



Luke's
First Outing
A MCINTYRE SECURITY INC. STORY

april wilson

Luke's First Outing

Read this short novella after reading *Hostage*.

A McIntyre Security, Inc.

Novella

by

April Wilson

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Dedications

To Shane, Beth, and Baby Luke

Books by April Wilson

McIntyre Security, Inc. Bodyguard Series:

Vulnerable

Fearless

Shane (a novella)

Broken

Shattered

Imperfect

A Christmas Wish (free short story)

Ruined

Hostage

Luke's First Outing (free novella)

McIntyre Security, Inc. Protectors Series:

Coming soon (2018-2019)...

Redeemed

Regret

Rescued

Wrecked

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Chapter 1

Beth

“What was that for?” Sam says, eyeing me with great amusement.

“What was *what* for?”

“That sigh.” And then he makes the most outrageously feminine sigh he can, fluttering his lashes at me. He can be such a drama queen sometimes.

I smile, feeling my cheeks flush. “I can’t help it. I’m just happy.”

Sam rolls his eyes at me as he shakes his head. “Motherhood has made you sappy.”

“It has not!” I ball up the napkin in my hand and pretend I’m going to lob it at his fat head, but since he’s holding my napping newborn son on his chest, I’ll have to wait for a later opportunity.

Luke looks so adorable sleeping on Sam’s broad chest. His little knees are drawn up beneath him, making his diapered bottom stick up in the air. His face is turned in my direction, and I can see one little fist pressed against a tiny, round cheek. His pale blond hair is tousled, and his cheeks glow with health. *Thank God.* My premature little bundle of joy is ten weeks old now, and he’s almost caught up to where he should be.

I reach over and stroke Luke’s back, marveling at how well he’s done since his traumatic entrance into the world. We could have lost him so easily if Jason Miller, the paramedic, hadn’t been able to get him breathing when he did.

Sam cradles my son securely on his chest, his big hands careful and sure. Luke’s a lucky little boy. There are so many people in his life who love him unconditionally—people who would lay down their lives for him. Starting with Sam.

I smile as Sam cups Luke’s little butt in one hand while he pats the baby’s back with the other. Sam’s really taken to Luke, and Luke to Sam. I nudge his shoulder. “You’d be a great dad.”

Sam cocks his head toward me, but says nothing.

I know he loves Luke. And so does Cooper. It’s only natural that they’d want kids of their own. “You’d both make great dads,” I remind him.

He grins. “Maybe someday. Right now I’m working on getting Cooper to agree to a wedding date. He proposed, yes, but he’s been a little light on the details. First things first, ya know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

Luke’s eyelids flutter open, shut, then open again. He makes a plaintive sound and begins to stretch.

“Looks like someone’s waking up,” Sam says, loosening his hold on my son, who is starting to wriggle in earnest. “Looks like somebody’s hungry.”

“He’s always hungry,” I say, setting my glass of lemonade on the coffee table. I reach for my son. “Come here, you little snuggle bunny.”

Sam hands the baby to me, and as soon as I cradle him in my arms, against my chest, his little mouth starts rooting at my breast. He reminds me of a hungry little bird in search of his next meal. And just the feel of him wriggling hungrily in my arms, coupled with the little plaintive sounds he makes, starts my milk flowing and my breasts aching.

And then, in case I wasn’t paying attention, Luke takes a deep breath and lets out a loud squawk.

“That’s my cue,” I say, rising from the sofa. “We’ll be back in a few minutes, after someone has had his dinner.”

Just as I step around the sofa, heading for the hallway that leads to the nursery, the private elevator chimes, announcing the arrival of my darling husband and Cooper.

“Our guys are home,” I say, quite unnecessarily, as Sam heard the elevator chime too and is already getting to his feet.

A moment later, Shane and Cooper walk through the foyer doors, Shane carrying several grocery bags, and Cooper carrying take-out from our favorite Indian restaurant down the street.

“Dinner has arrived,” Cooper says, holding up two sacks.

I inhale deeply. “Oh, my God, that smells so good.”

Shane leans close and kisses me on the lips before sliding his mouth down to nuzzle the side of my neck, tickling me. Then he dips his head to kiss Luke’s forehead. “How’s my little family?”

“We’re fine,” I say, smiling at the mutinous expression on Luke’s face. Patience is not his strong suit. “But hungry. Both of us.”

Shane watches as his son works himself up to a full-blown cry. “I can see that.”

