

A SECOND CHANCE
MEDICAL ROMANCE

SECRET
BABY FOR
Dr. Dreaming

SOFIA T
SUMMERS

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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DESCRIPTION

**“Your son is very sick... is his father in the picture?”
How do I answer?
His father is asking the question... but he has no idea.**

It was supposed to be a fun trip to the water park, but it ends with my son at the hospital with a serious condition. Suddenly, I’m transported to the beginning...

My life on a cruise ship, meeting Ben Wilkes. The first man who thought I was beautiful at any size. The first man I loved. The father of my baby...

The man who is now responsible for my son’s care, and who has no idea the baby boy is ours. Handsome billionaire doctor Ben was my first love, but I never told him the truth.

Can he grovel enough to change my mind?

PROLOGUE

Georgia

"Oh, wow," I moaned, bucking my hips upward as Ben's cock filled me relentlessly. More unintelligible sounds of pleasure streamed from my mouth as I bit his shoulder, our skin sliding against each other, slick with sweat. My orgasm began to pass, my body calming slowly, and his thrusts slowed too. I ached to feel him flood me, but condoms were essential, especially given our history.

He pulled out and rolled to the side, then pulled me into his chest. My heart was distraught after the news that my job on the ship was being given to someone else, at least in part. It was something he would never understand, but he comforted me anyway. I allowed him to hold me, feeling a connection between us growing with every encounter. I never intended to string him along, though the way he spoke to me, with pet names and such, and being so eager to make love to me—I knew he thought we had a shot.

"Feel better now?" he asked, kissing my temple. I could feel the thin layer of perspiration on every inch of my skin. I tasted it on him too during our sex, the pungent, salty flavor still on the tip of my tongue. I tasted myself too, on my own lips. He'd pleased me so incredibly, then followed that with a kiss.

I took a deep breath and thought about his question. Was I really feeling better? Would I ever feel better? Sex always brought me back to earth, grounded me in the reality of the present where I could focus on critical thinking and control my emotions, but the instant I thought about the call with my boss, my heart was torn again.

“It was my boss.” I sighed and turned onto my back to look up at him, and he propped himself up. Our eyes met, and I had to blink hard to keep the tears from coming. “She called me, so I left the room.”

“And?” Ben’s word hung in the air like a dagger waiting to slice me open. This trip to Hudson was only supposed to be a half-day jaunt. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. I was supposed to take my son to the water park and have a good time on land, then return him to the cruise ship and return to my normal life as an entertainer at sea. I wasn’t supposed to run into the man I’d hidden a child from for eight years. Now, I lay in his bed staring up at him, trembling inside at the thought that I was going to lose my job because I had a family medical emergency when Charlie slipped and hit his head at that park.

“They’re hiring someone to replace me immediately. When I go back, I’ve lost my position as headliner. I have to share the spot now.” At least the worst part of the shock had been wiped away by the relaxing hormones released during sex. But it didn’t take the sting away entirely.

“Ouch, that’s harsh,” Ben whispered. His hand splayed on my stomach, and I felt comforted for the moment. There was a lonely soul in the fox hole with me as the bombs dropped everywhere I looked. I opened my mouth to thank him for listening, but he spoke first.

“Look, we’ll find you a good job here. Okay? Maybe a singing diner, or you like to paint. You could sell paintings. We could get a bigger place and you could have an art studio where you—”

“Ben,” I snapped, sitting up. “The ship is my home. It’s my life.” I climbed out of bed and scrambled for my clothing, fixing my bra. I was upset, furious. Ben had no clue what that job on the ship meant to me, the life I’d built. I jammed my legs into my panties, well aware that my body still dripped with moisture from sex. I didn’t care. He was still under this delusion that I was staying here after Charlie’s surgery to remove that tumor.

“Babe, I didn’t mean anything by that. I was trying to comfort you. Please don’t be this way.” Ben rolled out of bed and reached for me, but I dodged his grasp.

“Be this way? What way?” Livid, I turned my back on him and put my clothes back on. He had no idea what his words made me feel. I had spent the past ten years building a name for myself, through an unplanned pregnancy and nursing a baby while trying to juggle a performance schedule. I had fought tooth and nail to be what I was today, and he thought so little about it?

Tears streamed down my cheeks, and I shook with anger as I finished dressing and found my shoes.

“Geo, please. Let me explain.” He reached for me again, but I swatted his hand away. I wasn’t going to be manhandled.

Eight years ago when I found out I was pregnant, I returned to shore, eager to tell him. I thought he’d be happy and want to make something from our no-strings-attached situation. Instead, I found an empty apartment and not even so much as a note. He never had any intention of supporting my career. He left to do his residency without telling me, so I gave birth to his kid without telling him. Now, I just wanted him to understand that the life I made for myself, I did on my own. I didn’t need him at all.

“I told you I’m leaving when Charlie is better, Ben. I’m not staying here. I don’t want a job here. I want my job on the ship. I want my normal life.” I glared at him, crossing my arms over my chest in protest.

“When will you accept that change isn’t a bad thing? Charlie would be happy here. You’d be happy here. We would be together again. It would work out. You’re trying to control something the universe is telling you needs to change.” He spoke to me as if he actually thought I was leaving my son here with him. I shook my head at his insanity.

“Oh, my God,” I said, scoffing. I forced my feet into my shoes, walked to the dresser where I left my purse, and turned to look at him over my shoulder. “I’m going back to the hospital. I’m going to stay with Charlie until he wakes up.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. The stress of almost losing my job was enough. Ben’s insistence that I stay in Hudson wasn’t helping. He didn’t understand. I walked out the door and slammed it as I did so. The only thing that should have been important to me was Charlie, then my job. I didn’t have time to keep playing this game with Ben, especially after I told him we shouldn’t be having sex anyway. We weren’t in our early twenties with time to kill. NSA sex was hot, true, but not when your partner gets you pregnant then leaves you high and dry. And what if I ended up pregnant again?

I furiously opened my Uber app and called for a ride. The yo-yo of emotion I felt surrounding this entire situation was so overwhelming that I was just dumb enough to fall into the arms of the man who'd hurt me so desperately. When would I ever learn?

Ben

I stood in the emergency department at Hudson Memorial with the phone pressed to my ear. This was all normal for me, the beeping of heart monitors, doctors and nurses walking past in a rush to visit their next patient. I was just used to being one of those doctors engaged in the practice of medicine—not one of the family and friends of the loved one being cared for. It felt surreal, given the circumstances.

“Yes, Harper, Lily is with your mom. They’ve gone back to your place with the key you left me. She will keep her until you get home tomorrow. I’m so sorry.” Harper, my best friend, was away on her honeymoon, and I was babysitting her four-year-old until everything happened this afternoon.

I turned to glance past the curtain at the young boy in the bed. His eyes were still shut peacefully, which wasn’t necessarily a good sign with a head injury. His mother hovered nearby, probably on pins and needles for a number of reasons, a few of them linked to me.

“It’s okay, Ben.” Harper’s tone was comforting, but I still felt like I was letting her down. “Your friend needs you right now. Go be with her and her son, and I’m sure Mom will do fine with Lily. It’s just one night. She called me earlier and told me how you saved that little boy.”

“I didn’t really save him. I just saw him slip and fall then stayed by his side until the EMTs got there.” I knew as well as anyone else that what I had done wasn’t special. I did what any decent human being would do. I just knew to check his vitals and such.

“Well, regardless, that boy was lucky to have you. Go now and be with them. I’ll let you know when we’re home safe.”

“Alright. Be safe traveling.”

“Bye, Ben.” Harper hung up, and I locked my phone and slid it into my pocket. I wasn’t sure if it was my guilt over passing Lily off to her grandmother or my nerves over seeing my one-time flame, but I felt like I could throw up.

I peeked around the curtain again, hoping to see the boy’s eyes open. Charlie, she called him—and his middle name was Benjamin. It was a shock hearing that in the ambulance because, of course, my name was Benjamin. Not to mention the fact that just over eight years ago was the last time I’d seen her. The boy looked exactly like her, though, not even a hint of me in him. But I stood there and stared, trying to make sense of it.

Georgia looked up at me, catching me watching her, and forced a pained smile. “You can come in.” Georgia Lane—the woman I thought I’d never see again but always wished I would—stared at me, her eyes both pushing me away and beckoning me forward.

I moved past the curtain that separated the small exam room from the hallway and sat down next to her on the bench situated next to the bed. She scooted over and gave me more room. Her hand was tightly wrapped around her son’s hand, her thumb brushing over the edge of the tape that held his IV in place. They had dressed him in a gown, on which he had thrown up. They had to put a clean one on him right away, and the entire time, he was sleeping, machines nestled around the head of his bed beeping.

“I’m just waiting on the CT scan results to come back.” Georgia was nervous, biting her bottom lip and blinking back tears.

“He’s in good hands here, Georgia. The best. I know because I work with these guys every single day. If I were on duty right now, I’d be doing everything I could for him. I’ve already briefed Doctor Manning on everything that happened. With the imaging results, they should be able to see how bad the concussion is. Trust me, he will have the absolute best care, and I will be here to explain everything in a way you understand.” I patted her knee, then instantly regretted touching her. There was so much history between us, and I should have been more sensitive to that. She squirmed away from me another inch and angled herself to see me better.

“Why were you at that water park? I mean, you weren’t dressed for the water. I didn’t see you with anyone.” She narrowed her eyes at me, searching

my expression.

“My friends got married and I was babysitting their daughter. Her grandmother was with us, so when I saw Charlie take that spill, I rushed in to help. Miriam took her granddaughter home when I came here with you.” Just saying the boy’s name felt like acid on my tongue. It burned. Mostly because the times and dates didn’t add up. Either Georgia had kept a very big secret from me for a very long time, or she had moved on at lightning speed. The other idea—that she had been sleeping with other men and me at the same time—was too painful to even think about.

“I see,” she said, her head dropping. She looked back at her son and squeezed his hand. “I’m glad you were there. I’d be a mess right now otherwise.” Her thumb continued rubbing his hand, and questions started rising to the surface in my mind.

“Why were you there? I mean, you’re pretty far from the port.” She was a cruise ship entertainer—at least she was when I knew her. It was something she loved and swore she’d never give up. The port in the city was so far away, she’d had to have been purposefully visiting the Hudson area. It didn’t add up.

Georgia sighed. “Charlie was antsy after a few months at sea. I wanted him to have fun. We heard about the waterpark here, and while I was in the city, I decided to Uber out here and surprise him. It was just supposed to be a day trip.” I could see the worry lines on her face and knew she was blaming herself. This wasn’t her fault at all, though.

“Accidents happen, Georgia. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Again, my instincts kicked in and I reached for her knee. This time, I didn’t cringe, but she still shied away, so I retracted my gesture of comfort. I wanted to ask her about Charlie, if there was something she had to tell me, but I hesitated, and in that split second, Dr. Manning came in with Charlie’s X-rays in hand.

“Hello again,” he said, clipping the flimsy plastic negatives onto the light board. “I have some images to show you here, and Betsy will show you some more on the computer.” Betsy, an ER nurse, walked in just as he said her name and smiled at Georgia, moving straight to the computer mounted on the wall.

“So, what’s wrong? Why isn’t he waking?” Georgia scooted closer to me, as if drawing strength from my presence now instead of being uncomfortable. I didn’t move away as she had previously. I understood how nerve-wracking this had to be for her. She sat so close her thigh pressed along the length of

mine, so I put an arm around her to make space for her shoulder.

“Well, we have some things to discuss.” Dr. Manning reached for the light switch. “Shall I?” he asked, and Georgia nodded. The minute the lights were off, the backlit X-ray panel revealed devastating news. I saw it in a split second, and I knew what was coming as Dr. Manning opened his mouth.

“This here,” he said, pointing with his pen at a dark shadow on the image, “is the concussion. It doesn’t appear to be severe. You can see it again on the CT scan results Betsy has pulled up.” Georgia glanced at the computer but turned back to the doctor.

“Okay, so it’s not so bad. Why isn’t he waking?” Her lip trembled as her eyes scanned the image in front of her.

“This shadow here, though . . .” Dr. Manning pointed at the image again. “This is something a little scarier.”

I pulled Georgia against my side, willing my emotional strength to be there for her and support her. I felt her heart racing and her hands trembling. God, what I wouldn’t do to stop all of that from happening, to reverse time, to undo that image and make Charlie not be in that bed.

“This is a tumor.” Dr. Manning paused for a moment, sighing. “It’s very fortunate that we took these images because if Charlie had let this go any longer, we may have been dealing with something far worse.” He flipped on the light as Georgia moaned and whimpered. Her hand reached for Charlie’s again.

“What do you mean, a tumor? He’s fine. He’s healthy.”

Dr. Manning pulled up his stool and sat closer to us. I scooted back, keeping my arm around her as she trembled. “Sometimes, things like this don’t have symptoms, Georgia.” I tried to reassure her. There was no way anyone could have foreseen this. And Dr. Manning was right—this slip was a godsend. At least if they caught it early enough.

“You may have noticed things like Charlie’s balance being off, sometimes he’s slow to answer you cognitively, and maybe he has had headaches?” The doctor clasped his hands in front of himself.

“Well, he started leaning on the wall while he was walking, and maybe his grades have slipped a little over the past few months, but I just thought it was a new thing he was doing. Maybe he just struggled with the harder subjects.” Georgia’s cheeks had rivulets of tears streaming down them, which she wiped away repeatedly. I reached for a tissue from the box on the counter and handed it to her.

“Yes, those are very normal things for a child his age. But they are likely early symptoms. Now, we need to do a biopsy. This tumor looks like it will be operable, but if we don’t have to open him, up we won’t.”

“What?” she asked, shaking her head.

“He means they can probably operate to remove it, but if there is a way to reduce its size without surgery, that’s better.” I squeezed her again, and she leaned in to me.

“Surgery? But he just has a head injury.” I could tell she was in denial, that this was all too much for her, and I set aside any thought of trying to confront her about Charlie. I wasn’t about to do that to her now.

“Ms. Lane, Charlie needs to remain sedated now until we are able to do this biopsy. With the concussion putting pressure on his brain that was already being squeezed by the tumor, we fear he will end up with brain damage or other consequences—blindness, going deaf, loss of motor skill. He needs to remain perfectly calm so the concussion will heal quickly and we can reduce the swelling in his brain enough to do the biopsy. We are going to medically sedate him until we can get the biopsy done safely.”

Manning looked at me with a look that told me I needed to smooth this over. We were colleagues, and I knew how he worked. He wasn’t the sort of doctor who had a very good bedside manner, and I was. I also knew Georgia was a bit emotional at times—not at all a bad thing and definitely warranted in this situation—but I needed to keep her calm so Charlie would remain calm.

“Look, Geo, please just listen to what I’m saying.” She turned to look into my eyes at the mention of her old nickname. “We are going to take this one day at a time. We are going to make sure Charlie heals up and that he’s okay. We’re going to fight like hell, and he’s going to be okay.” I wanted so badly to cup her cheek, wipe away her tears, but it wasn’t my place. I wasn’t that man to her anymore. But right now, I could be a good friend, and I would pour everything I had into it.

She nodded, but the tears still fell. “Okay, Ben. I trust you.”

God, this was going to suck so much, but I had to swallow my pride and care for her. As long as she didn’t push me away.

Georgia

The smell of a hospital room always reminded me of the nursing home my grandmother lived in before she died. I hated it—the scents of bleach and medicine. It always made me nauseated, and I'd had to deal with it round the clock now for the past forty-eight hours. I sat holding Charlie's hand almost nonstop, pausing only to use the toilet. I even draped myself over the side of his bed to sleep just to be there for him. The doctors told me he could probably hear me and feel my touch and that if I sprayed my perfume on his pillow, it would put him at ease, so I did all of that.

The steady beeping of his heart monitor at least gave me peace. He was there, stuck inside his tiny body, unable to speak or respond to me because of the drugs they had given him, but he was there. I stared at his little eyes, watching his eyelids move as he dreamed of something. I wondered whether he was having a good dream or a bad dream, and the thought of his being scared made me squeeze his hand tighter.

Charlie was my world. He was the one good thing I'd done in my life, the one good thing that had happened to me in my adult life. When my parents stopped talking to me, Charlie was all I had. Now, he was here, his life on pause while we figured out what was wrong with him. It grieved me to watch him suffer like this. I'd have traded spaces with him in a heartbeat.

The door swung open and a nurse walked in, followed by Dr. Manning. I glanced at the clock, not realizing it was already late afternoon, which was when he did his rounds. He offered the same plastic smile today as he had

yesterday and the day before in the ER, then brushed his graying bangs out of his eyes and pushed his glasses up onto his head.

“How’s the little guy doing today, Mom?” As he had the past two times he visited, he stood at the foot of Charlie’s bed not doing much. His job was to look at the computer screen and determine what, if anything, had changed based on Charlie’s vitals, which is what he did the moment the nurse wheeled the computer cart over to him.

“Nothing has changed, though I think he’s dreaming more.” I yawned, exhausted. I hadn’t eaten since we got here, though Ben tried to force me to eat. If Charlie wasn’t eating, I wasn’t eating. Besides, how could I eat when my son was lying there potentially dying of cancer? That news was enough to bring on the worst fear of my life. I never knew my heart could hurt so much, be so scared.

“Well, that’s a good sign,” he said absently as he squinted at the computer screen. I wondered why he didn’t just put his glasses back on.

The nurse smiled at me, checking Charlie’s IV and resetting some of the machines. Nurses were the ones who did all the hard work, so I was surprised to see that Dr. Manning even made rounds. He could have done his job from the privacy of his office with a good internet connection.

“I’m still seeing some fluctuation in his brain activity. I think we’re still dealing with some swelling from that knock to the head. He’s going to have to stay sedated a few more days at least, maybe a week. We won’t risk going in there for the biopsy until the swelling has gone down.” He turned and crossed his arms over his chest and gave me a look only a father would give.

“You need to go home and rest. Eat, shower, take time for self-care. Charlie will be fine here, and wearing yourself out like this will only mean that you’re sick or too exhausted to care for him when he wakes up and needs you.” It was the first bit of genuine kindness I’d seen from the man, though I disagreed.

“I’m fine. I don’t really have a home here right now, anyway. I was just in town for a few days and this all happened.” Thinking about my real home—the Freedom Express cruise liner—made my heart hurt more. I hadn’t even taken time to call my boss yet, and she wasn’t going to be happy about this.

“Do you have a friend you can stay with? What about Ben Wilks? He lives nearby. I can make a few calls.” For a doctor, the man was a bit nosy, but he was right. I knew if I asked, Ben would put me up. I just didn’t want to ask. Not only did I not want to impose, but there were a lot of complicated

emotions between us—not to mention the massive elephant named Charlie Benjamin Lane whom Ben had probably rightly assumed was his son.

“Thanks, I can manage.” I looked back at my son, sleeping seemingly peacefully, and the doctor clapped his hands.

“Suit yourself. I’ve got a few other patients to check in on. We’ll just keep a close eye on your boy, and when he’s ready, we’ll get the next steps lined up and moving.” Dr. Manning headed out, and the nurse followed him silently. I leaned over the bed and laid my head down. Manning had a point. If I was so tired now, how would I feel in a few days? I needed to eat something, even if it broke my heart to do it. Charlie needed me to be strong and have energy for him when he woke up. First, however, I needed to call Halie and let her know what was happening.

I pulled out my phone and dialed her number, holding it to my ear. It rang through, and I chose her extension and she picked up. “Halie Pence, Director of Entertainment.”

“Hey, Halie, it’s Georgia.” I bit my lip, slightly on edge. “Got a second?”

“Sure thing. What’s up?”

I could just picture her seated behind her desk smacking her bubble gum, tapping her manicured fingernails on her desk. I hated letting people down, and the last thing I wanted was to lose my job. Charlie’s life was the most important thing, though, so I swallowed my nerves and just spat it out.

“Look, I’m in the hospital with Charlie. He fell and knocked his head really good at the waterpark a few days ago. He has to stay in the hospital a few more days at least, and there were a few complications.” Fear needled at my thoughts, but I pushed it away. I couldn’t let that fear consume me right now.

“Oh, gosh, is he okay?”

“It’s a concussion for sure, but they found something on the X-ray and scan. I don’t really want to talk about it much. I just need some time off. I’m not going to make it to the port tomorrow.”

Halie sighed and said, “Yeah, I totally understand that. Look, we have a backup in place for things like this, but she can’t do the whole summer.” I heard her typing, then she continued. “Your place on this ship is secure, okay? You’re family and we take care of family. I just have to figure things out or the big guys back in Florida will wring my neck.”

“I’m so sorry this puts you in a difficult position.” I wanted to cry. None of this should have happened. It wasn’t supposed to go like this. I was

supposed to be prepping my set list and nursing my vocal chords for a week of shows.

“No, you don’t apologize for anything. There is no way you could have known this would happen. Alright? Just keep me updated. I have to go. My workload just tripled. I’ll talk later, okay?”

“Sure. Bye, Halie.”

I hung up and clutched my phone in my lap. The hard part of that was over. Now I just had to face the fact that I couldn’t live in a hospital and I would be forced to speak to Ben again. He stopped by yesterday to check on Charlie, but the doctors were in here and the room was full. I expected him to come back, but he never did. I was neither upset nor relieved by that, but I did feel anxiety all day about what I’d say when he asked the inevitable question about Charlie’s father.

“Hey . . .”

Dread washed over me at the sound of his voice. I turned to see Ben walk in, and my insides spontaneously tied themselves into a knot. He hovered by the door for a second until we made eye contact, then he walked right in.

“Hey,” I said, then wiped the instant sweat from my palms onto my denim shorts. He looked handsome today, dark hair swept over his eyes. And his smile was one of compassion, not the sort he used to give me that spoke of how badly he wanted me in his bed. Though, this situation hardly allowed room for flirting or a reunion of lovers. What sort of mother would I be if I neglected my child to rekindle a flame with a man I used to love? Especially with the secret I’d kept from him for so long.

“Dr. Manning called me.” He stepped closer, pushing his hands into his slacks. The white coat he wore made his bronze skin look even darker, like a Mediterranean god or something. I never forgot how good-looking he was. I’d just forced myself not to think of him for so long that it was like seeing him again for the first time.

I stood and shook my head. “I told him not to bother you. I don’t need charity.” I understood he was just being kind, but I was mildly irritated by his interference. I could take care of myself.

“He was trying to help, Geo.”

“Please don’t call me that.” My old nickname and my current stage name was something Ben used to call me that I never let anyone call me except him. It stung. I loved that nickname when it rolled off his lips, but those lips lied to me and then they were gone, and I was left alone and pregnant. No, I

didn't want to hear him say that.

"Yeah, I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I didn't mean anything by that, okay?" He moved closer until his legs were pressed against the bed. I didn't know what to say. Just seeing him in the same room with Charlie made my heart feel like it would explode, both from desire that I never, ever gave up and also because I was terrified how Ben would react. He would be so hurt to know I hid Charlie from him. I never thought we'd see each other again.

"So . . ."

