”

“Yes!” the boy blurted out before grabbing one of the computer tablets sitting on a side kitchen counter. He ran into the den without a backward glance.

“Whew.” Brandis set the meat on the stainless steel island. His company had built this house, using his design, after he realized his sister and brother-in-law needed a bigger place with room for their growing family. And because it was who he was, he still sweated every detail even now, years after completion. Making a mental note to complain to his stainless guy about the sloppy finish at one corner of the counter top, he turned to get a glass from a cabinet. Which put him in close contact with Shelly.

“Oops, sorry,” she said, blushing.

“No problem.” He took two big steps away from her. “Go ahead.”

He refused to allow thoughts of how this could be him, a man enjoying an evening with his wife, the mother of his children. No, those sorts of fantasies belonged to men who hadn’t screwed up their own lives with such finality. He clenched his jaw, but did admire Shelly’s rear view as she reached for a salad bowl, then bent into the fridge to retrieve the ingredients.

He sighed and ran a hand down his face, wishing—not for the first time—he was someone else. If he were someone else, he might have something like a normal life with a family. Maybe he wouldn’t be a workaholic bachelor, the ever-reliable uncle for his too-rowdy nephews, standing here ogling his sister’s third professional babysitter. He shook his head and turned away from her, focusing on getting the packages of meat open.

His mouth watered, as it usually did this time of day, tasting beer he couldn’t have. He muscled past the urge to crack one of the many craft options in the small, under-counter fridge, and plunked burgers and dogs on a plate. He headed past the tablet-focused Max buried in the couch, frowning when the French door stuck, and made another mental note to fix it once he had the grill going.

He fired up the charcoal—a throwback, but something he preferred for grilling—and stood, staring as the flames shot into the air, then settled down and got busy heating the coals. Without realizing it at first, he clenched his hands into fists against the compulsion to grab a beer. One wouldn’t hurt him, after all. When he caught himself thinking those words, he unclenched his fists and took a deep breath.

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