Sam joins us, taking the grocery sacks from Shane.

Now that his hands are free, Shane takes Luke from me and holds him in his hands, one hand supporting his bottom while the other cradles the baby’s back and head. “Hey there, little guy. How are you?”

Luke responds by upping the volume.

“All right, hold on, pal,” he says, bouncing the fussing baby. “Dinner’s coming.” Then he turns his gaze to me. “Lead the way, mama.”

We walk together toward the nursery. I glance back just as Cooper leans in and kisses Sam. Their kiss is long and lingering, and I’m pretty sure I heard a low groan coming from at least one of them, if not both. Shane meets my gaze, and I grin sheepishly at him.

“Stop eavesdropping,” he says, steering me into the nursery.

“I can’t help it. They’re just so cute.”

Shane rolls his eyes at me—bright blue eyes, just like his son’s. “They’re grown men, honey. They’re not *cute*.”

“Maybe not to you, but I think they’re adorable.”

Shane nudges me toward the padded rocking chair. “It’s good being back to work,” he says as I take a seat. “But I miss you two terribly.” He sits on the padded footstool in front of the rocker, facing me, and holds Luke while I unbutton my blouse and unhook one of the cups on my nursing bra.

This is the first week since Luke was born that Shane’s gone back to work full time, and it’s been an adjustment for both of us. He took a leave from work—we both did—when I went into labor six weeks early. We both agreed to take some time off, to stay home and relax and spend quality time as a family, getting to know our new son.

“I miss you too,” I say, arranging the nursing pillow on my lap. I hold out my hands, and Shane hands me the baby.

As soon as I position Luke on the pillow, his mouth pops open and he nuzzles hungrily as he latches onto my nipple. Shane watches, mesmerized, as his son nurses. Neither one of us has forgotten the struggles I had initially when Luke was born. We don’t take moments like this for granted.

My husband grins up at me. “Does it make me a pervert if I enjoy watching my son nurse?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I don’t think so.”

Running his index finger lightly down the side of Luke’s face, Shane gazes at our baby, studying him closely. “I wonder what he’ll be like as a man.”

I reach out and thread my fingers through Shane’s short hair, tugging lightly on the strands to make him groan with pleasure. “With you as a father and role model, I think he’ll grow into a very fine man.”

We sit quietly while Luke nurses, Shane watching contentedly, stroking my arm with his warm, calloused fingertips.

“How was work?” I ask him.

He shrugs. “It was fine. No big crisis or drama today. It’s good to be back to work, but at the same time, I really miss spending my days with you and Luke. How about you? How was your day?”

“Good. Erin called me today.”

“How’s she doing?” he asks. “How’s the store?”

“She said everything’s fine, and that everyone’s asking when they can meet Luke. I’d like to stop in for a visit soon. I miss being there, and I think Luke’s ready for a little field trip.”

Shane lifts his gaze to mine. “A visit, sure. But I’d rather you didn’t go back to work quite yet. I’m sure Erin can handle things just fine on her own.”

I frown. “I know she can, but I miss being there, Shane. I miss Erin. I want to go back to work, at least part time.”

“Can’t you work from home?”

“Yes, but it’s not the same as being there. I miss interacting with the employees and with the customers. I enjoy being there.”

“But what about Luke? We don’t have anyone in place to take care of him.” Shane sighs. “I guess we could ask your mom or mine, but they’re both busy, and I hate to inconvenience them. I guess we could think about hiring a nanny, but I really don’t like the idea of leaving our son with a complete stranger.”

I brush my thumb across his cheek, and he leans closer to kiss me.

“We’ll figure something out,” I tell him. “Right now, I just want to go for a visit, take Luke in to meet everyone. That’s all.”

Shane doesn’t look happy, but he doesn’t try to talk me out of it. “Now that we have Luke, there are going to have to be some logistical changes to how you travel. You’re going to need a dedicated driver when you leave the penthouse since you’ll be bringing a car seat, stroller, diaper bag, and God knows what else. Babies require a lot of paraphernalia. I’ve already identified a driver for you from my staff. You’ll have your own driver and an Escalade for traveling. In addition to having Sam with you for protection, your driver will also be armed.”

“A full-time driver? Who?”

“His name is Joseph Rucker. He’s former military—Army. He’s worked for me for about five years. He’ll take good care of you and Luke. You’ll like him. Joe’s a good guy.”

I smile hopefully. “So, can he take us to Clancy’s tomorrow? For a test run?”