"So, Dr. Manning told me what orders he gave you, and I agree. You need to eat and rest. You should probably shower and try to get your mind off things. I've seen this so many times. Parents think they have to hover over their sick child and they don't take care of themselves, and it really takes a toll on them and the kid." He pulled his hand out of his pocket and dangled a set of car keys in front of me. "Let me take you to my place. It's big enough for you and me to share without things being uncomfortable. You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the couch. You'll feel so much better when you rest and eat."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. Live with Ben? Was he crazy? I was going through hell just standing in the same room with him for a few minutes and he wanted me to live with him?

"I don't know, Ben. I'm . . ." I shrugged and looked down at my hands, wringing them. I lied to him, hid his son from him for nearly a decade. Shame swirled in my chest. My throat constricted, mouth drying out like the Sahara.

"I do know. And I think you need to let me help you. Where else are you going to go? I mean, there is the Ronald McDonald house . . ."

I scrunched my nose up. It wasn't that I was too good for a place like that. I just wanted to be with Charlie. But my stomach grumbled. It had been doing that for hours now. I was starving, and Ben heard it.

"So, it's settled? My place? How about we go wherever your things are and you can put a bag together for you and Charlie when he wakes up? Then I'll get you some dinner and you can shower and sleep." He stepped backward toward the door. He wasn't making things awkward at all. He was being a good friend. All of the anxiety and weirdness between us was in my head.

"Alright. I'll go." I reached down and squeezed Charlie's hand then kissed it. "Mommy will be back, baby. Okay? You sleep and dream of happy

things.” I brushed the hair out of his eyes and kissed his forehead. “I love you, sweet boy.”

Walking out was so difficult, and I hated myself for leaving him, but I knew he needed me to be strong, which meant eating and sleeping. Now, if my anxiety would go away so I could sleep, that would be amazing.

Ben

When I told Georgia to get a bag of her things, I assumed she'd come back with a suitcase. She didn't. She had two modest grocery bags with clothing in them, a toothbrush for each of them, and a different pair of shoes for herself. I wanted to warn her that with the tumor, she may end up staying in Hudson a while, but I held my tongue. If it came down to it, I'd pay to have her things shipped here or buy her new ones.

"So, you live here?" she asked me, craning her neck skyward as we walked toward the high rise.

"Yeah, the fourteenth floor. I have a small two-bedroom apartment, and I turned one of the bedrooms into a home office." I opened the door to my building and held it for her. She breezed past me into the cooler air, and I let the door swing shut as I hurried to push the elevator button.

"Seems like an expensive place." She held her bags, one in each arm, and adjusted them. I offered to help, but she insisted on doing it herself.

"Well, on my salary, I manage." The elevator doors slid open and we stepped in. She was quiet, not like I remembered her. She used to be bubbly and talkative, though the situation with Charlie probably had her down. I tried not to stare at her, but my eyes kept being drawn to her face. Just as beautiful as the day we met, despite the fine aging lines collecting at the corners of her eyes.

"You lived here long?" she asked, watching the numbers on the elevator floor readout change. I hated this small talk. I wanted to wrap my arms

around her and tell her how much I missed her, how crazy it was that fate aligned our paths at that waterpark the other day. But I played along, answering her surface-level questions, because the real question burning in my gut had to wait. She was in no place mentally to deal with the stress of unburdening herself from the secret I believed she harbored.

“Oh, about two years, I guess. I had a smaller apartment across town for a while after college. Before that, I was in New York City in a dinky little studio. I hated that place, but it was home while I did my residency.” The elevator shook as it slowed to a stop and the doors slid open. “This way,” I told her, pointing. I led her to my door and opened it. I’d barely been home for days after having kept Lily while Owen and Harper were gone. Having the time off work was nice, but it came with consequences, a few of which were no energy to clean when I got off work and having to pick up extra shifts to cover for folks who were nice enough to cover for me while I was out.

“Oh, this is nice,” she said, setting her bags on the kitchen table to the left of the door. Her eyes roamed the room, and she moved toward the old Victrola I rescued from my dad’s estate sale when he passed. Mom wanted it gone because it reminded her of him too much, which was the exact reason I wanted to keep it. “Wow, this thing is old.”

Hank wobbled down the hallway on his arthritic legs and let out one yelp of hello, and Georgia jumped, startled by him. “Oh, he’s so cute!” She rushed over to the old rescue dog and dropped to her knees. A mix of some sort of wire-haired dog and a Jack Russel Terrier, he was mostly gray and partially blind now, but he was my pal.

“His name is Hank. I rescued him when someone left him stranded on the highway. Took him to the shelter, but they couldn’t find his owner. So I brought him home.” I shut the door and locked it and dropped my keys on the table next to her bags. I felt a twinge of embarrassment that Lily’s toys still lay strewn about on my floor. I hadn’t had time to clean much, so I walked around the sofa and picked up a few things, laying them on the old mahogany coffee table. Georgia was so enamored with Hank, I was able to pick up the rest of the Barbies and the blocks and toss them into the cardboard box Owen had brought them in.

“He’s so cute. I just love his little whiskers,” she mewed before standing up. “I never knew you liked dogs. I wish I could have a dog on the ship, but they’re off limits.”

Now this was the Geo I remembered. I felt an instant bond with her, the same one we had years ago.

“Yeah, well, he’s my little buddy.” I gestured down the hall. “You’ve seen the kitchen and living space here, so let me show you the rest of the apartment.” I led her down the hall, opening the doors on the left as we went. “This is the office. This one is the bathroom, and this one on the end is my bedroom. I guess it’s your bedroom for a while now.”

I turned and let her look into the room, and she stepped in. The curtains were open, allowing light to filter in. I’d left my robe draped over the foot of the bed, but other than that, the room was clean. The walk-in closet was shut, the bed made, and the dresser tops clear of things. It looked more like a guest room than a lived-in bedroom, but only because I had a thing about being tidy.

“You sure don’t live like a bachelor,” she said, brushing her hands over the red and black comforter. She turned and grinned at me. “I never pegged you for a neat freak, not after that tiny dump you had back in the day.”

“Ah, that place was a death trap and mostly because Gary insisted it was the cheapest place and we couldn’t afford anything else.” Memories of those pre-med-school days flooded in—sneaking Georgia in late at night to have sex, trying not to wake Gary up. My old roommate hated that I brought women home, mostly because he was gay and the thought of heteronormative sex made him cringe, but he also just thought I should be less promiscuous and more focused. Now I was beginning to think maybe he was right. Those saucy nights with Georgia only led me to heartbreak, the inability to date any other woman because I could never forget her, and maybe even a child.

“Gary was something else, wasn’t he?” She sat on the foot of the bed and sighed. “I think I want to rest a bit. Do you mind?”

“No, I don’t mind at all. I’ll get some lunch ready for you if you want? I can bring your bags in here too.”

“Sure, thank you.”

I left her to relax and retrieved her bags from the kitchen table. When I returned to the bedroom, she was using the toilet, so I just left them on the bed and went back to the kitchen. As I passed the office, I decided I would have to make some changes. I knew with things like Charlie was suffering from, that treatment would take weeks or months. He would want his own room to hang out in, which meant I needed to invest in a bed, at the very least. Maybe I would buy him a television and gaming system too, something

to make him feel more at home.

I prepared lunch, but thoughts of Charlie being my son bombarded me. There were a million logical reasons Georgia would have kept this from me, one of them being that he might not be my son at all and I was just overthinking things. Any one-night stand could have produced a baby, so who was I to think that just because we had dated roughly the same time Charlie had been conceived that he was mine? Still, as I put the finishing touches on some really delicious-looking ham sandwiches with cottage cheese on the side, I couldn't help but feel in my gut that she had just hidden this from me.

I shook the thoughts away and picked up the plate of food I'd prepared for her. If she was tired, maybe eating in bed would help her relax more. She hadn't come out, so I just assumed she had fallen asleep. Her stomach would hurt and keep her awake if she slept without eating, so I knocked lightly and opened the door, pushing it wide as I entered with the food.

Georgia stepped out of the bathroom, draped in only a towel. Her sandy-brown hair hung around her face, dripping on her chest, and her eyes went wide. She was gorgeous even without makeup on, always had been, and I found myself being aroused by the sight of her soaking wet and wrapped in a towel. The towel was a little small for a woman with her curvy figure, and the ends didn't quite meet each other, which left a portion of her thigh and hip exposed, and my eyes found that curve so sensual, I felt my dick swelling.

"I . . . uh, I'm sorry. I thought you were napping. I made you a sandwich." I rushed over to the bed and set the plate down on the nightstand. "I am really sorry."

She smirked at me, and I tried to hide the fact that I had a huge boner upon seeing her like this. She just stood there with her arms wrapped around her body, holding the towel up until I walked out of the room and shut the door. I gripped my cock through my slacks and tried to make it go down, but it had a mind of its own. A mind that wanted to go back into that room and remember how amazing she felt wrapped around me.

I walked out to the kitchen and took my plate, sitting down at the table to hide my erection in case she came out. I tried to eat, but the food stuck in my throat. I was supposed to be a friend to her, not make passes at her. She didn't need the complication of a messy relationship while she was here. She needed support and encouragement to care for her sick child. I had to control myself.

The bedroom door opened, and I heard her footsteps in the hallway and the jingle of Hank's dog tags as he followed her. She carried her plate and sat across from me, her hair now towel-dried and brushed. She wore a pair of loose-fitting shorts and a T-shirt, but based on the way her nipples pressed against the white fabric, I could tell she wasn't wearing a bra, which only made my arousal worse.

"I'm so sorry. I should have knocked and waited." I took a bite of my sandwich to prevent more babbling.

"Nah, it's okay," she said, smiling. "We've seen each other like that before." Her smile as she took a bite of her cottage cheese made me chuckle. "Don't worry about it."

I wasn't worried about it. Not even a little. But I had been able to contain my attraction to her this long only because every time we had been in the same room, Charlie was there. This was going to be difficult if for no other reason than I was helplessly in love with this woman I hadn't seen in eight years, and she had no clue. If she really had hidden the fact that Charlie was mine for this long, it meant she had been upset with me. Maybe she hated me.

And how was I supposed to make amends for the past now? Even if I did, she wasn't going to stay here in Hudson. I just needed to keep telling myself that she was off limits and not let my heart get carried away, no matter what secret she kept from me or how I felt about her.

Georgia

The show I was watching ended, and I flipped the TV off, too distracted by worrisome thoughts to focus on another show. My stomach growled too, my appetite returning. I'd spent a few hours at the hospital today with Charlie, but he was still sedated. After which, I came back to Ben's place to nap, but I had a bad dream and decided television sounded better. Now, I knew I had to eat. My stomach was protesting loudly.

I set the remote on the coffee table and got up, forcing myself to the kitchen. It had been years since I'd cooked a meal, most of the food on the ship prepared for me by cooks and served by waiters. I could cook. I just wasn't used to it. And cooking at someone else's house felt like an invasion of their privacy, but hunger demanded that I sate it.

I opened the fridge, seeing nothing of interest. Then I snooped through the cupboards until I found one with food, not dishes. Ben had several cans of soup, a couple of boxes of different types of pasta, a jar of spaghetti sauce, and a can of mushrooms. He might be the sort to keep a tidy home, but I could tell by the state of his pantry that he wasn't the sort to eat at home a lot. As a doctor, he probably ate a lot of his meals at the hospital cafeteria.

I thought for a minute about ordering takeout to be delivered, but I had to conserve what little money I had since I wouldn't be working this summer—at least, not if I didn't find a job. So I pulled the pasta sauce and a box of spaghetti noodles and placed them on the counter. I found a saucepan and a pot for the noodles and started cooking.

While I cooked, I listened to some music, singing along with the tune to keep my voice active and my vocal chords strong. It felt good singing just to sing, though I did miss the stage. I was so into the music that I never heard when Ben opened the door and walked in. I had my back to him, facing the stove and stirring the pasta, when he whistled and clapped his hands.

It startled me, and I turned around with a hand on my chest. “Oh, God, I never heard you come in.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” He set his bag down and draped his white lab coat over a kitchen chair then moved toward me. “You can sing. My gosh, I never knew what a great singer you are.” His smile coaxed one out of me and I had to hide a blush.

“I mean, it’s what I do for a living. They sort of pay me for it.” It always felt good receiving compliments from people, but when they came from someone I really wanted to hear them from, they did things to my heart. Ben had always been that person. His opinion had been the only one that mattered, which was why it hurt so much when he wasn’t there to encourage me anymore.

The sting of that last thought made my smile fade, and I turned back to the stove to hide how my own inner turmoil crushed me. I stirred the sauce as it warmed, the noodles almost done cooking.

“You made dinner? Gosh, that was so nice of you. I could have done this.”

I shrugged but didn’t turn around. He thought I was cooking for him, which was okay. I made more than enough to share. I just hadn’t planned on sharing because I didn’t think he’d be home this early.

“It’s almost finished.” I let him think I was cooking just for him because it made him happy. And anything I could do to keep him happy and not prying into my secrets about Charlie, I would.

“I’ll set the table, then.”

I heard him moving around, but I focused on the food, draining the spaghetti and adding some butter so the noodles didn’t stick together. It felt awkward, the two of us working side by side together without speaking. I wondered if he thought it was awkward too, us back together in such a weird dynamic. And given how he walked in on me just out of a shower the other day, I wondered if he felt as challenged by my proximity as I did his. It dredged up emotions I thought I’d buried years ago.

“You cooked. let me serve it up,” he said, reaching for the spaghetti

spoon, so I handed it to him.

I sat down and waited as he dished up a bowl of spaghetti and drizzled sauce over it. He reached into the fridge and pulled out some Parmesan cheese and handed it to me. He remembered how I loved it, which was sweet. He was sweet like that all the time, and it was one of the reasons I fell in love with him. It was also one of the reasons I was feeling so guilty now. I had lied to him for eight years, hidden his son because I got hurt by his leaving me.

I felt like a horrible person. The guilt that swelled in my gut ruined my appetite, and I had to force myself to take a bite. It was delicious food. I was just too burdened to enjoy it now.

“So, how is Charlie today? I stopped by his room but he was still out.” Ben sat across from me and dug into his food, clearly not bothered with the same emotional weights I was.

“I sat there for a few hours. There was no change. I wasn’t there for rounds, but I’m sure the doctors will call me if anything changes. I want to be there when he wakes up.” The topic of Charlie would be one that came up every single day, but every time it did, it made my stomach churn. I wondered when would be the time that Ben asked me if he was Charlie’s father. I assumed he was already thinking it and just holding off because of Charlie’s situation.

My gut told me I should just be honest with him, but I was terrified he’d hate me. I was also terrified he’d take Charlie away from me. I didn’t think for a second that Ben would really take him, just that he would want visitation and to have Charlie around, which would mean I either had to give up my job or be long periods without my son. It was all too overwhelming to even think about. I had to focus on staying mentally in the game for when Charlie woke up.

“I’m sure they will.” Ben wiped his mouth and looked around. “Forgot the drinks. Want a soda? Glass of wine?”

Wine was the last thing I needed. Ben’s proximity made me feel vulnerable. We used to have an intimacy between us that I still wanted to lean into. I didn’t need my inhibitions lowered to the point that I caved in and let my guard down. Ben was my addiction, the thing I could never say no to. I still loved him, but I knew I couldn’t stay here.

“Water is fine.” I took a bite of food and chewed slowly as he got up and poured himself a glass of wine and got me a glass of water. He set it in front

of me then sat back down, sipping from his stemware. “So, I have a question.”

“Sure,” he said, putting his glass down.

“What happens if it’s cancer?” The words choked me, a lump forming. I knew Ben would give it to me straight. He wouldn’t sugar coat things or give me false hope. And that’s what I needed—reality.

“Well, first of all, there is a very good chance it’s nothing. We see this in kids sometimes. It happens a lot near growth plates. An intracranial osteochondroma is nonmalignant but can be life-threatening in the brain if left untreated. Or if it’s a glioma, we’re talking some very scary treatments—chemo, radiation.” He waved his fork in the air as he talked, but I didn’t understand a word he said. My look of confusion must have communicated that to him because he clarified things for me.

“Tumors are just a mutation of the normal cells in the human body. Some are cancer. They grow rapidly. Some aren’t.” He set his fork down and reached out and took my hand. “Ben is going to be fine, Geo. We caught this very early, even if it is cancer. I’m going to do everything in my power to have the best doctors on his case, okay?”

I let him hold my hand for a second before pulling away. I felt tears welling up. It was reassuring to know Ben was so knowledgeable about this topic. “Thank you,” I told him, blinking back my tears. He was such a good man. He didn’t deserve my lies. He deserved to know everything. I had to face the music, if not for Ben, then for Charlie. Because Charlie deserved to know his father and what an amazing man he was, even if I wasn’t able to trust him again.

“Ben . . .” I said, gathering the courage to tell him about his son. But as I said his name, he spoke too, picking up his empty bowl.

“I think I’m going for a shower.” He stood, carrying his bowl to the sink. “You want me to do the dishes?”

He turned his back to me, and I assumed he hadn’t heard me mutter his name. “Uh, no. I’ll put leftovers away and clean up.” His glass of wine tempted me. I wanted to pick it up and down it to squash my nerves, but Ben had one better. Some comic relief was what I needed, and he was the best at that.

“Now, don’t be walking in on me like I did you.” His chuckle sent a shiver up my spine. The idea of seeing him naked made me shudder.

“You know, we’ve seen each other like that before, lots of times, if I

remember correctly.” I felt a smirk stretch across my face as I remembered a time years ago when he did a comical striptease for me, swinging his dick around like it was an elephant’s trunk. Such a comedian, this one.

“Ah, so you want to see me naked, then?” He turned around and winked at me, and I felt the heat in my cheeks from arousal. “I think we should keep things tame for now. Maybe when Charlie is feeling better, we can explore the past.” He patted my shoulder as he walked past, but I couldn’t help one more comment that escaped because despite everything that happened, Ben and I still had chemistry. I stood and caught his hand.

“Wonder if this still fits . . .” I balled his fingers into a fist, and he turned with a look of lust in his eyes I hadn’t ever seen. Before I knew it, his lips were on mine, spreading my mouth open as his tongue searched me. I didn’t even need the wine to loosen me up. Just being in the same room with him had my inhibitions running for the hills.

His lips were just as smooth, teeth just as sharp. He nipped at me, pulling me against his body, and for a moment we were back in that tiny apartment on Lane Street with nothing but our desire and our youth. His hands gripped my curves, and I melted into him, wrapping my arms around his neck. I missed this. I missed him.

“Shit,” he said, pulling away. He pressed his forehead to mine and whispered, “I’m sorry, Geo.” Then he backed away. “Won’t happen again.”

His hand held mine as he backed away until our grasp broke and my arm fell. I watched him walk into his bedroom, then heard the bathroom door shut. I stood there until the water was running . . . and so were my tears. It hurt. Everything hurt—my heart, my body, my thoughts. That kiss broke the damn of anger and pain I’d held back every day of Charlie’s life since the moment that pregnancy test came back positive.

Ben Wilks destroyed my heart. I came back to port to find his room empty, no note, no forwarding address, no new phone number. I’d loved him, and he left me. I had a month-long cruise, and then I was going to take the summer off and be with him, see where we would go with our relationship. I’d have given it all up for him, but he just left. I heard later through his roommate that he’d been given a chance to mentor with some of the top doctors in the country. I knew he was on that list because he told me, but it was a waiting list in case someone backed out. I had no clue they would call him and give him the last-minute slot.

I sank onto the kitchen chair sobbing. I was angry with him. The hurt had

piled up for years, and I'd never spoken a word about it. Not even to myself. I didn't think I'd even cried except for that first day, or at least not when anyone could see me. But he was back in my life now and the pain was flooding back in. Questions like why wasn't I good enough? Why didn't he at least leave a note? I deserved a note or an explanation.

Those were the reasons I never told him about Charlie.

Maybe I shouldn't tell him about Charlie at all. Maybe he didn't deserve it. That's what my anger told me. But my heart whispered, *But Charlie deserves it*, and I cried harder. I still loved Ben, but I couldn't be with him. Not after what he did. I'd just have to find a way to give Charlie the life he deserved without letting my heart be hurt again.

Ben

I picked a clean outfit and locked myself inside the bathroom as quickly as I could. That kiss made my dick so hard it hurt. I hadn't had an erection like that in ages, and even when I turned the shower water to straight cold water, it didn't go down. Georgia did that to me. She always had. So instead of fighting it, I went with it. I stood beneath the flow of water and heated it back up and touched myself.

At first it was just physical, stroking myself to try to get release so the blood would leave my lower appendage and I would have relief. But when I closed my eyes, I saw her face. She was there, on her knees, stroking me while she licked the tip of my cock. Her mad grin and the ruby lipstick she wore always drove me nuts. So I pictured that too, her licking and sucking, stroking.

I almost came then. I thought of her full lips wrapped around my length, her tongue exploring the veins and the ridges. I nearly lost it. But I held off, stroking faster, harder. I saw her standing, her legs spread, her panties pulled to the side and her fingers dipping in and out. I thought of her body, the curves, the softness of her skin, how she always smelled like vanilla and strawberries.

Georgia liked it kinky too. She liked when I used four fingers, sometimes my whole fist. And she loved using toys and other things to really spice things up. I pictured one specific night when we had sex four times in a row, nearly wearing me out. She had a set of handcuffs, a black leather whip, and

a black vibrator. I thought of how she giggled, spreading her legs and telling me to whip her while I came inside her. The way her body looked in that leather thong she wore.

I thought of her moan, high-pitched and sexy, the moan she let out when she came. I thought of her body curling in pleasure, her breasts jiggling. God, her tits were amazing. I pictured my dick sliding between them as she stuck her tongue out trying to drink the precum from its head as I ground against her body.

We had sex in every position, in every room of that apartment, even on the kitchen table. Each image that flashed in my mind drove me closer to the edge. I teased myself too, keeping my body right on the edge of climax for as long as I could. I knew the buildup would make the release more pleasurable, and the better the release, the less likely I'd have this problem again anytime soon.

I could feel my balls tightening and my cock throbbing. I thought of her riding me, wrapped around me, her perfect breasts bouncing, her fingers roaming over my chest. I thought of her grabbing my shoulders and pulling me into her, screaming my name. I could picture how she'd look, her lips parted, her eyes closed and her hair a mess.

I thought of her slipping her hand into her panties, her fingers finding her clit and rubbing furiously. I thought of her getting tired of that and using the vibrator, the wand that had brought her so much pleasure. I could picture her biting her lip, her cheeks red, using the toy to push her to the edge. I could picture the toy pressed against her clit, her back arched and her mouth open. I could imagine the intense pleasure she felt as she came, her body wracked with sensations.

I could imagine it. I could see it. I could almost feel it. Pressure built in my groin, and I could feel myself getting close. And then, as I stroked with my eyes closed, I pictured Georgia, her body wracked with pleasure, and she was screaming my name, her eyes closed and her fingers pressing deep into her pussy.

I came. I came hard, and I came long. She was there, in my mind. In my heart. Everything was okay.

I opened my eyes. My heart was racing. I was panting. The water was growing cold, but I felt alright. I felt better than alright. I felt free. I let my shoulders relax, squeezing the remaining cum from my dick. It clung to my hands, and I cupped some water to toss on the shower curtain and rinse the

evidence of my release away. She didn't need to find that there later on.

