

Excerpt from Second Chance at Love

On Monday, Rachel arrived at eight o'clock instead of nine to work because she needed to leave early for Violet's try-out. Her daughter played the flute with the sixth-grade band. The school district had been invited to be part of a competition in Austin, and eight students from each grade were chosen to represent the district. Violet loved music and playing the flute, and practiced every chance she could—including the time she'd taken the flute into the bathroom as she waited on the hot water. Rachel was excited for her baby girl and wanted to be there to support her.

Rachel's boss, Roger Brennan, stepped into her oversized cubicle shortly before lunch. He'd already ditched his suit jacket and tie. He was barely six feet tall, had a large widow's peak in his light brown hair, and a smile that made everyone feel comfortable.

"Rachel, would you type this in an email? Send it to Larry and Suzanne in Procurement, and copy me on it—I need them on my calendar."

"Sure," she replied, taking the paper he handed her.

She read the note as he walked away. There appeared to be a concern about getting material from Sierra Leone in time for a client's deadline. Roger wanted an update *ASAP*.

Blazer had a source in Sierra Leone for necessary rare earth elements found in parts of Africa.

Roger was not your typical boss. He considered everyone in the company *family*. All employees were his friends, inside and outside of the office. But he could also be direct and firm when he meant business. Investors knew it, vendors knew it, and employees knew it.

After wrapping up her work for the day, Rachel slipped on her coat, turned off her monitor, and went to tell her boss she was leaving.

She strode into Roger's spacious office where he sat at his desk and snuck a quick peek at her watch. Six minutes before the traffic started to get crazy.

"Okay, Roger, I'm heading out. Just checking to see that you got the email before I take off." She hoped he'd say all was fine.

"Yes, thanks." He drew his attention away from his computer screen, looking as if he'd just seen something humorous. "I'm good. Tomorrow we can tackle the trip to Palo Alto. I want Trey Wilkins to attend as well."

Blazer had a big prospect in Palo Alto. If the sales team wanted Roger there, that meant they stood a high chance of getting the deal. "Sounds good. I have calls rolling to voicemail."

"Perfect. Tell Violet I said good luck. Thanks again, Rachel."

She pivoted and barely made it over the threshold when she ran smack-dab into a wall of muscle.

Oomph!

A tall, dark-haired man smiled down at her. She stumbled back. His subtle hint of sandalwood cologne circled her, lifting her into a glorious brain fog. "Oh." Her hand went to her heart. "I'm terribly sorry." She stepped to the side.

"Rachel? Rachel Johnson?" His eyebrows lifted as he talked over her apology.

Her brow furrowed. This man knew her, but she didn't know him. After six years at Blazer, she knew most everyone in Roger's circle, from vendors to his wife and kids—she'd even met his housekeeper.

This delicious man, she did not know.

“Yes?”

“Oh, wow. Funny running into you. Here.” He reached into his suit jacket pocket, retrieved a white envelope, and handed it to her.

What is this? Was she getting served? She bit her cheek and resisted the deep desire to run.

The envelope’s paper was far too nice to be a court or government document.

“Cheryl can’t make it to the ARC Gala. She told me to ask you instead.”

“Cheryl?”

“Yes, Cheryl Moorland. So, here I am asking.” His boyish grin on a mature face could make a woman swoon.

“Hunter!” Roger called from his office. “Get in here. You’ve got to see this.”

The mystery man named Hunter smiled toward Roger and said, “Be right there.” Turning back to her, his head tipped slightly as he asked, “Did she not call you?”

“No, but I don’t know—”

“Well, I’m sure she will. I hope you’re free Thursday night?” His lips pressed together. “It doesn’t really start until eight.”

What was going on and who was Cheryl Moorland? She lifted the envelope to return to him. “I think there is—”

“No, please don’t say no.” He stepped closer, his eyes pleading with her. “Cheryl will call you later and explain everything.” His warm hands cupped hers, gripping the envelope tighter in her grasp.

“Hunter,” Roger called again, an eager tone to his voice.

Hunter smiled directly at her. His gaze scanned her face, stopping for a fraction of a moment at her lips.

His looks were distracting. The words stalled in her throat. A thirty-nine-year-old mother of two energetic, almost-teenagers and assistant to a successful CEO of a growing electronics company was *rarely* at a loss for words. But now, nothing.

“I’ll see you Thursday,” Hunter said softly before releasing her hands and strolling into Roger’s office. “You sure are getting impatient in your old age,” she heard Hunter tell her boss.

Rachel stared down at the envelope. What was this about? She read the time on her phone. *Shit!* Two minutes later than she should have left. She would have to sort this out tomorrow, because right now her flute-player extraordinaire was expecting her number one fan to be sitting front row.

What a fortunate turn of events, Hunter Baron thought as he left Roger’s office and got into the elevator to the lobby.

He owned a consulting firm that specialized in helping companies in extreme flux, and Hunter depended on referrals to keep the sales pipeline full. The ARC Gala was a major opportunity for networking and making pivotal connections in the business world.

Usually, Cheryl Moorland attended these events with Hunter, with Ken’s blessing—her husband, and his best friend. As the head of the largest hospital chain in the southwest, Cheryl knew a slew of people and could make introductions that Hunter wouldn’t otherwise find.

When Cheryl had called him that morning and complained she felt the flu coming on, his heart sank. But then she’d quickly followed up with a plan to salvage his night. She happened to

be close friends with a PR executive, Rachel Johnson, who was also a highly connected member of the community. Cheryl assured him that she'd ask Rachel to step in for the evening.

"Phew," he'd semi-joked over the phone. The prior year, he'd garnered three excellent contacts from the gala.

Cheryl had added that Rachel worked in the Palladium Building on the thirty-eighth floor for Watson, Bradley, and Chalmers," her sluggish voice came through the phone.

Serendipitous for him to drop in on Roger Brennan, owner of Blazer Electronics, who had offices in that same building. They'd been college roommates and remained good friends.

Cheryl had remarked dryly that he needed to find a date besides her for these events. It was time. He stepped out of the building to the sidewalk, the conversation playing over in his head.

Hunter didn't agree. Cheryl was perfect in the role of business escort. Fun, knowledgeable, and she understood his past. He supposed he could hit the golf course to form connections, but he'd rather toast wine than drive a cart. Golf took too much time. Life was short as both Cheryl and Ken were aware.

Hunter had lost his wife eight years ago, just as his company was taking off. He'd dived into his business after mourning hard. He'd decided then and there serious dating was out of the question. He simply wouldn't tarnish the memory of his wife and their life together by getting into another long-term relationship.

He and Jessica had had a future planned. After focusing on their careers, they would start a family. Every year, they'd make a list of what they wanted to accomplish—for the house, or trips they wanted to take, or anything. It had been so freakin' effortless being married to Jessica.

Then in the blink of an eye, their dreams, and Jessica, had disappeared.

Some days, the pain of missing her was so crippling, Hunter didn't want to do a damn thing. It could still hit him sometimes, after eight years.

Hunter exhaled as he got into his car for the drive home. He wouldn't focus on that. He couldn't.

The good news was he now had an escort for the gala, and things were lookin' up.

Rachel—wearing a lovely smile and the sweet scent of vanilla—was like a breath of fresh air. It was as if he'd manifested her the moment he'd walked into the building. He didn't even need to make the trip to the thirty-eighth floor.

He was still chuckling once he reached his place, and switched on his over-sized monitor in the home office. There was always work to do.

Yup, this was gonna be a great week.