Shane nods reluctantly. “Yeah. I’ll invite him to stop by the penthouse this evening so you can meet him. Sam already knows him.”

“Thank you. Luke and I are ready to go out into the world.”

* * *

After we finish our dinner and clean up the kitchen, Shane’s phone buzzes with an incoming call from the security desk down in the lobby.

“McIntyre,” he says, taking the call. And then a moment later, “Sure, send him up.”

“Send who up?” Cooper says as he dries his hands on a dishtowel.

“Joe Rucker. I asked him to come up and meet Beth this evening. He’s going to drive them to Clancy’s tomorrow.”

The elevator chimes, and Shane heads for the foyer to greet the new arrival as he steps out of the elevator. A moment later, Shane returns to the great room followed by a mountain of a man.

“Sweetheart, this is Joe Rucker, your driver. Joe, this is my wife, Beth McIntyre.”

“Mrs. McIntyre,” the man says in a rumbling deep voice as he offers me his big hand for a shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.” Despite his size, his touch is surprisingly gentle.

“Please, call me Beth,” I say as we shake hands.

He gives me a warm smile and a nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

I don’t know what I was expecting, but Joe Rucker is a complete surprise. He’s a big man, with broad shoulders and muscles that just won’t quit. His complexion is a warm shade of mocha. His eyes are large and dark as night, framed by tiny laugh lines. His hair and beard are white and trimmed very closely, the color contrasting starkly with his brown skin.

Dressed in black jeans and a matching T-shirt beneath a black leather jacket—which I’m sure is necessary to conceal the firearm he’s undoubtedly carrying—he appears casual on the surface, but I have a suspicion those dark eyes miss nothing. He’s a very striking man, certainly very handsome, and yet also intimidating.

What’s most arresting, though, are the intricate black tattoos peeking out from beneath the neck of his T-shirt and the cuffs of his sleeves. Even the backs of his hands and fingers are inked with geometric shapes. I imagine that most of his body is covered in tattoos.

Sam joins us, handing a sleeping baby to me so he can do an intricate fist bumping routine with Joe. “Hey, good to see you, man,” Sam says. “I’m glad it’s you who’ll be driving us.”

“Hey, Sam. It’s my pleasure,” Joe says. His gaze travels to the baby in my arms, and he reaches out to gently cup the top of Luke’s head in his hand. “And this must be the little fella.”

“My son, Lucas,” Shane says, a proud smile on his face. “He’s the reason for all the fuss.”

Joe chuckles, his voice deep and resonant. “Aren’t they always? I’ve got a grandson Lucas’s age. I know how it is.”

Cooper joins us, holding out his hand to Joe. The two men shake firmly, making eye contact. “I couldn’t pick a better man to watch out for my family,” Cooper says, claiming me and Luke as his own.

Joe nods, his expression solemn. “I’ll take good care of them. You can count on that.”

Cooper pats Joe on the back. “I know I can. Come have a drink with us.”

Joe follows Cooper and Shane to the bar, and Sam remains behind with me and Luke.

“Wow,” I say, watching as Joe takes a seat at the bar beside Shane.

“You said it,” Sam says, grinning. “Shane’s going for the big guns. Nobody gets past Joe Rucker. If I wasn’t already spoken for, I might be crushing on the guy.”

* * *

Joe stays an hour, chatting with Shane and Cooper at the bar, while Sam and I relax on the sofa with Luke. Before he takes his leave, we make plans for Joe to pick us up at ten the next morning for our first outing—to Clancy’s Bookshop.

“I’ll pick you up at ten, Mrs. McIntyre,” Joe says as he steps into the elevator.

“Thank you. Call me Beth, please.”

He presses the button for the lobby and nods as the elevator doors start to close. “Yes, ma’am.”

After Joe’s gone, I glance at Cooper, who’s standing next to me, holding his grandson. “He’s not going to call me Beth, is he? It’s always going to be Mrs. McIntyre or ma’am, isn’t it?”

Cooper nods. “Joe’s old school, honey, and you’re the boss’s wife. You might as well get used to it.”

I smile, already liking my new driver. “We’ll see about that.”

Chapter 2

Shane

My favorite time of the day is late evening when Beth nurses Luke for the last time before we put him down for the night. She lies in bed, cuddling with our son, and I just want to wrap myself around them both. There's something so incredibly peaceful and satisfying when it's just the three of us, alone in our suite, in the quiet darkness.