As I washed up, I continued to think of her. All those times we had sex, and she never thought for a second that I'd be interested in knowing she had gotten pregnant? I wondered which time she had conceived and where I was when she took that test. She knew there was a chance I'd get accepted to that program in New York, and when the call came, I didn't have time to wait for her. There was no way for me to contact her on that ship at sea, so I just left. I wished it had been different, but back then, we hadn't even defined what we were.

I rinsed my hair and shut off the water, stepping out to dry off. The mirror was fogged with steam, but I didn't want to look myself in the eye anyway. I knew she had to have been hurt. Once I got to New York, everything happened so fast. I had no time to think about the life I'd left behind. I talked to our friend group a few times, but they all went their separate ways too, and Georgia was on a ship. She never looked back, at least not from what the gang told me.

I found out she'd stopped by to see me, but I wasn't there and she left crying. Then I found out she signed on for a six-month stint on the Royal Caribbean line and was never heard from again. I missed her. It broke my heart the way things ended, but I always believed she wouldn't be tied down. If I had stayed there with her in Florida, I'd have missed my opportunity to work with the greatest minds in medicine at the time. And she would have been out on a boat all the time, anyway. I needed more from a relationship. I wasn't afraid of commitment. I just wanted full commitment that neither of us could give. We were young and ambitious. Now, I just felt like a fool for letting her go.

I dressed, expecting Georgia to be watching television or preparing for bed, but when I walked into the living room, she was gone. A note lay on the kitchen table where previously, there had been dirty dishes. She'd done them, or at least loaded them into the dishwasher, and the note indicated she went to be with Charlie. It was probably a good thing. After that kiss, I knew we would have a very awkward evening together. I shouldn't have done it, but she was too tempting.

My heart was heavy with so many emotions. I sank onto the couch wishing I could just ask her about Charlie, but I knew how a situation like the one she was in could affect a parent. I'd seen it too many times as a doctor. It wasn't right for me to lay another burden on her shoulders. So I did the only

thing I could do. I called my best friend to vent.

“Hey, Ben. What’s up?” Harper sounded happy. I could hear Lily babbling in the background, playing with Owen.

“Not much,” I said, sighing.

“Uh-oh, you don’t sound happy. Need to come over for a dose of baby love?” she asked playfully. “How’s your friend? Mom told me about the waterpark.”

I looked at the fingernail file and bottle of nail polish on my coffee table, evidence Georgia had been in this room only moments before I walked in. She was so close but so far, and there were so many obstacles between us—words left unsaid.

“I think she is okay. I think her son is going to be alright too. we just have to wait and see.” I propped my feet up on the table and lay back on the couch.

“Well, that doesn’t sound bad. Why are you upset?” Harper could always tell when I was upset. It felt awkward calling to talk to her about a woman given the fact that for the past year I’d been telling her to stop setting me up with women. I had given up on trying to replace Georgia in my heart. No woman would ever measure up to her. I’d dated a few, but they weren’t what I wanted. Now I knew what I was missing, but I felt I had screwed things up too badly years ago to ever make that right. And there was the added complication of Charlie.

“So, you want the short story or the long story?” I forced a laugh, and Harper said something in the background to Owen. Then I heard the noise quiet, as if she had walked out of the room so she could give me her full attention.

“Tell me everything, bud.”

“Well, I told you about the friend whose son hit his head.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she was my old college flame, when I went to the University of Florida. Back then, she traveled a lot as a cruise ship entertainer, but when she was in port, we were like fire and ice.” I felt nostalgia creep up on me, but I continued. “So, she’s back in my life now like a jolt of lightning, and I’m having all these crazy feelings for her.” I pinched the bridge of my nose as I spoke. I hated myself for hurting Geo. Now I was about to confess to another woman what a jerk I was. I hoped Harper didn’t think less of me. I was just a kid, basically.

“So, what happened? I mean, that’s a good thing, right? She’s back?”

Maybe you can rekindle things.” Always the optimist, Harper still sounded upbeat.

“Yeah, well, she was out at sea and I left to come to New York. I never kept in touch. I think it hurt her pretty badly.” The weight on my chest felt like an elephant’s foot.

“So? You were young. That’s not so horrible. If she’s back and she’s single, just be honest about your feelings.”

“It’s not so easy, Harper. She has a child now. He’s eight. That means he was born roughly six months after I left Florida to come do my residency.” A thick tension made the silence unbearable as Harper put it together in her head. “Say something?” I said, feeling my chest tighten.

“So you think this kid is yours?” she asked, her voice suddenly quieter.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Either the kid is mine and she hid it from me for years or she cheated on me. I mean, it’s possible she had rebound sex and then had a premature baby, but I don’t think so, Harper. It’s really overwhelming me. I can’t even ask her because if I do and he is mine, it’s going to open a huge can of worms. She has so much on her plate right now. She doesn’t need that drama while her son is sick.”

I lay down on the couch, resting my head on the armrest and crossing my legs on the cushion. If I could sink through the floor and disappear, I would. Nothing was worse than admitting how much I’d failed—nothing, that is, except imagining how hurt she must have been to hide a baby from me. There was just no way he wasn’t mine. Georgia would never cheat on me. The longer I thought about it, the more I knew the truth.

“Okay, well don’t jump to any conclusions.” I heard her take a deep breath, which I knew meant she was thinking. I was so grateful for her. “I think you’re doing the right thing. Just give her space. Let her come to you with it. If you’re right, then she’s probably already feeling super guilty about it. She may also have some unresolved feelings or resentment. Pushing her might only make that worse. Just be supportive and caring. I’m here if you need to talk about it.”

“I figured you’d say that.” I turned on my side and stared at the nail polish on the table. I had a lot of time to make up for, and groveling might be the only way to do that. “I’m probably going to take you up on that offer to talk, because living with her in my home is really difficult. I’m so in love with her, Harper. I screwed up really badly. I should have never left her. She’s the reason I’ve been ruined for any other woman for the past eight

years.”

“Yeah, that’s a lot. Look, if you need anything, just call.”

I closed my eyes, refusing to look at Georgia’s things a second longer. It just made the guilt and the desire for her worse. Those two things warred against each other. I wanted her, but I didn’t deserve her one bit.

“Yeah, there is something. Can you have Owen have a look at Charlie’s imaging results? I can send them to him. I just want the absolute best doctor on this, and he’s the best in this entire region. I know he doesn’t do so many surgeries anymore, given his position, but it would mean the world to me. Even if Charlie isn’t my boy, he’s Georgia’s boy. And she is the love of my life even if I can’t have her.”

“Sure thing, Ben. I’ll tell him now. You take care. I have to get Lily to bed now, okay?”

I heard a door squeak and the sound of Lily’s laughter returning. “Thanks. I’ll talk to you later.” I hung up but remained lying there. Talking about things helped a little, but it also made them more real. How would I ever convince Georgia to open up to me? But how would I be okay with letting her leave with Charlie if I didn’t know the truth? And what if she never told me whether I was his father?

Georgia

The line was a bit longer than I'd have liked, but the small coffee shop was on the way to the hospital and I wanted a cup before I headed up to see Charlie. I stood in line behind a petite woman with dark, curly hair. She chatted with the woman in front of her about the cute handbag she was carrying. Apparently, it was a sale item at a huge clearance sale across town, and I loved it too, so when I got the opening, I cut into the conversation.

"Such a great find. It really is a cute handbag." I smiled at her as she turned to greet me.

"I know, right? And I can't believe it was half off!" Her kind green eyes relayed her enthusiasm. Striking up a conversation with a complete stranger wasn't always a good idea, but being in Hudson away from the ship, I felt lonely.

"Half off, that's incredible." I chuckled. "The only thing I've gotten half off is my balance. I'm a klutz at times."

She snickered again and said, "You're not from around here, are you?" Her eyes narrowed in a curious way, and I shrugged as she turned fully to talk to me.

"You're right. I'm not. I actually live on a cruise ship." I didn't really know how much to share, and at the risk of being seen as stuck up, I opted to not overshare. "You must be a local, then."

"Yeah," she said, her eyes sparkling. "What brings you to Hudson?"

That was a loaded question. She just didn't know it. "Actually, my ship

was in port and I wanted to take my son to a water park. He took a spill while we were there, and he's at Hudson Medical now." I tried to act casual, but my heart wilted every time I thought of Charlie. The hustle and bustle of the crowded coffee shop, however, interrupted the conversation, forcing us to move forward in line. The woman moved forward, then turned back to me.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I actually work at the hospital. I'm a doctor of internal medicine. Is there anything I can do?" The compassion in her expression was refreshing. People in this town were so friendly and kind. I felt welcomed here.

"Actually, probably not. He had a concussion which revealed some more troubling things." I bit my lip. I didn't want to talk about it, but I kept opening my big mouth. The barista waved at me, and I nodded. "I think it's your turn."

"Oh, yes!" Her smile returned as she moved toward the barista and placed her order. When she was finished telling him what she wanted, she nodded at me. "And whatever she wants too."

Shocked, I shook my head. "No, really, I can manage."

"Looks like you need a random act of kindness anyway," she said, sliding her card across the green countertop. The barista looked up at me expectantly.

"For you, ma'am?"

My eyes grazed over the menu and I sighed. "I guess give me a caramel macchiato and a bottled water." It didn't feel right taking so much charity from others, but I was thankful for her kind gesture. She paid the man, and we stepped up to the tall counter where drinks were served. "Thank you. That's very kind of you."

"Think nothing of it. Us ladies have to stick together. Now tell me about your son." She put her wallet back into her purse and readjusted it on her shoulder, watching me with intrigue. I figured it was a curiosity because she was a doctor and all, so I indulged her with details, leaving nothing out.

"So you see, Charlie has to have a biopsy and then they will be able to determine a course of treatment. In the meantime, I'm staying with an old friend." The words "old friend" choked me up, but I cleared my throat to disguise how I was feeling.

"Wow, that's rough. I'm so sorry you're going through all of that." She reached out a comforting hand to touch my arm as the barista called her name.

"For Mindy," he said, pushing two drinks across the counter. She smiled

and jerked her head that direction.

“That’s me.” Mindy collected the drinks from the counter and read the cups, then handed one to me. “Here you go.”

“Thank you again. It’s really kind of you and it makes me feel welcomed here in Hudson. I’m not really from around here even if I didn’t live on a ship. My hometown was in Florida, but now I just don’t have a home.” Even as I said the words I knew I sounded pathetic, which isn’t how I wanted to come across, but my social awkwardness prevailed again.

“It’s okay . . .”

“Georgia,” I said, thrusting my hand out.

“Well, Georgia. It was really nice meeting you. I really hope things turn out okay for you and Charlie. Your friend is really nice for letting you stay with him. I hope that all works out well too.” She sipped her coffee and smiled over the rim. “I’m off to work now. Maybe we’ll see each other around.”

“Yes, thank you. I hope we do.” I watched Mindy walk away and felt a little lighter for having unburdened myself a bit. I took a sip of my coffee and started for the hospital.

It was overcast but not raining, a break from the heat of the sun the past few days. Today was the day they would wake Charlie up from his medically induced coma. It was a bittersweet day for me because I’d get to see the light in my little boy’s eyes again, but it meant one moment closer to learning whether he had cancer, which I was terrified of. The thought of that diagnosis slowed my steps, and I meandered down the sidewalk beneath the low-hanging branches of trees, reluctant to enter the facility.

No parent wants to see their child suffer, and if I could have, I’d have taken the tumor upon myself just to spare him the pain and suffering. But that wasn’t how fate had decided this would go, and my heart was heavy as I pushed the button on the elevator to ride up to Charlie’s floor.

When the bell dinged and the doors opened, I trudged with an empty coffee cup in hand down the wide hallway. My sneakers squeaked on the floor, passing by room after room with young children in them. Each face I saw haunted me, pushing me further into my worry and anxiety. I reached Charlie’s room a shaken-up mess. I wished Ben were here to hold my hand while I got the news, but he had rounds to do, and I had insisted that I was an independent woman, capable of handling myself. I suddenly realized that I was not and that I needed emotional support.

I pushed the door open and walked into the room to see the nurse checking Charlie's IV machine. She waved at me with her fingers as I walked in. "How are you today, Georgia?"

I loved that this place made me feel like an individual and not just "Charlie's mom." It helped validate that I had feelings about this that most people would never understand.

"I'm okay. A little nervous today. I just don't know how to feel about the tests they want to do." I shuffled into the room and tossed the empty cup into the trash, then pulled my regular chair up to Charlie's bedside. He didn't even stir a little. His tiny little lips were chapped, the oxygen tube beneath his nose resting on his upper lip.

"Oh, they didn't call you?" she asked, turning around and placing both hands on the side rail of the bed. "They said he's ready for the biopsy, so they are going to push lifting his sedation tomorrow. He's getting ready to go in now." Her brown doe eyes frowned at me. "I'm sorry you didn't get that call."

My heart leapt up into my throat. "No, I must have missed it." I pulled my phone out of my purse, situated on my lap, and checked. Sure enough, there was a missed call from the hospital twenty minutes ago, while I was talking to Mindy at the coffee shop. If I had gotten that call, it would have made my walk to the hospital even more difficult, so I was glad I'd missed it.

"I'm sorry. Can I get you anything? They'll be coming to get him in just a short time now." The nurse, whose name I didn't know, pursed her lips into a frown and waited for me to answer. The only thing I needed was for my son to be better now so we could return to life and put this behind us.

"No, I'm okay." I sighed and took his hand and held it. His fingers were cold, likely from the IV solution pumping into his veins.

"I'm heading out, then. Push the call button if you need anything."

The nurse left, and I lowered my head to Charlie's bed, resting it on his leg. I had never felt more alone in my life than at that moment. Waves of sadness washed over me, mixed with happy memories Charlie and I had made over the years. He was too bright, too happy and full of life to be suffering this. I wanted to wave a magic wand and make him better.

A soft knock at the door had me sitting up. I expected Dr. Manning to be walking in, but this new stranger I did not recognize. He stood tall, more than six feet, with graying hair and eyes that shone with wisdom. He walked with confidence too.

“Hello, Mrs. Lane?”

“Miss,” I corrected, sitting straighter.

“Ah, my apologies. Miss Lane, my name is Dr. Thorpe. I am the head of surgery here at the hospital. I am here on a favor for Ben Wilks. He told me about Charlie’s condition and I looked over his files. Ben requested only the absolute best surgeon at the facility for Charlie’s care.” Dr. Thorpe looked down at Charlie with a sad smile. “It’s awful when things like this happen to young children like this, but I want you to know we are going to take the best care of Charlie possible.”

I couldn’t return his smile. There were no more fake emotions left in me. I was exhausted. “Thank you, Dr. Thorpe, for stopping by.” The fact that Ben would use personal favors to help me spoke volumes about the type of person he was, and that made me feel all the more guilty.

“You’re welcome. Now, if I understand correctly, we are waiting on a biopsy. In the meantime, I’ve looked at his previous scans and the tumor, whether malignant or benign, is definitely operable. I’ve done thousands of surgeries, dozens specifically like this one. Your boy is in good hands.” His eyes searched me and he stepped back. “I’ll let you visit now before they come and take him for his test, but if you need anything, feel free to ask for me.”

I nodded, not knowing what else to say. It was nice of Ben to ask his buddies to help, but nothing would erase the pain I was in. I just had to ride the wave and hope there was a God in heaven who could fix this, because I sure couldn’t. Not Charlie, not the past, not the lie I’d told Ben. I was drowning slowly, and it hurt like hell.

Ben

The door creaked as it opened, waking me. For a moment, I froze in place, thinking someone was breaking into my apartment, but then I remembered that Georgia was here and that she had a key. I had checked on her in Charlie's room before I left work for the day, but she was out for a bathroom break. When I got home, there was no note, but I knew she was at the hospital. I expected her home hours ago, so well after eleven p.m. surprised me.

I lay perfectly still in the darkness as she took off her shoes and shuffled through the room until I heard her snuffle. She was crying, and it broke my heart.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked, waiting for her to turn. She wiped her eyes and shook her head. The light was so dim, streaming in from the streetlamp outside my living room window, that I barely made out her frown. "Hey, come sit." I sat up, patting the sofa. I wore only my boxers, not so comfortable for this sort of conversation, but she needed me. I wrapped the blanket tightly over my waist and held her to my side the minute she collapsed onto the sofa cushion beside me.

"Ben, he's probably got cancer. They did the biopsy, and I just have to wait for the results." She sobbed hard, leaning against my chest, and I cradled her, rocking back and forth.

"Now, don't give up hope. You keep staying positive. We got this early on, Geo. Charlie is going to be okay." I forced the words out of my mouth,

but it was difficult. My own fears about Charlie, who he was to me, what all this meant, had piled up to the ceiling in my own heart. I meant what I said. I just had to convince myself to believe it too.

“How can you be so calm?” she asked, sniffing.

“I have to be here for you, Geo. You need me to be strong, and so I am.” I kissed the top of her head and held her more tightly. Her sobs lessened, but the sniffles continued. “You know, I’ve been in this profession for so long now, the things I’ve seen would amaze you. Medical science has improved so much over the past ten years and we save so many more lives. Please believe and trust me when I say, Charlie is going to be okay. It’s going to be a bumpy road, but I wouldn’t ever give you false hope. Okay?” Not after what I did to her in the past. Georgia deserved so much better than that, and I fully believed that things were going to be okay, even if my own doubts got the better of me sometimes.

“Okay, Ben.” She pushed away, straightening against my side, but she didn’t get up. “Thank you for being here for me, for taking me in.”

I didn’t feel like I was taking her in. I felt like I was helping a friend, but her gratitude warmed my heart. “I’d do it every day for the rest of my life if you wanted.” That came out wrong, but I wasn’t embarrassed by it. I’d made mistakes, but I still loved her. Even in this dark living room, where she couldn’t see the sincerity in my eyes, I wanted her to feel it.

“I miss you,” she whispered, but I heard it. I laced my fingers through hers, feeling the same way more deeply than she could imagine. There seemed to be this invisible wall between us and no matter how hard we tried to tear it down, it remained.

“I miss you too,” I said, squeezing her fingers in mine. There was a reason I never ended up marrying, and that reason was Georgia Lane. Still, even with her on my couch, I knew we had a very slim chance. She was bound to the sea, a traveler by heart, and I was a doctor, land-locked and needing the stability of a home and a job.

But when she turned and kissed my cheek, heat rushed through my body. None of that mattered. The tiny glimmer of hope that she could ever want me again burned in my chest like a forest fire. I didn’t turn to make an advance, despite wanting to. I was here to comfort her, not take advantage of her vulnerability, so when she rose up on her knees and kissed my lips, it shocked me. Her hands planted on my shoulders, her breasts pressing against my chest.

“Geo,” I said between kisses, “are you sure this is what you want? It could really complicate things.” I reached up and rested a hand on her hip, and she nodded, her mouth leaving mine for only a second.

“I’m sure, Ben. I want to feel like we used to feel. I want to feel safe.” Georgia crawled closer until her knees were touching my thigh. I continued to kiss her, knowing she was confused and hurting. I wasn’t sure this was really what she wanted, but it was definitely what I wanted. The problem was that if it wasn’t real on her end, if this was just her emotions getting out of control and her trying to make sense of what she was feeling and she dumped me later, it was going to hurt really bad.

I kissed her anyway, throwing caution to the wind, because she was worth it. Even if my heart was torn to shreds in the process, I would be what she needed in this moment and every moment in the future until she decided she wanted me or wanted to leave. And that was what I had to be.

“God, I missed you so much,” she said against my mouth, raising a leg to straddle me on the couch. I slid my hand under her shirt and up her back, feeling her smooth skin against the palms of my hands. I knew this was a bad idea. I knew I shouldn’t be doing this, but I couldn’t stop myself. Her body felt so good against mine, and her lips were so soft and sweet. I couldn’t resist her, no matter how hard I tried.

But what if she woke up tomorrow and regretted this?

I pushed those thoughts aside and focused on the moment. I didn’t want to think about the future or what might happen next. I just wanted to be here with her, in this moment, feeling her body against mine and her lips on my skin.

We continued to kiss, our bodies pressed together on the couch. My hands roamed over her back, feeling the curves of her body beneath her shirt. I wanted her so badly, but I knew I had to be careful.

As her leg brushed against my growing erection, I knew I had to slow things down. My mind was racing with the possibilities that lay before us, but I couldn’t let my desire cloud my judgment. I pulled away from her lips and looked into her eyes, searching for a sign of hesitation or uncertainty.

“Geo, we need to talk about this,” I said, my voice low and serious. “I don’t want things to get complicated between us. We have a lot of history and I don’t want to ruin that.”

Georgia’s expression softened and she placed a hand on my cheek. “I know, Ben. But I need this right now. I need you.”

She pulled her shirt up over her head and threw it away, and I was face to face with two of the most perfect breasts I'd ever seen. I'd forgotten. I pulled her against my face, lavishing her skin with kisses.

I pulled away and looked into her eyes. "Are you sure you want this?"

"Yes," she said, her voice soft and full of emotion.

We kissed again, the intensity of our connection growing with each passing second. She stood, stripping down to only her bra, and I folded the blanket back, untangling it from my legs. My dick was rock hard, ready for her, and there was no hiding it as it protruded from the slot in the front of my boxers. Her eyes looked straight down at it while she unsnapped her bra.

"I want this," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

I reached out and pulled her onto the couch, my hands exploring her skin. She settled over me and kissed me again, parting her lips to lick at mine. Her skin felt amazing against mine, warm and soft. Her pussy dripped with moisture, which she smeared on my cock as she ground against me. I took a nipple in hand, pinching and twisting it as she continued her assault on my mouth.

She guided one of my hands between her legs, and I massaged her clit, spreading her juices around. "Oh, Ben," she moaned, her breathing becoming labored. I moved my hand faster, feeling her getting closer and closer to orgasm. Then I thrust my fingers into her, finding the rough patch that brought her pleasure.

She let out a long, loud moan as her orgasm crashed over her. Her body jolted and shook as she groaned and panted. Her nails dug into my shoulders, head thrown back as she howled, and when she calmed, she reached down and took my cock in hand, stroking it. "I want this now," she panted, breathy words puffing out over my face. It felt like a dream, but it was real. Georgia was here with me, and she wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

She lifted her body up, and I held my dick upright as she slid down around me. It was glorious, the heat and moisture of her sex tensing around me. I could feel her heartbeat, and it was racing.

"Oh, God, Geo, I missed this," I whispered as I started thrusting. Her pussy clenched, tightening around me.

"God, Ben, make me come again," she moaned, but I heard the emotion in her voice. She was on the verge of tears. I wanted to back off, to slow down, but when I hesitated, thrusting more slowly, she rode me harder.

"This is what you want?" I asked again, feeling confused.

"Yes, I want you. Please, Ben . . ." Georgia kissed me again, harder, biting my lip. "I need you. Please."

I couldn't say no to her and I couldn't hold back any longer. I grabbed her hip with one hand and thrust up into her, pushing her over the edge into a second orgasm. She screamed my name and clung to me. Every strong contraction of her pussy around my cock pushed me closer to the edge.