I lie spooning behind Beth as she lies on her side, Luke tucked close to her breast as he suckles. I love hearing the quiet smacking sounds he makes as he fills his belly with his mama's milk.

After he's had his fill, I take over. While Beth gets ready for bed, I change Luke's diaper, dress him in his PJs, and tuck him into the little bassinette at the foot of our bed.

While I wait for her return, I stand beside the bassinette and watch our son sleep. He looks so small, so innocent. Right now his world revolves around cuddling and eating and sleeping. He has so much to learn, so much ahead of him. I want to teach him to be strong, yet kind. I want to teach him to respect and protect the people he loves. There's so much I want to teach him.

He draws his tiny fist to his mouth and starts sucking on it in his sleep, and I have to smile.

Beth joins us, peering down into the bassinette. "He's asleep?"

"Yes. He's got a full belly and a dry diaper—what more could a baby want?"

My gaze strays to the sheer nightgown Beth's wearing, one that barely reaches the tops of her thighs. It's obvious she doesn't have any panties on, as I can glimpse the shadow of pale curls between her legs. Instantly, I'm hard. I am definitely a pervert.

I sweep her up into my arms and carry her to the sofa across the room.

She laughs. "I thought we were going to bed."

"We will, eventually," I say, sitting her across my lap. My dick is hard as a pike, pressing relentlessly against the fabric of my trousers, and I'm finding it difficult to think about anything other than getting inside her.

I slip my fingers between her legs, sifting through her curls, past the lips of her sex to the soft, wet flesh at her core. She's slippery wet, which is very encouraging. I dip a finger in her silky wetness and brush her clitoris, teasing the small pink bud.

She moans in my arms and presses her face into my shirt. I can feel her warm breath through the fabric, heating up my skin.

"How do you feel?" I ask her.

Her amused reply is breathy. "Fine."

"Fine enough to indulge your husband this evening?"

She laughs. "I guess that depends on what he wants."

"He wants *you*." I untie the front of her nightgown, exposing her breasts, which are much fuller these days now that she's nursing. I cup one of her plump breasts in my hand, then lean down to flick her nipple with my tongue.

She shivers as a moan escapes her.

I press my lips to her ear and quietly whisper. "Did you like that?"

"Yes," she whispers back, her hands clutching my arms.

I draw her breast into my mouth and suckle gently, teasing a drop of milk from the peak. "I'm going to hell, I just know it," I confess.

She laughs again, then reaches up to run her fingers through my hair, tugging on the strands and making me groan shamelessly. "Take me to bed," she says.

"Are you sure?" I still worry about hurting her. It wasn't that long ago that she gave birth to our son under traumatic circumstances. I'm still haunted by the memory of her cries of pain, and by the helplessness I felt.

She snuggles into me. "I'm fine, Shane. Honestly."

My finger returns to her wet heat, sinking slowly inside her, curling upward so I can stroke the inside of her sheath. When she begins to squirm, making soft noises that make me even harder, I know I've found the right spot. God, I love making her come. I love feeling her fly apart in my arms, feeling her body tremble and listening to the keening sounds she makes when she's lost in the moment.

I stroke her inside, slowly and methodically, taking my time as I ratchet up her desire. My thumb brushes against her slippery clit, doubling the pleasure she feels.

She gasps softly. "Shane!"

When she tenses in my arms, I know she's close. I lean down and cover her trembling lips with my own, drinking in her panting breaths and soft cries. I'm drunk on the scent of her arousal and on her shaky breaths and the sounds she makes when she's almost there. "That's right, sweetheart. You're so close, aren't you? So close..."

My tongue tangles with hers, stroking and teasing, as I rub her clit relentlessly, faster and faster, until she cries out and shudders in my arms.

I rise to my feet and carry her to our bed, laying her down gently. I'm still fully dressed, so it takes me a minute to strip down to my bare skin. She watches me undress, her eyes glittering with sweet arousal, which only makes me harder.

When I kneel on the bed, between her open thighs, she reaches for me and pulls me down for a kiss. My heart is pounding and I can hear the blood rushing through my veins, loud in my own ears as my focus narrows down to one thing, and that's sinking inside her warm, welcoming body.

I grab a condom from the top drawer of the nightstand, rip the packet open and quickly sheath myself. Then I guide myself to her opening, pressing forward carefully as I know she's still tender. She sighs when the head of my cock breeches her opening, lifting herself up to take in more of me.

"Careful," I say, easing her hips back down.

"I'm fine!" she gasps.

I have to grit my teeth and remind myself to slow down and not give in to the urge to sink into her. The sounds she makes, and the sight of her heavy breasts with their lush pink nipples bouncing in front of me, drives me crazy, and I have to remind myself to take it easy with her. I force myself to press slowly inside her, an inch at a time, to give her time to adjust to me. She's panting with arousal, and her pale blue-green eyes glitter with desire. I lower my mouth to hers and drink in her cries as my cock fills her.

She wraps her legs around my hips and digs her heels into my ass, encouraging me to move. I'm trying to restrain myself, but I can't hold out any longer. I begin to move, the sweet drag and friction of my cock inside her driving us both crazy. I run my lips and tongue down her neck to her chest, and I take a plump nipple into my mouth and draw on it, both shocked and aroused when I taste her milk flowing on my tongue. Damn.

"I love you," she whispers, her voice soft and sated. "I love you so much it hurts."

Her words make me groan, and I press my face into the warm crook of her neck. The delicate scent of her skin, the feel of her hands stroking my back, her hot wetness gloving my cock are too much. With a hoarse cry, I buck into her, my cock spasming and throbbing. My spine is on fire, and my balls ache as they draw up tight before sending pulse after pulse of pleasure tearing through me.

Her arms tighten around me, and she holds me close as my body shakes above hers. Jesus, she owns me, body

and soul. I feel like a beggar worshipping her, completely undeserving. I don't think she has any idea of the power she has over me.

My cock throbs inside her, even as it begins to soften. I am loathe to leave the exquisite pleasure of her body, but I'm sure I'm crushing her. She's just too damn sweet to complain. Gingerly I withdraw and roll to her side, turning her to face me.

"Are you okay?" I ask her. I'm short of breath, panting like I've just run a marathon.

She gives me a sleepy smile. "Yes. Perfect."

It's late, and she's tired. I've worn her out. "I'll be right back."

I head for the bathroom to dispose of the condom and clean myself up. When I bring a warm, wet washcloth back to the bed to clean her up, I find her already half asleep.

"Mm, thank you," she murmurs.

After disposing of the washcloth, I climb back into bed with her and pull her into my arms, turning her so I can mold myself to her back. My hand settles over her breast. "Good night, my sweet wife," I whisper against the back of her head.

She settles back against me, her hand clasping mine. "G'night, husband. I love you."

With a contented sigh, I close my eyes.

Chapter 3

Beth

At ten the next morning, right on schedule, Sam and I head down to the underground parking garage. I carry Luke, and Sam manages the stroller and the diaper bag. When the elevator doors open, there's Joe leaning against a black Escalade, his arms crossed over his broad chest. He's dressed in all black, and I catch a glimpse of a chest holster beneath his jacket.

Joe pushes away from the vehicle and opens the rear passenger door. "Good morning, Mrs. McIntyre," he says in that deep, resonant voice of his.

I smile at him. "Good morning, Mr. Rucker."

"Just Joe is fine, ma'am," he says, giving me a courteous nod.

I strap Luke into his car seat, then climb in to sit beside him. Joe stows the stroller in the rear of the vehicle and then returns to the driver's seat. Sam sits in the front passenger seat.

"Clancy's Bookshop?" Joe says, as we drive out of the parking garage.

"Yes, please," I say. "Thank you, Mr. Rucker."

Joe catches my gaze in the rear-view mirror. "Just Joe is fine."

Sam looks back at me, grinning.

"Right," I say. "Joe."

Even with heavy morning traffic, we still make it to Clancy's in under fifteen minutes. Joe pulls the SUV right up to the front entrance, idling in the VIP parking spot as I extract Luke from his car seat and Sam gets the stroller out of the back of the vehicle.

"Text me when you're about ready to leave," Joe says. "I'll pick you up right here."

Mack meets us at the front doors, opening them for us as I walk in carrying Luke wrapped in a blanket in my arms. He's asleep at the moment—car rides knock him right out—but I expect him to wake up hungry any minute now. Sam follows me inside, bringing the stroller and the diaper bag.

"Hey, welcome back, boss!" Mack says as a small crowd of Clancy employees gathers around us.

"It's good to be back," I say.

My only warning that I'm about to be pounced on is the squeal coming from Erin as she launches herself at me. "Beth! You're back!"

"Watch the kid, Erin," Sam warns.