"I don't have a condom," I grunted, trying to hold back. She hastily reached for her shirt, shoving it in my hand, and I knew what she wanted. The harder I thrust, the closer I got, and when I was on the edge, I growled, "Now."

Georgia lifted off me and I covered my dick with the shirt, spasming as my load blew into the fabric and not her. She hovered over me, waiting, and the moment my twitches ceased, she lay across my chest, pressing the shirt to my dick with her pussy. I held her, my heart pounding and my body hardly sated. I wanted her body around mine when I blew, but this was the way it had to be. Probably better for now.

We lay there in silence, enjoying the moment until both of us were calm. I knew it wouldn't last forever, that eventually, we would have to deal with the consequences of what we had done, but for now, we were in our own little bubble and I was content to stay there forever. When she sat up and looked down at me, I pushed the hair out of her face.

"Hold me?" she asked, and how could I say no?

"Of course," I whispered. I rose and followed her to the bed, filled with emotion I didn't want to hold back. She curled up under the covers, and I held her, our skin pressing together in a way that made my heartbeat regulate and my emotions calm. "I love you," I said beneath my breath, but I'd never say it aloud, at least not yet.

Georgia was an enigma, and I had no way of knowing what just happened except that I wanted to give her anything she wanted. I just wanted her to want me in return. My heart clung to the hope that this wasn't some cruel joke fate was playing on me, and even if I was wrong and Charlie wasn't mine, even if Georgia had cheated on me or rebounded within days of my leaving, I still loved her. I still wanted her.

I just had to take it one day at a time.

Georgia

I sat in the small corner booth near the back of the little coffee shop, hugging my cup with my hands. After more than a week of torture—waiting on the lab results to come in—today was the day I would learn if my son had cancer. I stared at the image on the wall, a small child with an umbrella kicking a ball through a mud puddle. I wanted to feel like that child again, carefree and able to dance in the rain, but adulthood had brought with it levels of stress I hadn't imagined.

The shop was busy again today, as it had been every day this week. Today, however, I opted to stop and sit for coffee while I knew Charlie would still be sleeping. Ben left very early this morning without so much as a goodbye, but it was okay. It wasn't like he owed me. Sure, we had sex last week, but everything had been normal since then. We hadn't even spoken of the act. When I woke up the next morning, I was alone in the bed and he was on the couch. I didn't even know what I was feeling, anyway. The situation presented itself to me and I needed comfort. I just found comfort in the only arms nearby, and those arms were Ben's.

My heart sank at that thought too, that I might be leading him on when I knew full well I'd be leaving on that ship in a month or so. But we had never labeled the relationship. Not once did he ask me to consider being serious with him. We had sex and coexisted, and nothing more. Still, my heart was tangled up with his, and now with Charlie in the picture, it made things messy for me. I should never have kissed him, because deep down, I knew on

my part that it was love. But I didn't think for a second that Ben would want anything more than that, even if he knew Charlie was his.

The steady line of coffee seekers continued as my cup cooled and I sipped it. I missed the hustle of a town. It was quite different from long lines of entitled passengers on cruise ships complaining that their room wasn't tidy enough or that their food was cold. This laid-back feeling was growing on me, and I would miss it when I left to return to life as I'd known for the past ten years. Long before Charlie was even a thought in my mind, I knew sea life was the only life for me.

"Hey, Georgia!" A familiar voice perked me up, and I pushed away my thoughts. Mindy strolled up to me carrying a cup of coffee in one hand, a bagel in the other, and her purse hanging from her shoulder. She was dressed in blue scrubs today, her hair neatly tied back into a braid.

"Oh, hey, Mindy. Want to sit?" I gestured at the bench across from me in the small booth, and before she even answered she was on the way down.

"Sure." She sat and put her coffee on the table, letting her purse droop to the bench next to her. "Thanks. I needed a little more than coffee this morning. I don't want to walk and eat, so I was going to sit down and I just noticed you over here. How are things going?" Mindy took a large bite of her bagel and smiled at me as she chewed. She seemed the eternal optimist type, which usually wasn't my type at all, but with the way things had been going, I needed more optimism.

"Well, today is the day we learn the results of the biopsy, so I'm feeling anxious." I twisted the cup between my hands, spinning it around and around. Voicing my nerves only made things worse because it forced me to focus on the fact that this wasn't some faraway thing. It was a reality in my current day.

"That's tough." She reached out and grasped my wrist, squeezing gently before letting me go. "Do you have someone who will be there with you when you get the news?" Her eyes were full of compassion as she spoke.

"Yeah, Ben will be there. He's the friend I told you about who is letting me crash at his place." I shrugged one shoulder. God, what I wouldn't do to be able to talk about that messy situation and ask her what she thought. I just didn't want to look like a horrible person because I'd kept Charlie a secret.

"That's good. I'm glad you have someone." Mindy pulled a napkin from the dispenser on the table and wiped her mouth. "I can go with you if you think you need some more moral support."

The offer was very kind, but I couldn't ask her to delay her work for me. "Thanks, Mindy, but I think Ben being there is enough." I thought about it for a moment. Mindy seemed to have so much compassion, and I didn't know if it was because she was a doctor or if she had some similar experience. "Do you have any kids?"

Mindy's eyes widened, and she stared at me hard, then her head dropped. I felt like a fool. I'd dredged up something she didn't want to talk about. I could see it in her eyes. She took a drink of her coffee and her expression resolved to sadness.

"I don't now."

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize—"

"It's not like that." She took a deep breath and sighed, then her eyes met mine. "I was sixteen years old, on track to be valedictorian. I fooled around with a guy one night and ended up pregnant. I was really torn because I would never, ever get rid of my baby, but my parents were very unhappy. I wanted to keep him but they insisted that I abort. I ended up carrying him to term and gave him up for adoption. As part of that agreement, I wasn't allowed to know who the adoptive parents were." She looked back down at her hands.

"I'm so sorry that happened." Feeling her pain, I reached out and held her hand. "That must have been one of the most difficult things you have ever felt."

Mindy nodded. "It was, but maybe it was for the best. I was only a child myself, and there was no way I could provide for a baby, let alone finish my schooling and start my career. Wherever he is, I hope he is happy and healthy." She looked back up and smiled at me. "So I'm not an expert in how it feels when your child is hurting, but I can imagine."

Her pager went off, and she dug through her purse for a moment, reading something on the screen. "Listen, I have to get to work, but it was really nice talking to you." She pulled out a card and slid it across the table. "Here is my number. I want to keep in touch while you're in town. You need anything, you call me. Got it?" She stood, picking up her purse, coffee, and bagel, and I nodded.

"Of course. It really was great talking with you. Thank you for sharing your story. I believe great things are in store for you soon." I waved as she said goodbye and walked away, then I finished my cold coffee and stood too. It was time for me to find out what was going on with Charlie so I could

make a decision about our future.

My walk to the hospital today wasn't as dreadful. After hearing Mindy's story and seeing how she'd moved on, I felt a little more at ease. Bad things happened to people all the time, but that didn't mean things were life ending. And Ben had given me such hope that Charlie would be fine, which didn't put a skip in my step, but it eased the burden off my shoulders.

I walked into the tiny office building housed inside the hospital and sat down in one of the chairs in the waiting room, and moments later, Ben walked in. He offered a concerned smile and walked straight over to me and sat next to me.

"How are you doing?" Ben grabbed my hand and held it in both of his.

"I'm okay, actually. I think I'm feeling like things are going to be alright." I pulled my hand away from Ben's, not because I didn't want him to hold it. I just didn't want him to get the wrong idea. "Look." I nodded at the door as I saw the nurse walk out and smile at me.

"Ms. Lane, the doctor will see you now."

I stood with Ben at my side, and we followed the nurse down the hallway to a small office where Dr. Manning and Dr. Thorpe were seated at a table. As soon as I saw Ben's friend, the surgeon, my heart sank. I knew it wasn't good news. My gut churned as Ben gripped my hand more tightly and we sat. Despite my not having told him Charlie was his son, he was just as emotionally invested in this as I was. He'd even taken time out of his workday to meet me here when I knew he had rounds. It was as if he knew already, and secretly, I didn't mind. If he already knew, it was less pressure on me to tell him, and judging by the way he was acting, he wasn't upset.

"Please have a seat," Manning said as we adjusted our chairs. When we were sitting, he started with his small talk. I waved him off with a hand.

"Can we just get the results? I'm so anxious I might vomit." I felt Ben squeeze my hand even more tightly. I thought he might break my fingers. I winced and pulled away, and he grimaced.

"Certainly," Dr. Manning started. "We have the results of the biopsy back. You'll be very pleased to know it is not malignant. That means no chemo or radiation."

"Oh, thank God," I wheezed, feeling tears already leaking from my eyes. I put my hand over my mouth and cried in relief while Dr. Thorpe took over the conversation.

"This is a meningioma, which is a tumor that sprouts from the meningeal

lining of the brain and spinal cord. They are actually common and very rarely cancerous.” He pressed his fingertips together into a tent shape and pursed his lips. I got the feeling that this wasn’t the end of things. Why would the surgeon be here if we didn’t need him?

Ben’s arm shot out around me, and he pulled me against his side just as he had done last week on the couch. I felt feelings of comfort and attraction to his strength, but I was confused. I just got good news. Why would I need this?

“Charlie is going to need surgery, Ms. Lane.” Dr. Thorpe’s voice grew lower, more compassionate. “There is a risk that he could end up paralyzed or have other serious side effects if the surgery is not successful.”

“But you said it’s not cancer.” I clenched my hands together, finding myself scooting to the edge of the chair.

“Geo . . .” Ben cooed, holding me tightly. “Let him finish.”

“Yes, there is no cancer, which is a very good thing.” Manning cut in and offered a pamphlet with the word “meningioma” on it. I glanced at it as I took it, but I wanted to hear from them, not from some pamphlet. “If it had been cancer, we’d have been looking at very intensive treatments that could have put Charlie at risk for so many worse things. This is operable.”

“Okay, so we operate then?” I chewed on the inside of my lip. “What if we don’t? It’s not going to spread, right?”

“Ms. Lane . . . Georgia, if I may?” Dr. Thorpe’s voice softened. I nodded. “Georgia, if we don’t operate, this tumor will continue to grow. Charlie will continue to have pressure in his brain. It will affect his ability to grow and develop. It will cause side effects in his motor skills. Eventually, it will cause death.”

“Death? But it’s not cancer,” I whimpered.

“Geo, what Owen is trying to say is there isn’t enough room inside Charlie’s skull for the tumor and his brain to both function, but the tumor will not stop growing. It has to be taken out. With that come certain inherent risks.” I turned to face Ben, now feeling just as afraid as I had of the cancer.

“Risks?”

“Yes, and being paralyzed or having developmental delays or setbacks are some of them.” Ben’s eyes searched mine.

“I’m going to handle the surgery myself personally,” Owen said, tapping his finger on the desk.

“Owen is the best in the state, Geo,” Ben reassured me, and I nodded at

him. I just wanted this over. I wanted my boy back. I wanted him to be healthy and smiling now.

“How soon? Can we do it this week?” I turned back to the doctors and they frowned in unison.

“His brain has to heal from the concussion fully, four to six weeks before we can run more tests and schedule the surgery.” Dr. Manning was curt, not at all compassionate like Dr. Thorpe. I preferred the surgeon.

My chest tightened at the thought. Not only was Charlie going to suffer, but now I had to tell Dana I would be away from the ship until at least August, maybe later. I sat there letting the news sink in. It was bittersweet and I was torn. I needed relief from all of this stress so badly, but I had to hold it together for Charlie’s sake.

“I think we should go talk to Charlie.” Dr. Manning stood, and Dr. Thorpe followed. My body went on autopilot. I prayed Charlie understood all of this and didn’t get as scared as I was. Maybe Ben could help him understand everything too, the way he had done for me. And maybe Ben could just hold me again for a while, the way he did last week. That seemed to make everything better, even if only for a second.

Ben

I crunched some chips, seated across the table from Harper, my best friend, and a nurse on my team. After the news we got yesterday from Dr. Manning, I felt a lot more confident about Charlie's recovery, but that made my doubts about his parentage increase. And because Georgia had initiated sex with me, I felt even more confused. We hadn't even brought the subject up again. I let her fall asleep and then I went back to the couch. In the morning, I was out the door for work, and the topic never came up.

I should have brought it up . . .

"I'm just saying, Ben, that if you're feeling this overwhelming anxiety, and Charlie really is your son, then how do you think Georgia is feeling? You're wanting to spare her emotions in the whole thing, but rather than ripping the bandage off, you're making her suffer anxiety every time you're with her. She is probably wringing her hands every single day when she knows you're on your way home from work." Harper put a French fry in her mouth and shook her head as she chewed.

"I guess you have a point. I hadn't thought of that. If it were me, I'd feel horribly guilty and nervous that I was going to get caught. I'd probably be afraid that she would be angry with me too." I had no appetite. I hadn't in days, but I'd been forcing myself to eat, knowing the loss of appetite was due to the stress and emotion of the situation. Until I resolved this, I was just torturing both of us.

"I think you just need to ask her." Harper dusted the salt off her hands

and pushed her nearly empty tray away. The hospital cafeteria was loud today, so it was challenging to hold such a serious conversation, but it had to be done. She was my closest friend, someone I relied on for talks like these. Even after she married Owen, he and I hadn't gotten close. I chalked that up to my father being not such a great role model and the fact that I naturally gravitated toward women for friendship. When Harper gave advice, it was good advice I could trust.

"You really think so?" I didn't doubt her wisdom, but I did doubt the situation was going to work out. I just didn't want to nudge Georgia in the wrong direction or even the correct direction too quickly.

"I do, Ben. It's not just about her feelings. You have feelings too. But most importantly, it's about Charlie. Would you want to know if your real dad was in the picture again? Would you want him there while you went through one of the scariest things that can happen to a child?" She picked up her soda cup and slurped the remaining few drops through the straw, then tossed it on her tray and stood. "Ask her, just do it gently."

I nodded at her as she leaned down and gave me a side hug. "Thanks, Harper," I mumbled. She walked away, and I sat there sulking for a few more minutes before I got up to finish my day. When work was over, I headed home, knowing Georgia would be there. I checked Charlie's room to see that he was sleeping peacefully, and his nurse informed me that his mother had just left.

That meant we'd have plenty of time to talk about things tonight.

I opened the door and walked in, hearing a voice talking in the other room. The sound was coming from my home office, which I'd discussed with Georgia would become Charlie's room while he was here. I smelled fresh paint, which meant she had done what I suggested by purchasing a good color and getting the walls a fresh coat. I headed that way, dropping my keys, wallet, and phone on the coffee table. I kicked off my shoes and listened to her bubbling on. She sounded so happy with whomever she was speaking. It almost felt like she was speaking to someone she may be dating. Sadness started to creep into my thoughts as I wondered about her life away from the ship, if she was dating someone. If she had cheated on that person with me ten days ago and what that meant about her past. Doubt needled at my conscience now, forcing me to wonder if I was wrong, if she had just been cheating on me and Charlie wasn't really mine after all.

I stepped into the room to see the walls mostly painted a soft blue color.

The furniture had been draped in plastic sheeting, and Georgia wore one of my old T-shirts and a pair of my boxers, her dark hair swept up into a messy bun. She smiled at me and touched her face, leaving a streak of blue paint across her cheek.

“Look, I have to go now. I’ll call you tomorrow?” She laughed, and the smile on her face was priceless. It was good to see her smiling. “Sure thing. Mmm, bye.” She fiddled with her phone for a second, getting paint on the screen before she dropped it. I hurried over and picked it up, ending the call and snagging a tissue from the box on the floor next to her. I wiped the screen and handed it back.

“Good as new,” I told her, but my heart was twisting in my chest. I didn’t want to pry, so I didn’t ask who she was talking to. She’d had eight years to build relationships that didn’t include me, and it was none of my business. Still, my lack of self-confidence was startling at that moment.

“What do you think?” she asked, gesturing at the almost-finished walls.

“The color is great. Perfect for the bedspread you showed me on the computer.” I rested my hands on my hips and looked at the work she’d done. She had a knack for painting, more so than I did.

“I think so too.” Georgia put her paint roller in the tray and picked up another tissue and wiped her hands. I took it from her and dabbed her cheek, but it only smeared, and it made a very awkward tension between us as we looked into each other’s eyes.

“Uh, do you want me to get dinner started?” I asked, backing away, very aware that my closeness to her made me want her.

“I ordered pizza from Antonio’s. It should be here soon.” She headed for the corner of the room where a plastic sheet lay draped over the night stand. She folded it up and picked up a red cup, gulped something from it, and then folded the plastic back farther. “Drink?” she asked, revealing a bottle of whiskey. So that was why she was in such a good mood.

“Yeah, I think I will . . .” I walked toward her, accepting the glass she poured for me. It was as if she was expecting me to come home and drink with her while we finished this room. Charlie would come home to my place soon and we both wanted him to have his own space. Working on the room tonight was a great idea, but I wasn’t sure about the drinking part. Especially if we had to have a serious talk, which I was certain we should.

“Here . . .” She handed me a glass, and I sipped it as I watched her twist the lid back on the whiskey. Her hands fumbled a little again, and now I

understood why she'd dropped her phone. She was already tipsy. As she tried to get the lid on, it toppled to the floor, also covered in plastic. She bent to retrieve it, and my eyes locked on her backside, admiring the way her hips curved out and the boxers she wore rode up. I could see the hint of black lace peeking out, and it made my dick tingle.

Georgia was a sight to behold under any circumstance, but when she didn't even realize she was being sexy was the best time. I wanted to run my hand up her thigh, slide my thumb into her, and claim her as mine. I used to do stuff like that all the time with her. I just knew that years had passed, and given the situation, I didn't even know where I stood. For all I knew, she was dating someone on the ship.

"Gosh, I'm really a klutz," she mumbled as she stood and screwed the lid on. The moment was gone. I downed the drink, realizing I needed to drown my hormones before I let my sex drive ruin the serious talk I wanted to have.

"I applied for a job today, sent my recordings and head shot. It's a restaurant in New York City near Washington Square Park. They do singing and dinner. It would be a commute, but based on the job ad and the reviews, I could make a thousand bucks a weekend. That's about what I was making on the ship. The bad part is the commute." She gulped her drink again then set the glass down before heading back for the roller. I needed another drink—now.

"I thought you were going back to the ship?" My fishing was more than just querying information about her future. I was concerned that her working would detract from Charlie's healing. He needed her, and I was more than capable of taking care of her.

"Yeah, I am. I just need some money in the meantime. I'm going to kill my savings if I don't find a job." Georgia picked up the roller and walked to the dry spot on the wall where cream paint showed through. I poured myself another drink and downed it, then set my cup next to hers and watched her. She reached up on her tiptoes, the T-shirt rising to show her midriff. She was so freaking sexy, I wanted to snatch her up right then. What was wrong with me?

"But I can take care of anything you two need. You don't have to work at all. Just let me handle things . . ." I wanted to be helpful, not controlling, so when she answered, I had no choice but to relent.

"I need to work, Ben." She rolled the paint on, oblivious to the way she made my cock swell. Each stroke upward made her shirt rise, and when she

bent low, the boxers rode up, giving me a glance at her black panties. “It’s only fair. Besides, we’re not together or anything, so I feel like I’m imposing on a really great friend.”

“What if we were?” The question slipped out as she turned and straightened. I felt the swirl of alcohol loosening my shoulders. I moved toward her.

“What?” she asked, dipping the roller into the tray again. As she did, the neckline of the shirt dipped in front and I noticed she wasn’t wearing a bra, either.

Alcohol was a mistake. I felt my inhibitions fleeing out the window with the paint fumes. “What if we were together?”

She straightened and held the roller in hand absently, staring at me. I could see the way her eyes had glazed over from the drink. With paint smudged on her cheek and her hardening nipples pressing against the T-shirt, she was irresistible. I was drawn to her like a magnet. I reached for her, grabbing her hips and pulling her toward me. She yelped and dropped the paint roller onto the plastic-covered carpet, and I kissed her hard.

“God, I miss you so much. Having you here is so hard, because all I want to do is kiss you.” I bit her lower lip, holding her against my body and kissing her as her arms draped around my neck.

“Well, then kiss me . . . because once I’m gone, you’re going to miss me even more.” Her breath was laced with whiskey and I didn’t care. She held me tightly, using her arms as leverage to raise her leg around my body. I held her by the backs of her thighs and lifted her as she kissed me again, this time pursuing me as I made advances.

So much for a deep discussion . . .

Georgia

Ben carried me into the bedroom, my legs tightly wrapped around his waist as I kissed him. He was hungry, devouring my kisses until the moment he dropped me onto the bed and ordered me, "Take your clothes off." I snickered and obliged, slowly peeling my T-shirt off, then his boxers, as he undressed.

"You're bossy," I told him, grinning. I loved when he was assertive.

He chuckled in response and crawled on top of me. "Only with you," he said, grazing his lips against mine. "I can't help it. You make me feel so alive."

I moaned in response, feeling his hands roam over my body, sending electrifying shivers down my spine. I pulled him closer, wanting to feel every inch of him. His lips left mine and moved down my neck, nipping at my skin and leaving a trail of hot, wet kisses.

I arched my back, pressing my chest against his as he continued his assault on my neck. I could feel his hardness against me, and the thought of his body inside mine made me weak with desire.

"Please, Ben," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "I need you." He kissed me deeply, his tongue exploring my mouth while his hand roamed down my body.

I moaned as he traced his fingers over my nipples, feeling them harden under his touch.

He moved his lips down my body until he reached my breasts, taking one

nipple into his mouth and sucking hard. I cried out, my back arching off the bed. He switched to the other breast, giving it the same treatment.

"Mmm," I moaned, running my hands through his hair. His growls against my skin were electrifying.

I was so turned on, I could feel the wetness between my legs. He moved down my body, kissing my stomach and hips. I lifted my legs, giving him access to my most intimate area. He teased me with his fingers, rubbing my clit in slow circles.

I moaned and writhed beneath him, begging for more. He took his time, making me wait for it. Finally, he slid two fingers inside me, pumping them in and out. I gasped, my body convulsing with pleasure.

He kept up the slow, steady pace, driving me closer and closer to the edge as his face lowered between my legs. I spread them to him, giving myself over to his skillful touch. "Oh, yes . . . like that," I muttered, clawing at his shoulders.

His tongue lapped at my folds, sending waves of pleasure through my body. I grabbed onto the sheets, my breathing becoming more erratic. I was about to come undone.

"Yes, don't stop," I panted. He kept up his pace, alternating between his fingers and tongue. He sucked on my clit, and I screamed out his name, my body shaking in pleasure. I could feel the orgasm build up inside me until it finally burst from my body in glorious waves of pleasure.

He kissed my inner thighs, looking up at me with a satisfied smirk. I smiled back, unable to form words. I felt so alive and happy in that moment. "You taste amazing, and I want more," he said, grinning as he went back for more.

I laughed, wrapping my legs around his neck. "I'm all yours," I told him, meaning every word. "You like it a little naughty, Ben. Don't be so nice to me." His lips wrapped around my clit again, sucking me and forcing my hips off the bed. I felt his fingers plunge into me again, searching for my sensitive spots.

"God, I could drink from your pussy all day." His breath was hot against my mound, and it made me shudder.

"Yes, suck it like that," I moaned, tightening my fists around his hair.

His fingers worked me over, bringing me to the edge of release again. "Come for me," he commanded, and I obeyed, my orgasm erupting from my body in a series of waves. He kept going, taking me to the brink over and

over again until I was spent and too exhausted to move.

"Yes, harder, Ben," I begged, my voice husky and desperate.

He complied, increasing the speed and intensity of his movements. I screamed out his name as the pleasure flooded through my body, my orgasm blinding me in its intensity. Convulsions shook me, my pussy clenching around his fingers until my body began to calm.

He pulled away, kissing my stomach before looking up at me. "That was incredible," he murmured, a satisfied smirk on his face.

I smiled back, barely able to keep my eyes open. "You're pretty incredible yourself," I whispered, my voice low and husky. I knew he wasn't finished, but to my knowledge neither of us had bought condoms. I turned away from him, getting to all fours. If there was one thing he liked, I knew it was this. I looked back over my shoulder and reached back and held myself open. His eyes grew wide as he rose up and stroked himself.

When his cock dipped into my valley, smearing my juices around, I knew he got the point. He rubbed the head of his dick along my valley, finding the tight ring of muscles and pushing in. It was searing pain and intense pleasure all at once as he began thrusting. His dick filled me, stretching my body, and it was all I could do not to scream.

"Wow, I forgot how good this feels," he groaned, gripping my hips. I was already on the edge again and all he had to do was thrust.

His fingers dug into my hips, pushing me forward as he increased his speed. I threw my head back, screaming in pleasure as I felt the orgasm wash over me. I could feel the warmth of his cum flooding me as my orgasm continued.

He collapsed next to me, panting. I smiled, my eyes still closed, and snuggled closer to him.

"That was amazing," he murmured, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"It sure was," I agreed, smiling sleepily. I had never felt so alive, so in tune with my body and his.

"We should do it like this more often," he said, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

"Definitely," I replied, though I knew it was a bad idea. I'd always felt like Ben and I were made for each other, but with the way things happened, I felt like it would never work.

"Look, Geo . . ." Ben started, but his words hung in the air. I had something to tell him, and whatever he wanted to say could wait.

“Ben, I need to tell you something.” I took a deep breath and prepared myself to let it all out, but his question emerged before I could say a word.

“Is Charlie my son?”

My heart stopped beating and I lay there perfectly still. I wanted to say a simple “yes,” but that would not suffice. So I told him my truth. “When you weren’t there when I came back from sea, I was hurt. I came to your apartment. You left no note, no forwarding address. What was I supposed to think?”

“I told you I was going to do my residency. I told you about the program.” Ben sounded defensive, which put me on edge. This was a bad idea.

“You didn’t say when. You didn’t even say goodbye.” I sat up, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I came back and you were gone.”

“We never defined anything, Geo. I loved you so much, but your heart belonged to the sea. You were never going to leave that ship to be with me.”

His words stung because they were true. I would have wanted him to give up his life to join me. I didn’t want to give up my dreams and my career. I felt the bed jostle as he got up. He walked around the bed and picked up his clothing, dressing in front of me as I continued.

“I thought we had something. I thought it was going somewhere.” I felt tears brimming and blinked them back.

“I didn’t know what to think. I had to think of my future. For all I knew, it was just sex. I wanted more, but I didn’t think that was an option.”

I covered my chest, curling into myself. Why had I just had sex with him again? I knew better. There was too much unresolved anger here for this to actually work.

“So, he’s mine?”

“Yes,” I blurted out in a very angry tone. “And I felt deserted. You got me pregnant and you didn’t even say goodbye. I felt so used.”

“How was I supposed to know you were pregnant? You never said a word. You never called to tell me? Never tried?” Ben shoved his arms into his shirt and pulled it on over his head. He shook his head and glared at me. “I loved you, Georgia. And now this? I have an eight-year-old son I’ve never met until now. How could you do that to me?”

Guilt smacked me in the face and I had no response. He was right. I should have told him. No matter how desperately I was hurting thanks to his leaving, I had no right to hide Charlie from him. Charlie didn’t deserve that. I

couldn't look him in the eye.

"I am going to go out. I need space." Ben stormed out of the room, furious with me, and I curled up on the bed and covered myself, sobbing.

I never knew he wanted more. It was so casual back then that neither of us even thought to discuss it. It was just great sex, wasn't it? And now, look at the mess. I was totally in love with him and I couldn't even say it. Knowing how he felt now, I'd never have another chance with him. Even if I did, I'd never trust him to not leave me like he did before. I was better off on that ship with Charlie, homeschooling and performing. It was the way it had always been, and it was all I knew.

My heart hurt so badly I cried until my eyes were heaving, ignoring the knock on the door when the pizza man came with my dinner. This was too messy. Maybe I needed to find a different place to stay.

Ben

My shoulders slumped as I sat on the hard chair across the room waiting for Harper—filling in for a friend today—to give follow-up care instructions to Georgia. Charlie was still groggy, as I expected him to be. They lifted the drug-induced sedation yesterday, and after his bowel movement this morning, they said he was free to go home—or to my place, anyway.

Georgia helped him dress as Harper spoke about how he needed more rest than normal. She cautioned Georgia that he would likely have headaches, balance issues, and maybe be irritable. I'd heard the spiel a hundred times. I'd even given the talk myself a few times. It was white noise to me, so I was able to just sit and watch Georgia interact with my son, knowing he was mine but unable to say a thing about it yet.

The past few days had been nothing but bickering between Georgia and me. After holding that question in for so long, I thought the answer would bring me some peace. Instead, it brought up a dozen more questions equally as anxiety inducing and all the emotions to go along with them. I tried to push the frustrating thoughts away but they piled up, which led to my being in a sour mood and snapping at Georgia.

“Mom, I have to pee,” Charlie whimpered, holding on to her as he slid his feet into his sandals.

“Okay, baby, I'll take you.” Georgia kissed his forehead as Harper took a step back. Her job was done now, but she lingered as Georgia led Charlie into

the bathroom and shut the door. When they were out of earshot, Harper turned to me.

“Ben, what’s going on with you?” She stood with her arms crossed over her chest, frowning at me.

“What do you mean? I’m fine.” I stood and raked a hand through my uncombed hair. It was my day off. I hadn’t even attempted to shower and groom myself like normal. I was too upset by everything to care. I stared at the door, knowing Georgia would come back soon and I’d be alone with her again, which was uncomfortable enough when we were alone. Now Charlie would be around us, and I didn’t want to bicker in front of him.

“Stop it,” Harper chided. “I can tell you’re upset. I’m your friend. I just want to help.” She brushed a strand of her dark hair out of her face and cocked her head, waiting for me to fess up. Here and now was not the time nor the place for this talk. Not when Georgia would walk right through that door and I had to be composed.

“You’re right. I’m not really okay. I just can’t talk about it right now. Maybe I’ll call you later or something.” I jammed my hands into my pockets and fumbled with my car keys nervously. I wanted to unload everything and feel better, but I had to keep holding it in.

“Alright, well I’m here. You know?” She reached out and squeezed my bicep comfortingly and offered a weak smile. “I’m going to head to my next patient. You alright to walk these guys out?”

Hospital policy was for Charlie to ride down to the car in a wheelchair pushed by a nurse. I expected Harper to be the one doing that, but with me here, everyone was a bit more relaxed. It just meant I was facing Georgia and the inevitable discomfort sooner. I shrugged. “Yeah, that’s okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harper walked out the door just as the bathroom door opened and Georgia and Charlie emerged. He clung to his mother like a scared little mouse. I didn’t blame him. He’d been through a big ordeal already with more still to come. He looked up at me timidly, his tiny arms wrapped tightly around her waist.

“Charlie, this is my friend Ben. We are going to stay with him for a while.” Georgia’s hand rested on Charlie’s dark hair, smoothing it over his head. The bandage on the back of his head covering the incision mark where they did his biopsy made his hair stick up at a strange angle.

“Nice to meet you, Charlie.” I crouched in front of him, looking him in

the eye. This was my son, and I had never been more in love with someone I'd never met before until now. "Do you like superheroes?" My mind went to the bedroom we set up for him decked in posters of superheroes, with a giant, green, muscled man on his bedspread.

Charlie's eyes drew up to Georgia's face. Then he looked back at me, nodding. I stood, catching Georgia's gaze for a moment, and she mouthed, "thank you." I nodded, understanding her fully. Charlie had to come first. We had to put our differences aside for his sake. There would be plenty of time for us to talk or even argue if it came to that, but not while he was around.

"Shall we?" I gestured toward the door, and Georgia guided Charlie to the wheelchair before grabbing the large plastic bag with all of his things in it. We made our way down to the car, then across town to my apartment. Charlie fell asleep in the car, so it was a mostly silent ride, for which I was thankful.

I carried Charlie's things up to my apartment while Georgia carried Charlie. He seemed so small to me, like a little rag doll, despite being eight years old and capable of so much. I unlocked the door and pushed it open, letting Georgia go first. She set Charlie down and he rubbed his eyes. Hank didn't make an appearance, so I assumed he was sleeping in another room. I hoped Charlie liked dogs as much as I did.

"Want to see the room Ben has for you?" Georgia asked him, and he nodded again. She led him into the room as I set his things down on the kitchen table before heading to the crockpot where dinner had been cooking all afternoon. It smelled delicious—some concoction Georgia put together saying it was one of Charlie's favorites. I stirred it then put the lid back on, and as I looked up, Georgia and Charlie walked back into the living room. He had a huge smile on his face.

"I have a TV in my room!" He climbed onto the couch and leaned over the back, bouncing on his knees.

"Alright, none of that," Georgia told him, swatting his backside playfully. "This is Ben's furniture, so you have to respect it. And you need to be calm, remember? The nurse said not too much activity for a few more days."

"Aw, Mom," Charlie whined, exactly like an eight-year-old boy should. I grinned at her, imagining myself as a young boy in his situation.

"Mom's right, bud." I reached into the cupboard and pulled out a few bowls, then grabbed spoons from the drawer as I spoke. "You had a good knock to your head. You have to be careful for a few days more." I set the

dishes on the table. “Hungry? Your mom made some food that smells delicious.”

Charlie slid off the couch and walked over to the counter. He peeked into the crockpot and grinned. “You made my favorite.” His eyes sparkled, and he climbed onto a chair. In moments, Georgia had served up her masterpiece, and the scent didn’t disappoint the moment my spoon full of the creamy casserole hit my mouth.

“Mmm, oh, wow,” I moaned, chewing my bite and savoring the flavors.

“My mom used to call this crack chicken because it’s addictive. Sour cream, cheese, noodles, a few other things.” Georgia took a bite and grinned at Charlie who had almost finished his bowl already. “Slow down, baby. You’ll get a tummy ache.”

“Well, it’s delicious.” I took another large bite and watched Charlie as Georgia got him another portion. It was good to see him with an appetite after having been sedated for so long. My heart ached to tell him the truth, to dive into the process of getting to know him and him knowing me as his father. I wondered how many times he’d asked Georgia about who and where his dad was. He had to have questions the same as me.

We ate in silence while Charlie scarfed his food until he asked a question I didn’t think either of us was prepared for. “Does this mean you are dating Ben?” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and dropped his spoon into the empty bowl, large eyes staring up at his mom with curiosity.

Georgia’s face blanched. Her chewing slowed, and I shoved a heaping spoonful of food into my mouth to avoid having to answer that question. I’d like nothing more than to date her, to make a serious attempt at a relationship with her. And it wasn’t because of Charlie, either. Even if she had told me Charlie wasn’t my son, I would have wanted her. I made a mistake not keeping in touch with her all this time. But my gut told me even if I attempted to build a relationship with her, she wasn’t planning to stay around, anyway. It would never work out.

“Go wash your hands, okay, bud?” Georgia shooed him away from the table without answering and left me on pins and needles too. Charlie pushed his bowl away before slipping off the chair and walking down the hall toward the bathroom. He had yet to meet Hank, who was probably sleeping at the foot of my bed where he normally slept. His visit to the bathroom would likely wake the mostly deaf hound.

“Okay, I’m freaking out,” Georgia hissed the minute Charlie was in the

bathroom.

“He’s a kid. He’s just curious.” I tried to put her nerves to bed. “We have other more important things we’re going to have to discuss with him. Like, when are we telling him I’m his father?” I kept my voice low so Charlie didn’t hear me, but Georgia scowled at me like I had used a megaphone.

“Ben, not now.” She raked a hand through her hair. “Maybe I need to look for a short-term lease apartment or something.” I could tell she was stressed.

“No, that’s silly. Save your money. You’re welcome here. We will deal with his questions as they come up.” I set my spoon in my bowl and folded my hands.

“And your questions?” she asked, staring at me. I could see the confusion and pain in her eyes. After all the bickering, she had a right to worry, though I’d never jeopardize her relationship with Charlie or try to confuse or hurt him. The questions I had were ones that had to be addressed in a delicate way.

Charlie returned, leaning on the back of the chair he was just seated in, and our conversation was over. I lost my appetite. It would be challenging navigating the situation with Charlie around, but I knew if she left my place and went in search of her own, we would never have a chance to work things out. My chest ached from the emotional weight I was under. Carrying this secret was the most difficult thing I’d ever had to do.

But I had to keep doing it.

I was the one who'd screwed up by leaving town without telling her or even saying goodbye. She'd kept Charlie a secret, but only because she felt like I wanted nothing to do with her. She probably felt like I had played her—used her and left her for something better. That wasn’t the case, but I had no way of undoing what had happened and the damage to what we had was done. All I could do was be the absolute best friend to her that I could be while simultaneously being the best father I could to my son without his knowing I was his dad and pray to God that she’d forgive me.

Georgia

Something awakened me, I wasn't sure what, but I lay there listening to the birds chirping outside the window. The past few days of having Charlie here in Ben's house hadn't been as bad as I thought they would be. Charlie really liked Ben, and he really liked that Ben went to all the trouble to remodel his office into a bedroom fit for an eight-year-old king. I loved that the two of them got along well, though it did bring up a lot of confusing and heart-wrenching questions I knew I'd have to answer soon enough.

I sat up, deciding I needed a shower, and looked at the time. Nearly nine a.m., which meant Charlie would be waking up soon if he wasn't already awake. I needed to make breakfast and continue my job search via the online listings. Ben had been gracious enough to lend me his laptop, though he did insist a number of times that I could just depend on him. I wanted to, but I also knew from experience how much it hurt to get burned. So I trusted my gut and kept searching even after several places turned me away.

I stood, stretching my arms wide, then peeled off my shirt and shorts. I looked through my suitcase, which had only a few things left in it, and found my last clean pair of panties and a fresh bra. I'd have to do laundry today too, but only after I had a shower and was fully awake. Maybe I would take Charlie down to the little pastry shop near the park and let him choose a donut too.

As I walked to the bathroom door, I thought of how different this whole

situation would have been if I hadn't run into Ben at that waterpark. I knew he lived in the northeast somewhere, but I didn't know he would be at that park, that day. Fate had intervened, and because of that, I had a safe place to rest and take care of my boy while he got the treatment he needed. I had been really hard on Ben after finally admitting Charlie was his. I felt badly for that, and I wanted a way to apologize without his thinking that I wasn't hurt by his past actions. I just needed more time to think about it.

The second I opened the door to the bathroom, I knew I'd made a mistake. Steam rolled out at me and I heard water running, but I was two steps into the room before it registered. Ben was hunched over the sink shaving, completely naked, with water droplets kissing his skin. His corded back drew my eyes immediately, and I couldn't look away.

"Gosh, I'm sorry. I didn't lock the door. Force of habit," he said, tapping his razor on the sink. "I'll just be a minute." He straightened, but he angled his body away from me.

"Uh . . ." I stammered, not sure what to say. It wasn't like he hadn't done something similar to me the first night I was here. I just hadn't expected to walk in on him naked. I blinked hard, trying to force myself to look away, but it was like a train wreck. I had to see him. The curiosity that is common to all people made me gawk. "It's not like we haven't seen each other naked before. Just finish shaving," I told him, realizing he was staring at me too. I laid my panties and bra on the counter next to him and moved to the shower, which was my obvious destination.

My body was on edge, already responding to the sight of him naked in the same room with me, but I had to control myself. Not only was Charlie just across the hall, but continuing to have sex with him when things were already so complicated would only make it worse.

I turned my back and started the water, forcefully making myself keep my eyes down on the shower floor, but my pussy started to hurt. I could tell I was making moisture, and I loved the feeling, but so many conflicting emotions washed over me. I felt trapped in this confined space with someone I wanted to love so desperately but knowing it would never work out. And I felt his eyes on me too, because I didn't hear his razor tapping on the sink anymore. A quick glance over my shoulder proved he was, in fact, staring.

"I'm sorry, Ben," I mumbled, looking back down at the shower floor as I waited for the water to heat up. I didn't know why I was waiting. He'd just been in a shower and the water was probably plenty hot. I just couldn't force

myself to get in.

“Hey, it’s okay. Like you said, it’s not like we haven’t seen it before.” His voice sort of trailed off at the end of his sentence, and I heard the sink shut off. When I glanced at him again, I noticed his dick was getting hard enough to stand upright. I wanted to melt into the water and down the drain with it.

How could we both want each other so badly but still be so angry with each other? There were too many things we had to work out. Things like how to handle a relationship when I left on a ship. How to navigate parenting a child when we lived so far apart. Like, how did I forgive him for completely deserting me without even saying goodbye?

I looked over my shoulder again, but he hadn’t moved. He hadn’t gotten a towel to dry off or even taken a step toward the door. He stood leaning his hip against the bathroom counter, facing me. His cock stood up for me, and he looked down at it, then shrugged. I’d seen the sheepish look before, his way of begging me to fix his “problem”, as he used to call it. I couldn’t hide a grin that crept onto my face. It didn’t matter how much I wanted to hate him or how angry I was with him. He could always get me to smile even when I didn’t want to.

I bit my lip and turned, leaning backward on the glass. “Charlie is sleeping . . .” I mumbled in a low voice. He probably didn’t even hear me, but he nodded and locked the bathroom door behind himself, then moved to the door that led into the hallway and locked it too.

“I can be quiet if you can?”

Ben stepped closer to me, and the animal inside me took over. When he came within reach, I pulled him into my body hard, our skin smacking together as our lips collided. His hands were everywhere, and I gasped for air as he trailed his lips down my neck, pushing me against the shower wall and backing me under the water. With the warm water cascading around us, his hand found my breast, pinching and twisting a nipple.

I moaned, my body alive and on fire like it had never been before. His other hand trailed between my legs, searching and exploring. When he found the sensitive spot between my legs, I gasped and held my breath. His fingers moved expertly against me, teasing and tormenting. I was lost in the moment, completely under his spell.

His thumb massaged my tender nub while his fingers pushed into me over and over. The hot water only heightened the sensations, slicking my skin for

his hand to search my curves. He teased and explored until I was so close, so close to letting go that I couldn't take it anymore. I could feel my orgasm building inside me, and I grabbed his shoulders for support, pushing my hips against his hand. I felt like I was going to explode, and I let out a muffled cry as I finally let go, my body shaking and quivering as he held me tightly against him.

My pussy felt raw and hungry. I wasn't satisfied. I wanted so much more. When he started to pull his hand away from me, I grabbed his wrist. "More," I mouthed before leaning forward to kiss him. He obliged, sliding his fingers back into my sticky moisture. His thumb continued to massage my sensitive nub as he moved his fingers inside me. I was lost in a haze of pleasure and I clung to him desperately, my hands gripping his shoulders. His breath was hot against my neck, and I could feel the heat radiating from his body as he moved against me. I was so close, so close to coming again when he finally stilled his hand and pulled away.

I gasped, my heart pounding in my chest and my legs trembling with exhaustion. He kissed me softly on the lips and pulled away, his eyes still dark with desire. I was panting, on the edge and waiting for him to tip me over. Instead of putting his fingers back, he stroked himself and slid his cock up my inner thigh. I nodded, lifting a leg to give him more room in this tiny shower stall to pleasure me.

"Wow . . . I need you," he moaned as he slid into me. He was thick and hot, and my pussy clenched around him.

This time, his strokes were slower and more deliberate. His movements were more focused on pleasure than teasing, and I felt the tension building up in me again as he thrust into me. He moved his arm around my waist, pulling me closer and closer until I was perched on the edge of ecstasy. I felt the orgasm coming and pushed my hips against him, wanting more, needing more.

This time, the orgasm was intense and powerful, and I stifled a scream as pleasure coursed through me. I felt my body quivering and shuddering, my breath coming out in short, sharp bursts. My legs went weak in the knee as he continued thrusting, burying his cock into me over and over. It was harder than I thought to remain quiet, but Ben mastered the art, not even a peep escaping from his lips.

He drove into me as my orgasm subsided, but the fire in his eyes told me his was close. I leaned into him, whispering into his ear, "Fill me up with

your seed." I should have made him pull out, but the moment was so overwhelming, all I could think about was feeling him flood me.

He growled into my ear, and I felt him tense up just before he came. His movements became faster, more urgent. I welcomed it, wanting more, needing more. His breaths became more erratic, and he started to lose control, making me gasp with pleasure. He slammed into me one final time. I could feel every twitch of his cock as he emptied himself into me, and when he was done, he slumped against me, both of us breathless and exhausted.

We stayed like that for a while, both of us too tired to move. The steam from the shower slowly dissipated, and I could feel his heart slowing down to match mine. Finally, he pulled away, giving me a soft kiss before helping me stand without my knees buckling. We didn't say anything, but the look in his eyes said enough. The anger and hurt between us could still be felt, but something else was there too. Something that said that maybe, just maybe, we could work it out.

Ben stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel, wrapping it around his waist. He pulled me into a tight embrace, our wet bodies pressing against each other. I felt so safe in his arms, so content. He kissed my forehead and pulled away, giving me a knowing look. We had just shared something beautiful. Something so much more than just sex.

When he opened the door that led to his bedroom, I was surprised, but not as shocked as I was to hear him say, "I'm not finished." He took my hand, still dripping wet, and guided me into his bedroom. I felt like a kid again.

Ben

"You're infuriating and confusing, and I can't get enough of you." I kissed her hard again, turning her so I could back her toward the bed. When she walked into the bathroom naked, my cock got instantly hard, but that little spicy moment wasn't enough to sate me. "You drive me wild with arousal and insane with your secrets and the way you think you've never done anything wrong." I couldn't take my hands off her, groping her huge tits and grabbing her love handles. She was perfect in every way, so why was she so infuriating?

"You left me behind. You broke my heart and acted like I was nothing. You left without saying goodbye." Her kisses came as hard and fast as mine. Georgia wasn't the sort to do something out of reckless impulse. I knew she wanted me as badly as I wanted her when she walked into that bathroom and stared at me, starting the water but not getting into the shower. And no matter how mad I was with her, I still wanted more.