But the warning is completely unnecessary as Erin wraps her arms gently around my shoulders, careful not to squish Luke between us.

"I'm so glad you're here!" she says, hugging me. And then she holds out her arms for Luke. "My turn!"

Mack herds us all away from the entrance, and we cluster together in the midst of the new release tables.

The beloved familiarity of the store hits me hard and my throat tightens. I've missed this! The crisp smell of new books, the aroma of specialty coffees and baked goods in the café, the dull murmur of so many voices... it all hits me at once. "I've missed this place so much," I admit, blinking back tears. Goodness, it's been over two months since I've stepped foot in the place. I'm definitely ready to come back, if I can just figure out what to do with Luke while I'm working. And if I can get Shane to agree.

Erin grins at me. "We've missed you!" she says, but her eyes return to the sleeping baby in her arms, as she rocks him gently from side to side. She runs her index finger gently down the bridge of his nose. "And I'm so happy to see

this little guy again.”

“How’s everything going?” I say, glancing around at the autumn displays of pumpkins and colorful fall leaves that I’m sure are Erin’s doing.

“Erin’s done a great job with the store,” Mack says, laying his hand on her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “You couldn’t ask for a better interim manager.”

Erin blushes. “Oh, stop.”

We end up taking our little impromptu party to the café, where we can sit and sip iced coffee concoctions and nibble on chocolate chip cookies. Employees stop by in small groups to say hello and to see Luke up close. Sam does the honors, showing off Luke to everyone who stops by, hovering over him like an overprotective avenging angel.

Erin gives me a run down on everything that’s happened here at the store since I’ve been on maternity leave.

“Three employees quit at the end of the summer because they were moving away to start college,” she says. “I hired their replacements. Sales numbers for the second quarter were way higher than anticipated, which was a nice surprise. And fall orders are up significantly as well.”

It looks like everything’s been running beautifully without me, thanks to Erin. I don’t know if it’s my imagination, but she seems more confident in her ability to run this store. When I first told her she’d be filling in for me while I was on maternity leave, she balked vehemently, insisting she wasn’t ready for that much responsibility. But, obviously, she’s done a fantastic job. When I tell her as much, she blushes, nervously tucking the strands of her silky dark hair behind her ear.

Mack hovers around our table, splitting his attention between Sam and Luke and their entourage, and me and Erin. As head of security, he takes his job very seriously. If only he’d take Erin just as seriously. I haven’t missed the longing glances she sends his way when he’s not looking.

When there’s a bit of commotion near the front doors, Mack excuses himself to check on things, leaving me and Erin alone to speak in private, while everyone else makes a fuss over Luke.

“So, what about Mack?” I ask her, as she takes a sip of her iced caramel decaf.

She makes a face. “Mack? What about him?”

I refrain from rolling my eyes at her. She knows perfectly well what I’m asking. It’s no secret that Erin is crazy about our head of security. And after my conversation with him at my baby shower, I have my own suspicions that he’s not indifferent to Erin. “Erin, come on. I’m not blind.”

She shrugs as she sets her cup on the table. “He’s been very helpful while you’ve been gone.”

“*Helpful?* That’s it?”

“Well, you know. What else is there to say?”

I give her a long-suffering look. “Erin, you’ve got to take the bull by the horns, so to speak, and ask him out yourself. Don’t wait for him to get around to doing it. Life is short, and we have to go for the things we want. So, ask him.”

She sighs. “It won’t make any difference. He thinks I’m too young for him, or he’s too old for me. Maybe a little bit of both. He’ll say no, and frankly I couldn’t bear the rejection.”

“Age is just a number. Shane is ten years older than I am, and it doesn’t matter one bit.”

“Yeah, well I’m twenty, and Mack is thirty-six. We’ve got you guys beat. I think Mack feels like he’d be robbing the cradle.”

“I still think you should ask him out. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, Erin. I’ve seen how his gaze follows you around the store when you’re not looking. That’s not indifference I see on his face. That’s longing.”

Mack returns to our table just as I hear Luke starting to fuss. “Excuse me, ladies,” he says. “Erin, you’re needed

at the check-out.”

Erin rises from the table and pushes her chair in. “Duty calls,” she says, giving me a dimpled smile. “I’ll catch up with you shortly, okay?”

Luke’s fussing escalates to a cry, and I reach for my purse. “You will find me and my son upstairs in my office. It’s clearly time for his second breakfast for the day. Come see me when you’re free.”