I dropped my towel and held her naked body against mine. I wanted to be in her again, filling her. I wanted to pin her to the bed and use my body to show her how serious I was about us, how I'd always been serious about us. And how I wouldn't change my mind just because she had lied to me, kept secrets, and intended to leave me in a few months.

"Why did you leave?" she whimpered, sliding her hand around my dick. The way she squeezed and stroked almost brought me to my knees.

"I left because I loved you," I said, trying not to lose focus on her touch.

"I wanted to give you space to make your own decisions, to think about what you wanted without getting in the way."

She nodded, her mouth pressed to my chest. Her lips were still hot and wet from our kiss. "But I wanted you near me. I wanted you here with me, every step of this journey." Her hand continued to stroke me until we toppled onto the bed, my body pinning her down. I wanted to be in her again.

"You would never leave that ship, Geo. You told me as much. I couldn't be the one to pin down your wings. I had to let you fly." I slid my hand between our bodies, massaging her clit. Her pussy was still dripping with moisture from the first round of lovemaking.

"You were my wings," she breathed, her voice trembling with desire, her eyes widening as I pushed my fingers inside her. She moaned softly, her body clenching around my ministrations.

"God, I miss this so bad. I miss you," I whispered before closing my lips around one of her nipples. I bit softly, flicking my tongue over it behind my teeth. She hissed and arched her back upward.

"I miss you too," she said, her fingers gripping my hair as I moved around her body, nibbling and licking my way down her stomach until I reached her core. She was so wet, her scent almost too sweet for me to bear. I kissed her inner thighs, my hands exploring the soft curves of her body as I continued to pleasure her. "God, eat me," she begged, her breathing coming in short gasps now. I looked up at her, my eyes meeting hers. I could see the tears in them, and I knew I never wanted to make her cry again.

I pushed two fingers inside her and sucked her clit. Her body bucked, and she let out a guttural moan as I increased the pressure and intensity. She came hard, her body shaking as she clung to my hair for dear life. She wasn't nearly as quiet this time around, though we had more walls between us and Charlie in the other room. Her pussy spasmed as she rocked her hips against me.

I kissed her again, our tongues entwining as I moved up her body, pressing my cock against her wetness. I moved slowly, savoring the feeling of being inside her, feeling her walls tighten around me. We moved together, our rhythm building, her body trembling with pleasure.

"You are so beautiful," I said, my voice gruff with desire. I kissed her neck and ran my fingers through her hair as I felt her orgasm building, her breathing coming in short bursts.

"You make me feel alive," she said, her voice trembling. I could feel her body quivering beneath me, and I increased my pace, pushing her closer and

closer to the edge. She came again, screaming my name as her muscles tightened around me.

Her thick walls hugged my dick as I slid in and out of her. I could feel myself getting closer and closer to the edge. I wanted to let loose and come as hard as I ever had before.

"Come for me, baby," I said, my voice low and gruff. She responded, her body writhing beneath me as she reveled in pleasure. I thrust hard and fast, my own orgasm building quickly. I let out a guttural moan as I spilled inside her, my body shaking with pleasure.

We lay there, tangled in each other, our breathing evening out. I kissed her forehead, and she smiled up at me, her eyes filled with a love I felt in my bones. When I rolled to the side, the same familiar feeling of connection washed over me, but at the same time, I still felt a distance. I stared up at the ceiling, spent after my morning workout and this bit of exercise. My heart felt uncertain.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, my voice breaking the silence.

"For what?" Georgia asked, her voice soft and sweet.

"For leaving. For not understanding. For not telling you I loved you." I reached for her hand, but it wasn't there. She was still hiding from me. I let my eyes fall shut while I waited for her response.

"It's too late for that apology, Ben, but I appreciate the sentiment." She sat up and let her legs fall over the edge of the bed, her shoulders drooping. "God, sex with you is as amazing as I remember, but we cannot keep doing this. You know I'm planning to leave on that ship, Ben. We are only going to be hurting each other more by keeping this up."

I reached over and rested my hand on her hip, strumming her skin with my thumb. I knew she was right, but I didn't want to stop myself. Something that felt so right shouldn't be wrong. It shouldn't be a poor choice for me to make love to her when I loved her. And she shouldn't be stopping herself from coming to me with her needs when I could be everything to her. I didn't speak, and when she stood and pulled away from me, my heart hurt. How long would I have to grovel before she understood how badly I felt over everything? I was even willing to overlook her lying and keeping Charlie a secret.

"I'll stay," she whispered. "I'll keep Charlie here while he's going through his surgery and treatments, but on Labor Day, when the ship departs from Cape Canaveral, I have to leave. I can't be late. It's my career."

I thought of the next few days, how Independence Day was upon us, and that left two months for Charlie to have his surgery and recover. And then she'd be gone. Out of my life again.

“What about Charlie? I need to tell him he's my son, Geo. I need to be a part of his life.” I sat up and noticed her wiping herself clean with a tissue and looked away to give her privacy.

She shook her head and walked into the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush, and when she returned she was wearing panties and carrying her bra in hand. I still sat on the edge of the bed with a wet dick, now limp and spent. I didn't even care how vulnerable I was or how I looked. I'd humiliate myself for this woman any day of the week and she didn't even believe that I wanted her.

“We have to work that out. I know he needs to know. He deserves to know, and I won't stop that. Just give me some time to think about how and when to tell him. Okay?” She slid her arms into the bra straps and buckled it behind her back. “I think we should get dressed. He'll be awake soon. I don't want to answer any awkward questions.”

I stood and walked over to her, cupping her cheek. She didn't shy away from my touch, and I saw a hint of sadness in her eyes. “Geo, I meant what I said. I am really sorry for not even leaving a note. I could give you a million explanations as to why I did what I did, but they would all sound like excuses to you because I hurt you.” I kissed her softly and pressed my forehead against hers. “I never meant to hurt you. I genuinely thought you were married to the sea and would never leave that for me. And I knew my career path would take me in a different direction. I should have done better.”

“Ben . . . Charlie . . .” she whispered. I heard some noises out in the living room and sighed.

“He'll get to spend time with me, right? Like, visitation and shared parenting?” My heart sank as I asked the question, but I wasn't ready to admit defeat yet. I still had eight weeks to convince her to stay.

“Yes. Now, we have to go out there.” She backed away and tore my heart out as she did so.

I locked myself in the bathroom to clean up our mess and get dressed. I didn't know what to do. Georgia needed to listen to me and understand my heart. I screwed up really badly and I knew it. I just didn't want to be the only one to carry blame. I stuffed my anger over her misdeed into a dark hole inside my heart and sat on the toilet lid and buried my face in my hands. I didn't just want visitation with Charlie. I wanted a family. The only way I

was going to get what I wanted was to grovel with my face in the dirt, and if that was the case, then I had to step up my game. I needed her in my life.

Georgia

I watched Charlie as he sat in the sand pit with another young boy we saw earlier in the day at Ben’s apartment building. I met his mother, who briefly shared that they lived on the seventh floor and would love to have Charlie come play sometime. It was good to see him interacting with other kids, especially given the fact that he wasn’t allowed to run or jump. The two were quietly entertaining themselves while Mindy—who met me to chat for a while—and I sat and talked.

“So, how is he doing, then? He’s been out of the hospital a week or so, right?” Mindy’s hair was swept up into a tight bun, and she wore workout clothes. I had left my hair down, and sweat made it cling to my neck and temples. I had shorts, but even still, I was hot in this early July heat.

“He’s doing okay. We are taking things slowly. You probably already know the advice is to not let him be too active, but how do you keep an eight-year-old boy contained?” I chuckled and pulled the water jug I brought with me out of the backpack I carried. We sat in a shady spot, but New York in July was sweltering.

“That’s so true. I bet he is feeling tortured.” She sighed contentedly as a breeze picked up and cooled our sweat-glistening skin. “And how are things with Dad?” She turned her full attention to my direction, folding her arms on the picnic table where we sat. I’d told her before about the messy situation with Ben and the dilemma I faced. She was a great listener, and I felt encouraged by the fact that she cared.

“Not much better, though we did have a talk. I took your advice. I told him we will tell Charlie soon. We have a lot to discuss as far as who will have him and when. I don’t know what I will do when I’m out at sea without Charlie, though. He’s been my little man for the past eight years. It will be difficult.”

Having that conversation with Ben was challenging because I knew he wanted answers I didn’t have. With how suddenly this whole situation sprang up, I had no time to make a plan or even think about what life could or should look like. I drummed my fingers on the tabletop and ignored the chipped paint on my nails.

“How did that go?” she asked, tilting her head. She had a look of compassion in her eyes. I knew her past weighed on her, losing a child the way she did because of her parents. She probably had more empathy about what I was going through than anyone I currently knew.

“I mean, he seemed to take it okay, but I know he’s still upset. I think he is still angry I never told him. He has every right to be, but then I had every right to keep Charlie a secret when I believed he would just walk out on me anyway. He kinda did.”

Mindy reached for my hand. “Well, first of all, you should probably forgive him for that. You don’t know for a fact how he would have responded.” I felt frustration welling up because she didn’t understand what I went through, but I said nothing. I just listened as she continued. “And second of all, you have to build some trust with him. Being away at sea without your boy is going to suck, but it will be better if you trust the person he is with.”

I looked up at her with discouragement in my heart. Trusting Ben might never happen for me. I didn’t even feel like he was actually sorry. Sure, he’d said it, but how much of that was simply because he wanted me to stay in his life and not leave for a ship again? And how much of it was because he was trying to convince me to leave Charlie here?

“I don’t know, Mindy. I forbade myself from trusting him ever again, not after what I felt back then.” I shook my head and picked at my fingernails. Facing these complicated feelings was something I never thought I’d do, but here I was, staring down the barrel of the gun.

“Look at it this way. You don’t have to trust him with your heart and emotions. You’re not having a relationship with him. You’re going to trust that he is a good father. It will be very obvious to you whether he cares about

Charlie or if he's just manipulating you. Also, you can trust his character as a doctor. Ask people he knows personally whether he's a good person."

"Thanks, Mindy. I just don't know." I looked up when I saw Charlie walking over, his new friend following behind him with his mother. I smiled at him. "Hey, baby, getting hot? You want a drink?"

"Nah, I'm good. Mom, Jordan asked if I could go to his house. He has some baseball cards we can look at. And also, can I have dinner with him? His mom is ordering pizza." Charlie's grin was priceless. I glanced up at the woman with kind eyes and looked over my shoulder at the high rise towering behind me. They lived in the same building and I could check on him any time I wanted.

"Is it okay?" I asked the boy's mother, and she stepped forward.

"Of course. We're in seven-oh-two. You're at fourteen-seventy? Ben Wilks's place?" She held her son's shoulders protectively, and I knew by her body language that she was probably a lot like me. I didn't want to be away from Charlie, but my gut told me he would be fine.

"Yes, Ben . . . You know him?" It made me feel safer that Ben potentially knew this family too.

"Yes, he's Jordan's pediatrician. When I needed a place to stay, he told me about an apartment for rent in his building and put in a good word for us. He's an amazing doctor and human being."

"That he is," I said, but the words felt hollow after all my confessions to Mindy. "Yes, baby, you can go to Jordan's house." I looked up at Jordan's mom. "Have him home by nine?"

"Of course," she said, smiling.

As they walked away, I felt my heart going with them. It was easier to watch him walk away now after having left him in the hospital for weeks in a medically induced coma, but I still didn't like it. At least this was only for a few hours while they played and had dinner.

"Hey, girl, I need to scoot. My power-walking buddies are going to meet me across the park. You're welcome to come." Mindy stood, and I looked at her spandex and my denim shorts.

"I'm not really dressed for it, but thank you so much for the invite." I stood too, not really wanting to go back to Ben's apartment alone.

"No problem. Listen, just talk to him. You're going to get through this the way you get through everything else. One step at a time. Okay?" She wiggled her fingers in a tiny goodbye wave. "Call me if you need to talk."

I watched her half-jog, half-walk away and then stared up at the apartment building. Ben had been pretty docile after my firm insistence that sex not be a part of the equation anymore. It didn't mean my body didn't crave his touch, though, and it had been days. He was alone up there, and hearing that mom talk about how amazing he was and Mindy telling me to give him a chance, it made me feel things I didn't really want to feel. Things like how desperately I used to love him—still did, if I were truly honest with myself, though I didn't want to admit that out loud.

I trudged to the building and took the elevator up. Before I was even in the apartment, I smelled the delicious meal he was preparing. Mindy was right. Ben was a great guy, and I could see based on his actions and the respect he showed me and Charlie that he did care. That only made me feel more conflicted because it would be easier to leave Hudson with my son and not look back if Ben was a total jerk.

He'd never been a total jerk, and lying to myself about that wasn't right.

I let myself in and he looked up in surprise. "No Charlie?" he asked, his eyes searching me.

"He went to Jordan's house? His mom said you know them." I dropped my keys and backpack by the door and kicked off my shoes. Hank wobbled over to me for scratches and I patted his head. Content with the greeting, he curled into a ball behind the couch and tucked his nose under his tail.

"Yeah, I know Jordan. He's a great kid. His parents are great people. Charlie will have a blast." Ben busied himself serving up a lasagna onto two plates and clearing away the third table setting. It smelled heavenly. I sat down in one of the chairs and moved the plate in front of myself.

It was then that I noticed soft music playing and a vase of flowers on the counter. He lifted them and carried them to the kitchen table, where he set them in front of me before choosing the chair right next to me and placing the second full plate of lasagna in front of himself.

"This looks so good, Ben. You didn't have to do this." I picked up my fork and plunged it into the lasagna, cutting a bite for myself.

"I have to admit. I talked to Jordan's mom and asked her to invite Charlie over. I wanted to spend some time with you alone." The sincerity in his eyes as he waited for my reaction was touching, but I couldn't let myself get swept away. I told him we couldn't do any more of this romantic stuff, especially sex, and he knew me too well. He could push every button I had.

"Ben, you know I asked you not to do this." I hated seeing his hopes

deflate and knowing I was the reason.

“Just eat the food, though, okay?”

I sighed and picked up the fork again, taking the bite I had cut. I had to admit the lasagna was delicious. I never knew he could cook so well, or maybe he'd learned to cook in the past eight years. I couldn't imagine living in New York state was cheap. Eating out was expensive. He probably had no choice but to teach himself to cook.

“This is good. Thank you.” I wiped my mouth on the paper napkin lying on the table next to my plate and picked up the glass of water he had set out with the food. I was thankful he hadn't also tried to get me drunk. It showed that he did respect me.

“I know you don't believe me one bit when I say I'm sorry, but I really am. Okay? And I'm going to do everything in my power to show you that I mean it.” He didn't take a bite of his food. He just watched me as I ate. “Georgia, you are the only good thing that has happened to me in my life until Charlie. When I left Florida and moved up here, I did so honestly believing you'd be better off without me. If I had known about Charlie, I'd have done my residency there. We'd have a totally different life now.”

As I chewed and listened to him, I found my heart being softened again. I wanted so desperately to believe him. There was just so much pain still inside me. To avoid having to say something, I took another bite.

“You are smart and funny. You're one of the most beautiful women I know, and I have lived with a feeling of being unsettled, ill at ease, for the past eight years. You were always the one for me.” He picked up his fork and held it over his plate but didn't cut his lasagna. “Your body is addictive too, and I'm needing a fix.” His eyes glazed over. He used a phrase that he knew set me off.

“Yeah?” I asked, feeling my body stir already. I promised myself I wouldn't do this, that I'd be strong. But he was so damn sexy and we were so good in bed together.

“Yes, and I think . . .” He gestured with his hand and his fork hit the ground, an old move he'd near perfected back in the day. A lump formed in my throat as he continued. “I dropped my fork, and I need to pick it up.”

Before I could protest, Ben was on his knees under the table. He crawled over to me and slid his hand up to my waistband. I squirmed, giggling as he buried his face between my thighs while he worked to undo my pants.

“God, Ben, we're too old for this.” I swatted at his head playfully, but I

knew where this was going, and despite my best effort to resist him, my body still wanted him.

Ben

The second I had Georgia's pants unbuckled, I was pulling them down. Her fingers were laced through my hair, and I squeezed my face between her thighs. I nipped at her inner thigh, teasing her, letting my stubble scratch her a little. I was surprised she didn't resist me more after she told me no more sex the other day. But she was irresistible. I couldn't keep my hands off her.

"Ben," she whimpered as she wrestled with pulling her leg free from the shorts tangled around her ankles. I paused my ministrations for a second to help her free a leg, and she spread her legs wide for me, guiding my mouth right to the center of the bullseye.

"Mmm," I groaned as my tongue dipped into her valley, tasting the forbidden fruit. She shuddered, sucking in a breath.

"Yes! Oh, God . . ." Georgia's hands tightened to fists in my hair as I lapped up her moisture.

"You taste so good," I said as I licked up to her clit and sucked it into my mouth. I knew it's what she loved. And I knew what she liked. I could read her body like a book. I knew all her erogenous zones and knew exactly what needed to be done to her.

"Oh, my God, Ben! Don't stop! Don't stop!" I thrust two fingers into her pussy while I licked her clit. She came fast, her strong muscles tightening around my fingers, pulling them in deeper. She had to have been as on edge as I'd been for the past forty-eight hours. I'd never seen her go that fast.

"Uh, uh, uh! Oh!" She was moaning and shaking, and I could feel her pulsing on my fingers.

"Oh, God," she said in a sigh when she came down from the orgasm. "Oh, my God!"

"Did you like that?" I teased her. "You like me eating your pussy like an ice cream cone?" I didn't wait for a response. I dived back in, slurping at her clit until she was twitching again, clawing at my back.

She was pulling at my hair, rocking her hips against my face. The chair was tipping and thumping against the floor, and I was pretty sure the downstairs neighbors were going to complain. But I didn't care. I couldn't stop. I drove my fingers into her harder, nipping and sucking at her clit the way I knew drove her wild.

"Ben!" she cried out. "Oh, God! I'm going to come again!" Her entire body was shaking, and I could feel her thighs trembling around me. "I'm coming!" She'd be raw from the scraping my stubble was doing on her skin, but she didn't seem to mind. When I heard the grunt of satisfaction, I turned my eyes upward to look at her.

Her eyes were shut tightly, mouth hanging open. Her chin was tucked to her chest and her entire upper body shook with spasms. I loved doing this to her, knowing I had this power over her. Every gasp of pleasure was a direct result of something I did, and I loved it.

I pulled my fingers from her pussy and brought them to my mouth, licking them clean. She tasted so good. I wanted to fill her pussy up with my cum, to pump myself into her until I exploded and spill my seed into her. I reached down to my pants and freed my cock.

"Ben!" she gasped. "What are you doing?" Georgia pushed her chair back from the table and the feet ground over the tile. "I thought we agreed . . ."

"Shh," I told her, crawling out from under the table and rising up. I kissed her hard, cupping her cheeks. "I'm going to fuck you," I said simply as I lined up my cock and thrust into her, filling her up. She cried out, her fingers digging into my back. "I'm not stopping until you come."

"Yes!" she cried out, and I began pounding into her. Her pussy was hot and wet, and her inner muscles squeezed my cock, making me want to fill her with my cum.

"Yes, God! Harder, Ben! Harder!" she cried out.

Every bit of her protesting, pretending we didn't belong together like this, faded away as I drove into her. She whimpered, kissing me and pulling my

shoulders toward her.

"In you?" I asked, knowing my threshold was close.

She shook her head and bit her lip. I reached into my pants pocket, slowing my thrusts. I'd planned every second of this. I wasn't going to let anything ruin this moment. In two swift movements, I tore the condom wrapper open and pulled out, then rolled it on and slid back into her.

"We can't keep doing this," she panted between kisses.

"We can and we will." I bit her lower lip, and she whimpered again. When I reached up under her shirt and pinched a nipple, squeezing her tit in my hand, I knew I hit the jackpot. She milked me, convulsing around my cock like a vise grip. We met each other in orgasm, moaning and panting.

When I pulled out, our eyes met in an awkward stare. I stayed there, kneeling between her legs as she sat on the chair in utter shock. I knew sex wasn't the way to this woman's heart, but it was a good way to get her attention, and I knew she couldn't resist me. "I'm not giving up, Geo. I'm going to prove to you that you can trust me. Even if the only way I can prove it is by telling you I want you and then following that up with actions that prove it, time and again." I cupped her cheek, ready to kiss her again, and I heard the elevator chime. Her eyes shot toward the door as the sound of voices drew near it.

"Oh, crap!" she hissed, pushing her chair back quickly. She hopped up, shorts and panties still dangling from one ankle, and raced into the bedroom, slamming the door. I got up so fast I scraped my back along the underside of the table and nearly knocked the chair over.

I could hear Charlie's voice at the door. He'd come home earlier than I thought he would. Flustered, I tugged the condom off and raced to the trash can. Cum still dripped from my dick as I tucked it back into my pants and zipped the zipper. My shirt was half tucked, my hair a mess, but I rushed back, picked up the condom wrapper, and righted the chair under the table just as the door swung open.

"Hey, Ben," Charlie said, grinning. "This is Jordan." He gestured over his shoulder, and Jordan waved at me.

"Hi, Dr. Wilks. I have to go home now. Thanks for letting Charlie hang out. We had fun."

"No problem, Jordan. Be safe." I waved at him, acutely aware of the condom wrapper wadded up in my hand. I felt like a child who'd just been caught stealing. The rush of adrenaline made me a little lightheaded.

“Where’s Mom?” Charlie sang out, plopping on the couch. He lay down and propped his feet up on the armrest, and I playfully pushed his shoes off.

“Mom’s in the bedroom changing. No shoes on the couch.” I glanced at the table. “You hungry?”

“Nah, Jordan’s mom fed me. Where’s Hank? Can I walk him?” he asked, sitting up. “I’m sick of being inside all day.”

“Just a few more days of playing it safe, bud.” I tousled his hair and jammed the condom wrapper into my pocket. This hiding from him any semblance of a relationship was getting to the point that it was unfair to him. If we had just told him we wanted alone time, he’d know we were in a relationship and we wouldn’t have had to cut that moment short. Not to mention the fact that he deserved to know the truth.

“I hate playing it safe.” He rolled his eyes just as Georgia walked out and instantly sobered, squaring his shoulders. I could tell he had a great deal of respect for her, even while still being a little boy with an attitude. It made me smile as I sat down next to him.

Georgia and I hadn’t discussed it yet, but I knew it was time. I looked up at her as I said to him, “Charlie, there is something your mother and I have to tell you.”

Her eyes grew wide, fear flitting through her expression momentarily, before her shoulders fell and she nodded. She sank onto the couch on the other side of her son, and I scratched my forehead, not knowing how to break into the topic.

“You guys are dating? Does that mean we’re not going back to the ship?” His question surprised me that he was that astute, though he was very misguided.

“Well, honey, that’s complicated.” She rested her hand on his thigh. “We’re not exactly dating.”

“What, then?” Charlie looked from me to his mother and back.

“Charlie, I’m your dad.” I let the words sink in as he looked at me, confused. I hoped Georgia would chime in, but I could tell she was nervous, maybe afraid, so I continued. “Your mom loves you so much, she did what was best for you the last eight years.”