“I will,” she says.

As Erin heads for the front of the store and the check-out lines, Mack follows, never more than a few feet away from her. I’m not sure what the altercation at the front of the store is about, but I know Erin’s safe. Mack would never let anything happen to her.

“Come on, Mommy,” Sam says, heading my way as he gently bounces my complaining son in his arms. “Someone’s hungry.”

I laugh as he hands me Luke, so he can push the stroller toward the elevator.

* * *

After I finish nursing Luke, Sam sits on the sofa in my office, his boots propped up on the coffee table. Luke is passed out cold on his chest. Sam’s chest has quickly become one of Luke’s favorite places to nap. With my hands free, I boot up my computer and check e-mails and return some phone calls, taking care of a few time-sensitive issues.

Not long after, Erin walks in and joins Sam on the sofa. “God, it’s so good to have you two back. It’s just like old times.”

Erin peers into Luke’s sleeping face. “Your baby is ridiculously cute, Beth,” she says. “I mean, seriously. It’s ridiculous.”

I laugh. “Shane says that babies are cute so that we’ll take care of them. It’s nature’s way of ensuring the survival of the human race.”

Erin nods, gently patting Luke’s back. “I mean, seriously, he’s adorable.”

“Thank you,” Sam says, grinning.

Erin smacks Sam lightly on the shoulder. “Not you, idiot. I meant the baby.” Then she turns her attention to me. “Please tell me you’re coming back to work soon.”

I nod. “That’s the plan. I certainly want to come back. The only problem is we haven’t decided what to do with Luke while I’m at work. We hate to ask either of our moms, because they’re both so busy. And we don’t like the idea of hiring a stranger to watch him.”

“Why do you have to do anything with him? Just bring him here with you. Sam and I can take turns watching him when you’re busy. There are plenty of people here who would jump at the chance to spend time cuddling with Mr. Cutie Pants.”

I look to Sam for his reaction to Erin’s suggestion. He shrugs. “Why not? Between the three of us, we can watch him.”

“Yes, that’s fine for now,” I say. “But what about when he gets bigger and demands more attention, and more scrutiny? He’ll need a safe place to crawl around and play. I don’t think my office is necessarily the best place for a baby to crawl around.”

Erin raises her hand. “I have an idea.”

“What’s that?” I say.

She points at the wall beside my desk. “The room right next to your office is currently a storage room, and it’s

hardly ever used. We can repurpose that room into a nursery. All it would take is cutting a doorway through the wall there, into the other room and a little remodeling to turn the storage room into a nursery. Piece of cake.”

Mack walks into my office, his gaze going right to Erin, who’s leaning against Sam as she pats Luke’s back. I catch a flash of emotion in Mack’s expression, quickly suppressed. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that was a flash of jealousy, which is ridiculous. Mack, jealous of Sam? Good grief! Mack knows perfectly well that Sam has eyes only for Cooper.

I think I need to have another talk to Erin about Mack. I think he’s far more aware of her, and far more interested, than she allows herself to believe.

“Mack! What do you think about remodeling the storage room next door into a nursery for Luke? We could have a door put in connecting my office to the nursery. Then I could bring him with me to work.”

He nods. “I think it’s a great idea.”

Erin clasps her hands together. “Yay! That means Beth’s coming back to work!”

I stand. “I’ll be back. I’m going to check out the space next door.” I smile at Mack on my way out of the office. “Care to join me?”

I see the tiniest flash of panic in his eyes before he gives me a bland smile. “Sure.”

* * *

The storage room is bigger than I remember. There’s more than enough room in here for a crib and a changing table and a rocking chair, plus ample space for a baby to crawl around on a rug and play to his heart’s content. This plan is going to work just fine.

I stroll around the room making a mental picture of what I envision the room looking like after it’s remodeled. Mack stands just inside the closed door, watching me warily. The man’s not stupid.

He sighs, crossing his arms over his broad chest. “Just say it, Beth.”

“You’re a coward.”

His jaw tightens for a moment, and then he chuckles. “I know.”

“You’re admitting it?”

“She’s twenty years old, Beth. I’m nearly twice her age. You don’t see a problem with that? Everyone else does.”

“Everyone else being who?”

“Your husband, for starters. He threatened to kill me if I so much as touched Erin.”

I laugh. “Oh, come on, Mack. Shane can’t stop you from seeing Erin, and you know it.”

“No, but if she got hurt in the process, he’d kill me.”

“Okay, first of all, you’re not *twice* her age.”

“I’m four years shy of being twice her age. That’s close enough. Hell, technically, I’m old enough to be her father.”

“Oh, please! Trust me, Erin doesn’t see you as a father figure.”

“Erin’s too young to know what she wants.”

“That’s bull, and you know it. She might be young, but she’s not foolish or immature. Quite the opposite, I’d say. Wouldn’t you agree? She ran this store perfectly well for over two months while I was gone.”

“Beth—”

I stop pacing and look Mack directly in the eye. “Do you have feelings for Erin?”

He frowns, looking away. “That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point? She’s crazy about you, Mack. And forgive me if I’m wrong, but I suspect you’re just as

crazy about her. I've seen the way you look at her when you think no one's watching. I've seen how you follow her through the store, hanging back, staying just out of reach. I know longing when I see it, and I'm definitely seeing it."

"She's never even had a boyfriend, Beth. I'm sure she's a virgin."

"Yes, I'm sure she is too. But so was I when I met Shane. That didn't stop him. Every girl has to have her first lover. There's no reason why you can't be Erin's first. And who knows... if things work out for you two, you might be her first and her last. You just might be her *forever*."

Mack closes his eyes, his expression pained as he runs his fingers through his dark hair.

"Mack."

"What?"

"Stop torturing yourself. You want her. She wants you. Don't be an idiot. Do something about it."

The look on his face is nothing short of conflicted.

"You're overthinking it, Mack. Just ask her out for coffee one evening after work, maybe dinner. Let things progress naturally from there. It's not that hard."

He frowns. "I'm no choir boy. I've done things in my life. Especially overseas, in the service, in times of war... things I'm not proud of. I don't want to sully her with my past."

"She's interested in your future, Mack, not your past. The man you are today... that's who I want for Erin. You're one of the most honorable men I've ever met. If you weren't, you wouldn't be beating yourself up over this."

A light knock at the door puts an abrupt end to our conversation. Mack opens the door to Erin, who's eyeing us warily. "Is it okay if I come in?" she says.

"Of course," Mack says, stepping back so she can enter. "I was just heading back to work. You ladies have a nice chat." And then he's gone without a backward glance.

"What was that all about?" Erin says, following Mack's departure with curious eyes.

I shake my head in dismay. "Men. They can be such idiots sometimes."

She smiles. "I know. Except for Mack. He's no idiot."

"Yes, he is. You need to ask him out, Erin. Just bite the bullet and do it. One of you has to have the balls to do it, and it might as well be you."

"I don't know," she says, looking defeated. "I want to, really I do. But if he turned me down, I don't know if I'd survive the rejection."

"But what if he says yes? What if he's *The One*? What if he rocks your world?"

She blushes. "I don't know. If he was really interested, he would have said something by now."

"Don't be so sure, Erin. I told you, men can be idiots sometimes."

Erin turns to face the dingy storage room. "So, what do you think?" she says brightly, clearly changing the subject. "Can you see this room turning into a baby nursery?"

"Yes, I can. I'm going to talk it over with Shane tonight, and if he's okay with the idea, I'll ask his sister Sophie to oversee the remodeling project."

* * *

I send a text message to Joe, letting him know we're about ready to leave. When Sam and I head out of the building, the Escalade is waiting for us right in front of the entrance. Joe's standing beside the vehicle, looking all dark and intimidating. When he sees us, he opens the rear passenger door for me to climb inside with Luke.

"How was your visit, Mrs. McIntyre?" he says, as we pull into the early afternoon traffic.

"It went very well, *Mr. Rucker*. I figured out what I'm going to do with Luke when I return to work."

Joe meets my gaze in the rearview mirror, a grin on his face. I think we're at an impasse. Sam snickers at us from the front passenger seat.

"I'm glad to hear that, *Beth*," Joe finally says, although he sounds rather reluctant at the idea of using my given name.

I smile. "Thank you, *Joe*."

The end... for now.

Coming Next

Stay tuned for more books featuring your favorite McIntyre Security, Inc. characters! Watch for books for Jake, Erin and Mack, Hannah, Killian, Chloe and Cameron, Liam, Tyler, and many more!

Here are the next few books on my publishing schedule in 2018-2019:

Redeemed (Jake's book)

Regret (Mack's book)

Rescued (Killian's book)

Wrecked (Sam and Cooper's prequel novel)

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Acknowledgements

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With much love... April