“I’m eight years old.”

“Yes, you are. And for the past eight years, she didn’t tell you about me because we live so far away from each other.” I angled my body to face him more directly and sighed. “She didn’t want you to have to be passed back and

forth from here to a ship.”

“Wait . . . Why don’t you just come to the ship? How do you know you’re my dad?” His hurt little eyes probed me, and that is when Georgia finally spoke.

“Baby, remember how I told you about where babies come from?” she hummed, clearly a professional at this. She knew what she was doing better than I ever could. Charlie nodded, but his eyebrows were still furrowed. “Well, Ben and I . . . Well, we . . .”

“You had sex?” he blurted out, and she burst out laughing, covering her mouth.

“Yes, we did.” She shook her head. “Where did you hear about that word?”

Charlie shrugged. “Some kids on the ship once. I know what sex is, Mom.”

“But you’re eight . . .” she mumbled, still stifling a grin.

“What your mom is trying to say is that when two people love each other very much and they make a baby, they make a family. Our family has been separated for too long, and I think it’s time we weren’t separated anymore.” I stared into Georgia’s eyes as Charlie ran a hand through his hair. I could tell we’d have a dozen more difficult questions to answer, but for right now, the important thing was making her know how committed I was to her and to our son.

“So, are we living here now? What about my Xbox on the ship?”

It was my turn to hide a grin. If his Xbox was the thing he was worried most about, I didn’t think this would be as bad as we feared. “We’ll talk about that later. Can you give your mom and me a chance to talk?” I said, patting his head. “Go have a bath, okay? You’re dirty from playing at the park. If you need anything, you call me and I’ll come help.”

Charlie got up and walked out obediently, and I swallowed hard. Now the tough conversation would happen. Georgia may not have been ready for this, but I was. I just needed her to see how ready I truly was.

Georgia

I stirred the macaroni in the pan on the stovetop while I pinched my phone between my ear and shoulder. It wasn't exactly gourmet, but I hoped Ben and Charlie would appreciate having dinner when they both came home—Ben from work and Charlie from Jordan's. It also made me feel a little more at ease with how things went down the other day between Ben and Charlie. I wasn't quite ready to spring the news on him yet, but with the way Ben had disarmed me with his charm, I didn't even protest. It didn't go half as badly as I thought it would, but it did leave Charlie asking a lot of questions.

"I'm so happy things are working out. Do you think you'll end up sticking around Hudson a while?" Mindy asked, her melodic voice crooning in my ear. She'd been pressuring me to put down roots here ever since I told her Ben was Charlie's father.

"I don't know, girl. My heart is at sea. I've had such a great career on the ship. I think it's nice here, but I'm more of a mermaid." I chuckled at the running joke we had. Mindy thought I was like a siren since I lived at sea and sang for a living. I felt the metaphor fit well and played into it.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pressure you at all. I know how you feel and I'm trying not to allow my personal feelings to get involved."

I knew she and I had hit it off well, but the personal feelings she was referring to were ones that she'd had long before she met me. "It must be difficult knowing you have a child out there somewhere and you can't see

them. I do hope one day, you can reunite with them.” Mindy felt strongly that families should be together, and so did I. I just wished Ben would consider an on-board job to be with us. I hadn’t even asked him, but I seriously doubted he would.

“Anyway, let’s not get all boo-hooy. How about you tell me about the job postings you’ve seen? Did you hear back about tryouts on Broadway? I heard it’s so difficult to get in there.”

I set the spoon to the side and opened the refrigerator, pulling out the cheese slices and milk. Making homemade mac and cheese the way my mom did when I was a kid was something I hadn’t done in years. With no need to ever cook for myself, I rarely cooked, but it was like riding a bike, and I forgot how much I enjoyed it. I worked on opening cheese slices and cutting them in cubes while I chatted.

“Yeah, so I have called a dozen times and I sent them all the stuff. I guess there is no official tryout until they approve the recordings and things.” The director at the theater wasn’t very helpful, though I was sure it was only because things were super busy or something. Still, I felt a little down that I hadn’t found a decent lead on a job.

“Well, keep calling,” she said, and I heard the key click in the lock. I looked up to see Ben walk in, a frown on his face. He must have had a bad day or something, so I was even more thankful I’d thought about making dinner.

“Thanks, I’m trying.” I focused back on the task of food prep as Ben did his thing.

“I listened to some of your videos on YouTube. You can sing, woman.”

I felt my cheeks warming at her compliment. “My God, you’re so sweet. I can’t believe you went and looked them up.” It felt amazing to be supported by friends. I wondered if Ben ever took time to look up my videos on YouTube. I glanced at him and saw him watching me as he sat on the sofa.

“Seriously, and you are gorgeous in your stage makeup and costume. I am so jealous. How do you get your hair to do that?” Mindy made me feel encouraged after weeks of looking for a job and getting no response or rejections.

“Look, you’re pretty hot yourself, hun.” I turned off the burner and moved the pan off the heat, then reached into the cupboard for the colander. As I straightened and put the colander in the sink, I noticed Ben’s scowl was now a glare aimed at me. I felt my gut tighten. “Hey, I think I need to go. I’m

going to need both hands to finish cooking.”

“Oh, yeah, no problem. I’ll talk to you tomorrow?”

“Sure thing. I’ll call you. Bye-bye.” I hung up the call and set my phone down, then strained the macaroni and set the pan back on the burner to warm up and melt the cheese, which I dumped in along with a splash of milk.

“Who was that?” Ben asked, abruptly standing and moving toward me. I could tell his bad day at work had him on edge. I smiled at him but kept my focus on the food so it didn’t burn or stick. Before I got a chance to respond, he snapped at me. “Are you dating someone else?”

For a moment, I just stood there wondering why he would make that assumption. Mindy had become a close friend over the past few weeks, but he hadn’t once asked me about her or even what I did when he was at work. I never felt it was a pressing issue to bring up, so he knew nothing about her.

“Ben, did you have an okay day at work?” Rather than being confrontational, I wanted to head this off before it turned into something heated. It was obvious to me that his frustration wasn’t about whom I was speaking to.

“Answer my question. I have a right to know about people in my son’s life.” Ben leaned over the bar and stared at me. I had no obligation to disclose the identity of the person to whom I was speaking, and given his attitude, I had no desire to do so, either.

“Who I talk to and who I date are none of your business. I’ve tried to explain to you a number of times that I am not staying here. I am returning to the ship and my career.” My heart wrenched in my chest at the words because the more he apologized and showered me with attention and affection, the more I wanted to stay. I just couldn’t give up my career.

He huffed out a loud sigh and ran a hand through his dark waves. The storm brewing in his hazel eyes concerned me, but I reminded myself that his bad mood was not my fault. “Look, Ben, I can tell you’ve had a rough day. Do you want to talk about it?” I slowly stirred the dish while the cheese melted and watched his jaw tighten.

“We have to talk about this, Georgia. Because I’m going to be a huge part of Charlie’s life now. If you’re dating someone else, they will be too. I should have some say in who that is.”

Jealousy didn’t look good on him, and I didn’t even care that he thought I was dating someone else. He’d never know it, but I hadn’t really dated anyone since him. Sure, there were a few guys over the years, one-night

stands. But he ruined my heart when he vanished, made me mistrust everyone around me. My chin dropped to my chest, eyes focusing on the melty pot of food. He didn't understand, and I felt like he had no intention of being fair, either. He'd hate any man I dated—if I ever dated.

“So you'll let me approve of any woman you date because she would be in Charlie's life too?” I said the words in an even tone, controlled emotion, but he grunted an angry sound out. I fully expected him to blow up and shout at me, but the doorknob clicked and the door swung open. Charlie burst into the room all smiles and bouncing.

“Mom! Jordan has the new Fortnite game. He let me drive the shopping cart!” Charlie's forehead was covered in a thin layer of sweat, and I knew he'd been running. It was great that he felt well enough to do so, but it worried me that he would make his head injury worse before it healed. I didn't want any delays in his treatment.

“Bud, your mom and I were just talking.” Ben's stern tone made me glower at him.

“It's okay, Ben. We can finish talking later. Charlie, baby, you need to stay calm, remember? No running or jumping yet. Just a few more days.” I tried to smooth things over, but I knew when “later” happened, Ben would be angry with me for not shooing Charlie away now. “Go to the sink and wash your hands. Dinner is ready.” I glanced at the table. “Ben, can you get the bowls out?”

He sulked to the cabinet and got out the dishes while I poured three glasses of milk to go along with our food. Charlie washed his hands and helped Ben set the table. Then I served each of us a heaping spoonful of the macaroni. The air was thick with tension, but every time Charlie spoke it lightened things up. Still, Ben persisted in pressing me. At least he managed to keep it professional.

He took a spoonful of food and chewed it for a second, then swallowed hastily and waved his spoon in the air as he spoke. “I'm glad you like spending time with Jordan, Charlie. How many friends do you have on the ship?” His tone was biting. I could tell he was trying to prove a point, and it angered me.

“Not too many.” Charlie shoved food in his mouth, oblivious to the way Ben's question was aimed at proving to me he'd have a better life if he were in a normal setting. I had thought that a hundred times, but we always managed to make it work. There were a few other ship kids, so he wasn't

entirely alone.

“You like having Jordan close by?” Ben prompted, and I glared at him when Charlie wasn’t looking.

“Yes,” Charlie spat, mouth full of food.

“Baby, don’t talk with your mouth full.” If I knew where Ben’s leg was under the table I’d kick him or something. “The weather was nice today. I think tomorrow if it’s as nice, we will go to the park.” I hoped the change of subject thwarted Ben’s pushy line of questioning. He eyed me as he sipped his milk, and I could tell he was still upset, but he didn’t press me further.

The rest of dinner was just as tense, though we focused on Charlie and asking questions about Jordan’s house. When we were finished eating, Ben offered to clean up, so I got Charlie into a bath and avoided the main part of the apartment the rest of the evening. I needed time to think about my options because Ben seemed to have very strong feelings about things that I wasn’t really ready to address yet.

Ben

I cleaned the dishes and table, then swept the floor. I waited for more than an hour for Georgia to come out after taking Charlie to bed but I knew she was avoiding me. I hadn't meant to act like a jerk at all, so when I sat at the table with a bottle of beer trying to relax, I felt like a complete idiot. My momentary fear that she was with someone else had turned me into a jealous fool, and all I wanted to do was apologize.

When my beer was gone ten minutes later and Georgia still had not come out, I knew I wasn't going to sleep unless I made things right. I tiptoed down the hallway and listened at the door but heard nothing. Still, the light was on. I could see its fingers stretching beneath the door, reaching for my bare toes. She was awake, or she had fallen asleep with the light on. Either way, I wanted to speak with her, even if it was to flip the light off and say a quick "I'm sorry."

I mustered my courage and tapped on the door with a knuckle, holding my breath.

"Yeah?" she called, and I heard the tension in her voice.

"Can I come in?" I said quietly, knowing Charlie had only just laid down and his room was across the hall.

A few seconds passed, my heart pounding, and I heard the lock click. That didn't make me feel any better. She was so upset she had locked me out of my own bedroom. I sighed as the door swung open to reveal her curvaceous body wearing only a red nightie. Any other night, I'd have been

ogling her, ready to get handsy, but tonight, my soul was crushed. She stepped aside, and I walked in and sat on the foot of the bed while she shut the door.

“Geo, I’m sorry.”

“I asked you not to call me that.” She crossed her arms over her chest, making her boobs push upward slightly.

“What am I supposed to call you, then? You were my best friend. You were the woman my heart belonged to even if I couldn’t say it at the time. You kept me motivated and driven. And I was a fool for leaving you. I was young and stupid, and I’m sorry. But more importantly, I’m sorry for attacking you that way this evening. You didn’t deserve that.”

She tapped her foot, an expression on her face that told me she didn’t believe me, but I knew the only way to apologize was to give no excuse, own my mistake, and admit my failure. She was silent, staring at me with a hard glare. I deserved that, and I wasn’t about to ask her to not be upset with me. I sat there with my shoulders slumped feeling like a wet blanket.

“And?” she asked, tapping a manicured finger on her arm.

“And nothing. I’m sorry. I was an idiot.”

Her face softened, and she stood straighter, then walked toward me. “No excuse? No explanation?” Georgia sat down next to me, and the bed shook. I wanted to take her hand, but I had forfeited that right a long time ago. I had even crossed lines recently that I should never have crossed. I didn’t respect her boundaries when she said no more sex because I knew I could convince her the way I used to.

“I’m really sorry, Georgia.” I looked up into her eyes, and she crinkled her nose.

“Yeah, don’t call me that. Call me Geo. It sounds better.” Her slight smile told me I was forgiven, but I refused to push the boundaries this time. I loved this woman more than life itself, and it was time that I began to actually put her first and love her.

“If you’re dating someone else, that’s okay. I know you’d never bring anyone into Charlie’s life who wasn’t good for him. And I’m sorry for being so jealous.” It was everything I could do not to touch her, so I locked my hands together in my lap.

“I’m not dating anyone,” she admitted, and our eyes met again. “That was Mindy. She’s a woman I met at the coffee shop a few weeks ago, and we’ve been chatting. She’s a doctor at Hudson too, super sweet. Anyway, we really

hit it off.”

My heart soared at the confession, but I remained compassionate and reserved. Just because Georgia was single didn't mean she was mine. I wanted this to work more than she'd ever know, but I knew the challenges and hurdles I faced to make it happen. I had a very long uphill battle ahead of me to convince her to stay in Hudson, and I had no idea how to do it.

“Are you okay? You had a rough day?” she asked, once again being the amazing, compassionate woman I knew her to be. She had tried to get through to me earlier, but I hadn't even listened to her.

“Lost a patient. A sixteen-year-old battling double pneumonia with an already tragic case of asthma. His parents were devastated, and as you can tell, so am I.” My heart sank again just recounting the moment I had to tell his parents he didn't make it. Georgia reached out and pried my hands apart, taking one of them between hers.

“Oh, Benny, my God, that must be hard.” She kissed my knuckles, and I saw tears forming in her eyes.

“God, I hate myself for taking work stress out on you. I swear I'm not like this.” I had to look away because I felt tears welling up too. I had not acted like the man I wanted to be earlier.

“Listen,” she said, putting her arms around me. She pulled me in for a tight hug. It was awkward with us sitting side by side, but I felt comforted by it. “I know you're not that man. That's how I knew immediately that something had gone wrong at work. Okay? And as for all the challenging things we need to talk about, I think we need to have that conversation when neither of us is hungry, tired, or already upset. We need to think objectively about what's best for Charlie.”

I didn't want to let her go, but when she pulled away, I released her. My instinct to use physical touch for comfort had to be squashed because I needed to respect her boundaries. More than that, I needed to show her I really loved her, and that meant putting her first.

“Maybe I should get changed and lie down. You're tired.” I stood, but she caught my hand, so I stopped and looked down at her. The view down the front of her nightie was too tempting to turn away, and she caught me looking at her.

“Stay?” she asked. There was no playfulness or naughty expression, just eyes full of love and compassion.

“I want to respect your boundaries now, Geo. You said no more sex and

that it's complicating things. I feel like you're sending mixed signals." I hovered, praying she asked again, that she was starting to feel like she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

"I know . . ." She looked down at our hands, laced together. "So maybe we don't have sex. Maybe we make love."

My body lit on fire at her words. "Yeah?" I asked her, still testing the waters. "You know what that means to me, Geo. You can't say that and lead me on and then tear my heart out."

Georgia stood and looked up at me. "I'm not trying to lead you on. I know all of this is as confusing for me as it is for you, but you are my absolute best friend in the entire world. What we had years ago never went away for me, Ben. And right now, all I can think about is being comforted by my best friend. So whether this turns into something or not, we can just enjoy the time we have."

My heart wanted to protest because the "time we have" wasn't long enough for me. I wanted forever. I just didn't want to pressure her right now and ruin the fragile bridge we were rebuilding between our hearts. She floated toward the door, quietly locking it before returning to my side and lacing her fingers through mine again.

"I love you, Georgia Lane, and I'm going to prove to you how much I mean that. You'll see." I cupped both of her cheeks, not giving her a chance to respond. I didn't want some emotion-driven response that she loved me too. If and when she said it back to me, I wanted her to mean it all in her own right. I kissed her gently, nipping at her upper lip, and she began unbuttoning my shirt.

As Georgia removed my shirt, I felt my heart rate increasing with excitement. Her touch was electric, sending shivers down my spine. I could feel her love and affection through her touch, and it only made me love her more. I could sense her hesitation, her fear of complicating things, but I couldn't resist the urge to be with her. I pulled her closer, deepening the kiss, and she responded with equal passion. Our tongues danced together, exploring each other's mouths as our bodies pressed closer. I could feel her curves against my chest, and I let out a small moan of pleasure.

Georgia pulled away for a moment, gazing into my eyes with a look of pure adoration. She shimmied out of her nightie, then slipped her panties off. "I want you, Ben," she whispered.

The words sent a rush of desire through me, and I knew I couldn't resist

her any longer. I lifted her up and carried her to the bed, laying her down gently. I climbed on top of her, my hands roaming over her body, and she arched her back in pleasure. We explored each other's bodies, taking our time to savor every moment. It wasn't just about physical pleasure, it was about expressing our love for each other in the most intimate way possible.

I kissed down her body, and she wrapped her legs around my head, holding me to her as I pleased her with my tongue. I loved the feel of her skin against my lips, and her moans of pleasure were driving me wild with desire, even as quiet as they were. With Charlie in the room next door, she was a church mouse, not the banshee I knew her to be.

She pulled me back up to her lips and kissed me deeply, her tongue exploring my mouth. Every inch of me was craving her. I wanted to be inside her. I wanted to feel her body against mine, to feel her heart beating against my chest. I needed all of her.

"God, I forgot a sleeve," I moaned as she fumbled with my belt buckle.

"Forget about it," she said hastily as she freed my cock and stroked it. "You know I'll take care of you."

Her confidence drove me wild with excitement. I kissed her hard again as she curled her legs up and hooked her toes in the waistband of my slacks and boxers. God, she was so sexy when she did that. She pushed hard, forcing them down, and I raised my knees off the bed so they'd slide all the way to my ankles. As soon as my knees hit the mattress, I wiggled my legs out of them.

"I want you in me," she whispered before kissing me hard again. I pinched one of her nipples and twisted it, swallowing the yelp of pain she let out as she arched upward into me.

"I want to be in you so bad too." I positioned myself at her entrance as she wrapped her arms around my neck, kissing me hard. She guided me inside her, and I slowly sank into her warm, wet depths.

Georgia kissed me with all the passion she possessed, and as I began to thrust, the kiss intensified as if she was trying to get me to go deeper. Her tongue and lips were on fire, her moans muffled in my mouth. She wrapped her legs around me, running her heels up the backs of my thighs as I thrust harder. She was so tight, it took every bit of my control not to come. I wanted to feel her orgasm around my cock, feel her spasming as her body was overcome with ecstasy.

I reached down between us and started playing with her clit as I thrust

into her. Her moans got louder, and she wrapped her arms around my back, her nails digging into my skin as she tensed up.

"Baby," she moaned, her voice filled with passion, "I'm going to come."

"Shh," I told her. "Come for me." I thrust into her hard as I felt her orgasm begin, and I watched her close her eyes, her mouth open in a silent scream. Her body was completely still as I pounded into her, her pussy clenching and unclenching around my cock. She opened her eyes and kissed me hard, her tongue darting in and out of my mouth as she came. She held my head to her as I thrust into her, and her heart pounded against her chest and my cheek.

When she calmed, I was grateful. I had a difficult time controlling it and almost dumped my load. I slowed, pausing for a moment to quiet the nerve endings in my throbbing dick. She lay there panting and pushed hair out of her eyes. "Wow," she breathed, and I agreed.

"Wow is right." I began thrusting again, feeling the pressure lessen a little. I knew I had a bit more in me.

"Not like this," she whispered, patting the bed. The grin on her face sent another wave of arousal through my body. "Lay down," she said, and I obeyed.

I lay on my back as she got to all fours. I thought she'd straddle my dick, but she turned around and straddled my chest and it made my pulse race faster. I gripped her hips as she backed up to my face and lowered her lips to my dick. Her pussy dripped with sticky, sweet moisture.

I lifted my head and thrust my tongue into her, feeling her shudder. She moaned and grabbed my dick, stroking me as she licked me from tip to balls. I felt her tongue flit across the sensitive underside of my shaft, and I moaned into her pussy. I thrust my tongue into her, swirling it around, licking her from her clit to her entrance.

I felt her shudder and reached up to play with her breasts, kneading them through the lace of her bra. I moved my head in time with her strokes, harder and faster, thrusting my tongue into her pussy as far as I could. I felt her tremble as she neared another orgasm, and she moaned quietly.

"I'm going to come again," she hissed, and I felt myself pulse in her hand, the warmth spreading through my body.

She shuddered as she came, and her muscles clenched my tongue as she rode it. It was like a waterfall. I licked and slurped her moisture, then slid a few fingers into her pussy to egg her on. My ministrations worked,

intensifying her orgasm. She took me into her mouth so deep I felt her throat constrict around me and I felt the vibrations of muffled screams, choked out by the sheer girth of my cock.

"Oh, God," I moaned, pulling my tongue from her for only a second. I felt my balls tighten and my dick pulse as I came in her mouth, the warmth spreading out from my loins like it was going to fill me. It took every bit of my willpower to keep my head up and watch her as I came. She gulped down my cum and swallowed, and I felt her tongue slide along my length as she cleaned me up.

I lay there, watching her, totally spent, and the most satisfied feeling I've ever felt began to spread through my body. She climbed off me and lay next to me, her head pillowed on my chest. I could taste her on my lips, a taste I'd never gotten sick of. I wrapped my arm around her and held her close to me for a few minutes, in heaven.

"Stay here?" she asked, fiddling with the few hairs on my chest. The request tore me right down the middle. If this was just sex, I could probably get over that when she left on a ship. But she was pulling my heartstrings now.

"Babe," I whispered, hesitating.

"Please, Benny. I don't want to sleep alone tonight."

It had been exactly eight years since we'd slept together all night, a feeling I hadn't ever experienced with any other woman. A feeling I wanted to keep for only her, but if I did this and she left, my heart would never recover.

"Geo . . ." I said, hesitating more.

"It's okay if you don't want to. I understand." When she said the words, I turned to face her and forced her to turn into me. I wasn't about to give her the idea that I didn't want this because it was the only thing I wanted.

And so began the uphill battle, even if my heart was a casualty of this war . . .

Georgia

I woke to an empty bed again, though I knew he stayed with me until the sun began to rise. He probably didn't want Charlie to see him coming from my room. That was okay with me. The fact that he was trying to protect Charlie's innocence of the matter, given how complicated things were getting, was a bright spot in an otherwise cloudy sky.

The bed was comfortable, but I knew we had to get to the hospital first thing. Charlie was set to have another scan of his head today to see how he was healing. If all went well, we'd be setting a surgery date for around three weeks out. I was terrified of that, and my hands shook as I dressed. I picked a simple pair of khaki shorts and a pink Polo shirt—hair tied back in a rubber band—and made my way out to the kitchen where Ben had a veritable feast prepared.

Charlie sat at the table smashing his eggs and bacon. Ben even made silver-dollar hotcakes, and Charlie had a few of those on a plate next to his protein. I was impressed. It felt like one of those movies where the family is so happy and the father kisses the mother on the cheek as she sits down to the delicious meal. Except, we weren't exactly a family, at least not that type, and Ben did not kiss me, though my cheek ached to feel that.

"Good morning, how did you two sleep?" I asked as I sat across from Charlie. He nodded his head as he chewed a huge bite of food. He didn't speak with his mouth full, which was actually a shock to me.

"Good, how about you?" Ben said, sliding a plate loaded heavily with

food in front of me. My stomach growled, but I was afraid to eat. My nerves were on edge, and that anxiety often gave me nausea. But I didn't want to turn away Ben's act of kindness, not after what he did to comfort me last night.

"Slept fine," I mumbled as I picked up the fork he placed next to the plate and dug in. I took tiny bites, watching Charlie inhale his food.

"So good!" Charlie exclaimed as he took his first bite of pancakes. I looked around at the kitchen counters, covered with ingredients and dirty dishes. Ben really went all out. I was impressed.

"Don't eat so fast, kid. You're going to throw up." Ben chuckled at him and winked at me. My heart felt full, but it also felt conflicted. Allowing myself to feel settled in this lifestyle meant it would be harder for me to say goodbye. The ship was all I had for the past ten years, and I didn't want to give that up. A huge war raged in my heart to build a wall and not feel this way, but part of me wanted nothing more than this.

We chatted while we ate then finished getting ready. Ben rinsed all the dirty dishes, promising to wash them all later on. I was a bundle of nerves as we headed out in his car, and he offered to stop by the coffee shop on the way. I didn't really think I needed coffee, but any distraction was a good thing.

Mindy was there, in line how I usually found her when we ran into each other here. She beamed as I walked in, offering Charlie an instant hug. "Hey, guys!"

"Hey, Mindy." I accepted a hug too, then gestured in Ben's direction. "This is Ben, the friend I told you about."

Ben reached out his hand and smiled knowingly. "Hey, Dr. Scriber. Early shift this morning?"

I stepped back, giving them space to speak. I didn't realize they knew each other, but it wasn't a huge hospital.

"Not really. This is my normal thing. I like to be there early so I can sit and enjoy my coffee." She tousled Charlie's hair. "Today's the day, huh?" she asked Charlie, and he nodded.

"Mom said I can have a chocolate milk," he sang out, grinning. Then he walked toward the glass case where they had different pastries and breads displayed.

"Ben, Mindy is the friend I was telling you about." I hoped this put his conscience at ease, that I was being truthful with him. Jealousy wasn't a look

I liked on him.

“I’m so happy you two met,” he said, folding his hands in front of himself. I could tell he was being genuine and that he was very happy for me. It put my heart a tiny bit at ease.

Still, thoughts about the test today and what the scan would reveal plagued me. Even after that chance greeting with Mindy at the coffee shop and how happy Charlie was to get a chocolate milk, my hands still shook. We drove to the hospital, and my anxiety only got worse. Ben and Charlie seemed to be unaffected by anything. I felt like a fool.

“It’s really okay,” he said, clasping my hand as we sat in the waiting room. The doctors had come already to wheel Charlie back to the lab for his scan, and it was all I could do to keep from crying. Ben’s being here with me was a huge comfort, but nothing even began to touch the fear I had.

We’d see that tumor on the scan again. I knew that much. I was terrified that it had already gotten worse, that things had deteriorated in the two and a half short weeks that had passed, that it was hopeless.

“I’m scared, Ben.”

“I’m here, Geo. Charlie is doing fine. The doctors are going to take great care of him.” He squeezed my hand with one of his, then put his arm around me. At any other point, I might have moved away from him, resisted the physical affection I knew comforted him so much. Today, I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“It’s not that. I know the scan isn’t dangerous. It’s what the results will be. I’m so scared that the tumor has gotten bigger, that they will say they can’t operate anymore.” I blinked, and tears cascaded down my cheeks, dripping onto Ben’s T-shirt.

Some people walked past us talking loudly and said hi to Ben, but I didn’t even look up. I saw their legs and feet in a blur of teary vision. I had pushed this fear away the entire time Charlie was healing from his concussion in the interest of keeping my calm, but it all came to a head now. There was no more pushing it away.

“Look, baby,” he said when his friends walked away. I was oddly comforted by his use of that pet name despite knowing I was very much not his baby. “I know what I’m talking about. Tumors don’t get that bad in two weeks, at least not this kind. Okay? They are just taking the scan to make sure the concussion is healing properly now and not getting worse. Once that’s over, you can rest a bit. I promise.”

I nodded my head, sniffing, and a nurse walked through the door and called my name. “Georgia Lane?”

I sat up and looked at her, swiping at my tears. Ben’s arm never left my side as we stood and followed the nurse down a long hallway. She turned a corner, and we continued weaving and curving past doors until we came to a small patient room. Charlie lay in the exam bed rubbing his eyes. He was groggy. I could see it on his face as I approached.

“You can wait for Dr. Manning and Dr. Thorpe here. They’ll be in shortly,” the nurse said before leaving the room. I hovered over Charlie, lavishing kisses on his forehead.

“Hey, baby, how you doing?”

“I’m sleepy.” He yawned, probably a side effect of whatever drug they gave him to keep him calm during the procedure.

“I know, baby, you can rest. The doctors are coming in soon.” A machine behind him beeped in rhythm with his heart rate, and the clip on his finger glowed red, monitoring his oxygen levels. He closed his eyes and laid his head back, and I pulled a chair up beside him to wait, just as I had done for weeks.

Ben stood next to me with a comforting hand on my shoulder. I expected our short wait to last much longer, the way doctor’s appointments usually go, but the doctors came in within a few minutes. Dr. Thorpe looked happy. Dr. Manning looked like he always looked, a bit stern and grumpy.

“So?” I asked, turning to face them. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and I was certain the only thing that kept it from exploding was Ben’s hand on my shoulder.

“Well, we have some great news.” Dr. Manning’s words did not match his tone or his facial expression as he typed away at the computer mounted on the wall next to the foot of the bed. “The scan showed only minor growth of the tumor.”

Dr. Thorpe walked to Charlie’s bedside and looked down at him, standing on the opposite side as me. He said, “The best news is, Charlie’s concussion is healing much more quickly than we thought.” He looked up at me and continued. “We can move on with his surgery to remove the mass as early as next week. We’d do it sooner, but we have no slots in our schedule until then. We just have to go over a few pre-op things today. Do you have time?”

I felt Ben squeeze my shoulder, and I turned my gaze toward him. He was the one who had taken the morning off to be with me. I didn’t want to do this

alone, but I had to respect his work schedule. He nodded at me to indicate he would stay, and I felt relief wash over me.

“We have time, Owen,” Ben said. I reached up and took his hand into mine, pulling it from my shoulder, and he let me hold it the entire time Dr. Thorpe walked us through what would happen for the surgery.

Something inside my heart had softened to him over the past twelve hours despite how he treated me last night, and I was starting to think life in Hudson was possible. It still terrified me what Charlie had to go through, the risks involved. Still, I did believe he was in good hands here, and Ben’s role in helping me remain calm and collected for my son’s sake had begun to build something between us again that I thought was completely gone.

I didn’t want to give up my career, though, and that thought plagued me still. I had worked so hard in my early twenties to make sure my singing career went somewhere—tours, time in a studio, hard work with vocal coaches. I put everything I had into making my brand and image what they were, and to just walk away from all of that was a heartbreaking thought.

I listened intently to what Dr. Thorpe said, but my heart was still heavy. I didn’t feel any better now than I had earlier, except for a slight relief to my anxiety about the tumor’s size. I just wanted this nightmare to end.

Ben

I pushed the swing higher and higher as Charlie cackled and laughed. It was the first time he'd been fully allowed to be himself, running and playing like normal. Following the appointment, I told my supervisor that I was taking the rest of the day off to spend with my son. It was a prideful moment for me, relishing the fact that I could openly tell people I was a father. Georgia still believed Charlie should be resting, but she trusted my expertise as a doctor, if nothing else.

"Higher!" Charlie cheered, but I noticed him not hanging on with his right hand. It worried me, and I saw Georgia gesture to slow down. I was glad she respected me. As a mother, it was her job to worry about our kid, and Charlie liked to play daredevil at times. I'd seen that with my own eyes.

"Slow down there, cowboy. Let's check out the jungle gym." I grabbed the swing, bringing it gently to a halt, and Charlie climbed off, racing toward the playground equipment. He was gone in a flash, and I breathed a deep breath, feeling almost winded. "That kid has so much energy." I walked over and sat down next to her on the park bench, and we watched Charlie climb up the ladder to the slide above.

"That he does. You should see him in a swimming pool." Georgia chuckled. It was so good to see him free, and it was even better seeing the smile on Georgia's face. I could tell she really loved him a lot, and that made my heart full. I enjoyed being fun and free with Charlie, but I did have my reservations about my ability to be a father to him. He had hardly spoken to

me about my being his father, which I chalked up to the fact that he was still recovering from a head wound and enjoying an experience that didn't include scheduled meals and sea sickness.

"I'd love to see him splashing in a pool and having a great time. Probably not any more this year, but next year for sure." As I said the words, I noticed a hint of sadness enter Georgia's eyes. I knew how much her job on the ship meant to her and how hard she'd worked to build that life for herself.

I had been there when she applied for the job as the cruise ship singer. When she went to the interview, I had been the one who drove her there. She was a nervous wreck, and I calmed her down by buying ice cream. So when she landed the gig, she took me to dinner. Looking back, I can see how she thought those were dates. At the time, I thought they were just things friends did for each other. I hadn't asked her to commit to me because I knew in my heart that I would be going off to do my residency somewhere once my applications were approved.

I did love her, though, and I had given a lot of thought to asking her to follow me. But when she got the job, it cemented it for me. She was wed to the sea, and I felt like her taking that job was her telling me how 'not serious' our relationship was to her. I was forced to push away everything I felt or wanted to support her, and I would have done it a million times the same way. She never gave me any indication that she wanted something other than that.

"Look, Geo, I—"

"My gosh, he's always so careless," she said, waving her hand in the air at him frantically. I turned to watch Charlie try to climb the monkey bars with only one hand. I knew it wasn't his being careless. He was revealing a symptom of his brain tumor, weakness or loss of movement in one limb.

"Hey, go easy," I coaxed, bringing her hand down. I held it in my lap until she looked at me with frustration.

"He's going to get hurt." She pulled her hand away and stood, and I stood too. She was right. Charlie could be injured, so we moved that way, but as we did I explained to her what was actually happening.

"Geo, that's not him being a daredevil, okay? That's actually a sign of what's going on in his brain. If you watch carefully, he does it a lot. He is right-hand dominant, but he uses his left hand for most physical things now."

Her eyes trained on him as we got closer, squinting. "What do you mean?"

“I mean, one of the symptoms of the tumor is weakness or loss of motor control on one side of his body. Now, don’t freak out,” I told her as I saw her expression changing to fear. “We know what’s happening, and we’re going to correct it. Okay? And we got it early enough that everything will go back to normal once the tumor is gone.”

“My God, I’ve been seeing this for months. I thought he was just trying to prove he was strong or something.” Her eyes welled up with tears, and I rested my hand on the small of her back.

“Charlie!” I called, rubbing my thumb up and down against her shirt. “Time to come down.”

“I’m ready to go, Ben. I am worried it’s hot and he’s just going to get too tired. I think he needs a nap.” She stepped away from me as he descended the slide, zipping toward the earth in a windy spiral. His feet hit the ground, and he ran over to us and grinned.

“I saw you holding hands,” he taunted, pointing and sticking his tongue out. “You guys are dating, aren’t you?”

Georgia blushed, and I ruffled his hair a bit. “Let’s get to the car. I think we need a snack and a nap.”

“Aw, Ben . . . I mean, Dad . . .” He looked confused. “What am I supposed to call you?” Charlie’s little pudgy face finally reminded me of myself for the first time since I’d met him. I had no idea what to answer him. I didn’t want to pressure Georgia at all, and I wasn’t about to step on her toes. As far as I was concerned, I’d be delighted if he called me Dad, but I was the newcomer in this family and I wanted to tread lightly.

“Well, bud,” she said, starting to walk toward the car. He reached up and took her hand, and we walked together. “I think you should decide. What do you think you should call him?”

Charlie shrugged hard with his left shoulder. “I think Dad since he’s my dad. Is that okay?”

My heart soared when Georgia said, “That sounds good, baby.”

We spent most of the drive across town in silence, and Charlie was dozing by the time we got to my apartment. I carried him up and tucked him into bed, then returned to the living room where Georgia was lounging on the couch. She looked as tired as Charlie, and after the anxiety-inducing morning, even I needed a nap. I sat down at the far end, and she scooted toward me until her head was lying in my lap. I stroked her hair lightly, thinking about the question I wanted to ask her at the park before she cut me

off. Now was as good a time as any.

“Geo, have you thought about what life would be like here in Hudson if you stayed? I mean, I could help you get a job doing something you love. Charlie would have regular friends, and we could send him to the best schools.” She didn’t answer right away, so I continued stroking her hair. The awkward silence ate away at my resolve, and I had to speak again to break the tension. “I wasn’t exaggerating or lying when I told you I love you the other night. I mean that with my whole heart. I really screwed up eight years ago. I just want a chance to make that right.”

Georgia sat up, turning to face me. Her eyes were brimming with emotion, bottom lip almost trembling as she spoke. “You know what I went through to get that job, Ben. You know what it means to me. I can’t give that up. Living in Hudson isn’t going to work out long-term. I’m already taking a risk by staying here.”

I felt my gut twist into a knot at her answer, but I wasn’t going to let it get to me. “So you’ve thought about it?”

“I have,” she said, her voice almost a whisper.

At least she’d thought about it. That was more than I assumed had happened. I was getting somewhere, albeit very slowly, but progress was being made. “Well, if you won’t consider moving here permanently, will you consider making love to me again? Because your body is really frickin’ hot and I can’t seem to keep my hands off it.”

The compliment turned the corners of her lips upward, and she nodded. “I think you’re pretty dang sexy yourself.”

“So you’re saying that’s a yes?” I asked, feeling my dick stir to life already. She had a way of doing that to me.

“You get the ice, and I’ll meet you in the bedroom.” Georgia winked at me and stood, strolling toward the bedroom door, and I leapt into action. I snagged a cup from the cupboard and filled it to the brim with ice before dashing into the bedroom and locking the door behind myself. We hadn’t been adventurous like this since she came back, and it was exhilarating to know she still had it in her.

She was already naked, resting on the bed in a sexy pose on her side, head propped up on one hand. Her curves were absolutely perfect, fully round tits and thick thighs, just the way I loved my women.

“God, you’re so hot,” I said as I climbed onto the bed next to her, my dick hard as a rock. I’d forgotten how much I loved all this. It was like a drug. I’d

never been with a woman who was as comfortable with her body as Georgia. She was confident and sexy, and it was like a drug in my blood. "Lay down," I commanded, and she did.

Her back arched as she laid her head on the pillow and looked at me with her big, green eyes. Her hand was between her legs, her fingers sliding into her pussy, slick and wet. I held the ice to her chest, the cold stinging my fingers. She looked so hot I wanted to get inside her immediately. The ice melted as I slid it around her navel first, then up over her nipples one at a time, making them hard. Water streamed down her sides and soaked into the comforter.

"Keep your hand right there," I said, kneeling on the bed and moving over her. I lowered my head and flicked my tongue over one of her nipples, swirling it around the hard peak. Her body tensed and her breathing quickened. She hissed and lifted her chest into my face more. "You like that?" I asked, leaning over her and flicking my tongue across her other nipple, then sucking it into my mouth.

"God, yes. The cold, then the heat. Do it again," she moaned.

I scooped up another ice cube from the cup in my hand and iced her other nipple, feeling her whole body shudder with pleasure. I loved how responsive she was beneath me. I let the ice drop to the bed and lowered my body between her legs. I pulled her hand away from her pussy and pushed her thighs apart. She gasped as I slid my fingers inside her. She was so warm and wet.

"Your fingers are so cold," she moaned.

I set the cup on the nightstand as I thrust my fingers into her but claimed one more piece to be cheeky with. I slid it into my mouth while her eyes were shut, and when I relaxed back to my position between her legs, I ran my tongue up and down her slit, tasting her and testing her reactions.

The coldness of my tongue and the ice in my mouth made her gasp in pleasure. Her hands shot out and gripped my hair as her legs shook and squeezed my head between her thighs. My tongue danced around her clit, and she began to writhe beneath me. I loved how she moved her hips when she was turned on. It was sexy as hell. I slid another finger in her as I licked her clit, and she cried out, her body tensing around me.

"Oh, God, Ben, yes," she panted, grinding her hips against my face. I sucked and licked at her folds until she was loud enough I worried she'd wake Charlie. My fingers searched her insides, finding the rough patch that brought

her so much pleasure. Then she was coming, her pussy squeezing my fingers, her hand clenching the comforter. Her body bucked against me, and I tried to keep licking her, but it was impossible. She was so wild, bucking and thrashing. I felt her fingers threading through my hair again, clamping down.

She uttered tight gasps of pleasure through her teeth, spitting slightly as she did so. I loved making her feel this way, hearing her inability to contain the pleasure.

As her body calmed, her legs shook uncontrollably, and I knew it was a really good orgasm. I rose up, kneeling between her legs again, but I continued to slide my fingers in and out of her. She was so kinky at times. If I had a beer bottle, I'd be screwing her with it right now, but all I had were cans, and I wasn't a monster.

"More," she whimpered, reaching for the glass.

I snickered and pulled my hand out of her, climbing off the bed. I quickly undressed and grabbed a piece of ice from the glass and the condom out of my nightstand, placed there this morning before I made breakfast just in case.

"No, more," she whined, arm outstretched, fingers wiggling at the glass.

"More?" I asked her as I tore open the condom wrapper and rolled it on. The ice in my palm chilled my dick. I loved it as much as she did.

"Just do it," Georgia demanded, and how could I deny her?

I took several cubes from the glass and climbed back onto the bed. One by one, I pushed them into her pussy, each time drawing a hiss from her lips. "God, it's so cold," she moaned.

"Yes, well, it's ice."

"Oh, God," she moaned, arching her back.

She was so wet, and her pussy clamped tightly around me, taking me in deeply. The contrast between the heat of her walls and the ice buried within them drove me wild. I thrust once, twice, and the third time was a strong, hard thrust, almost lifting her off the bed. I continued to thrust into her, watching her face contort, her breasts bouncing, her eyes fluttering. I reached up and grabbed her nipples, twisting and pulling. She cried out sharply, and I felt her pussy clench and squeeze my cock harder than ever.

My hands were still cold from holding the ice. I pressed a thumb against her clit while I pushed into her. "Oh, God. Oh, yes. Oh, God," she moaned.

"Come for me, baby. Look at me," I demanded, stroking her clit and thrusting into her at a steady pace.

"I'm looking. Oh, God," she moaned, tensing up.

When her orgasm hit, it was intense. She spasmed over and over, her pussy milking me. I felt the condom slide easily with her juices, and I leaned down, sucking on her nipple. The way she convulsed and shuddered pushed me to the edge, and I felt my balls draw up, ready to release. She cried out again, her hips jerking. I thrust several more times, enjoying the way her body caressed me.

"I'm coming," I grunted, my cock throbbing, balls twitching, shooting my load into the condom. I swallowed hard, trying to stifle my groan so it didn't break the spell.

I didn't stop, though. Not right away. I continued to thrust into her, enjoying her pussy gripping me, milking me. She looked at me through heavy-lidded eyes, her cheeks flushed. Her arms reached up and wrapped around my neck, her lips finding mine. She kissed me, her tongue sliding into my mouth. I kissed her back, loving the way she tasted. I knew I could easily get addicted to her. "Yeah, come for me, baby," I said, my cock still throbbing.

She came again, this time grunting her pleasure into my mouth as I glided in and out of her slowly. Our bodies touched shoulder to knees, a feeling I would never experience with anyone else because my heart belonged to her.

"I love you," I whispered as I felt her muscles relax beneath me. I wanted her to say it back, but she remained silent until I pulled out, condom hanging loosely off my dick as I deflated. The moment was bittersweet—sweet because I felt like we'd come to an understanding of sorts. Bitter because it wasn't what I wanted it to be yet.

At least we were moving in the right direction, even if it was agonizingly slow.

Georgia

I paced the tiny waiting room. After Ben took off last week for the appointment to get the results of the rescan, he was unable to have today completely off. He had to do his rounds this morning while Charlie was in surgery, but he promised to be here as soon as they were done. I was so anxious I chewed my nails, knowing the manicure would be ruined and it would take money to get it fixed. I scolded myself a dozen times but continued to do it anyway.

When the door opened and Mindy walked in, I rushed to her for a hug because what words could even begin to describe how worried I was while my son had his head operated on? She held me for a moment while I shed a few tears then gestured at the couches. “Sit down, hun.”

I sat obediently, and she pulled a tissue out of her pocket and handed it to me so I could blow my nose. My face must have been a wreck. I opted to not even wear makeup today because I knew it would be washed off with my tears.

“How’s it going?” she asked, perched on the edge of the seat angled toward me.

“No news yet. They said three hours or so, but if there were complications it could take up to six.” I kneaded my hands in my lap, crushing the tissue in my grasp. The cold leather sofa was uncomfortable, the chill seeping into my skin. I never understood why they made hospitals so cold all the time.

“Well, no news is good news. At least that’s what they say.” Mindy reached into a pocket and pulled out another tissue. “For later,” she said, handing it to me. I took it and put it in my own pocket. The gesture was sweet, but I was certain I would need an entire box, not just one.

“Yeah,” I breathed, not sure I believed that. “Ben should be here soon. I appreciate your stopping by.”

Mindy wore a lab coat and nice clothes. I knew she was probably on the clock and just checking on me. She knew today was Charlie’s surgery because we had talked about it a number of times. She even knew how scared I was, and she had tried to reassure me just like Ben had.

“Do you want me to stay until he comes? I have a few minutes.” The offer was sweet, but I knew I wasn’t much company. I shrugged.

“Honestly, I think I’d rather be alone right now. I’m sorry. Is that okay?” I wiped my eyes with a dry corner of the tissue, and she nodded.

“I totally understand. You have my number if you need me, okay?” Mindy stood, and I stood with her, hugging her again.

“Thanks for being here for me. I appreciate your friendship more than you know.” I squeezed her hard then let her go.

“No problem, girl. Call me if you need me, okay?” Mindy backed away, vanishing out the door. It clicked into place, and my pacing recommenced. I was wearing a path in the mottled vinyl tiles. My ballet flats clacked on the floor with each step, echoing around the room. It felt hollow and cold, the way my heart felt as I walked on pins and needles.

It was only about fifteen minutes later when Ben walked in, but it felt like a million years. Each second passed by so slowly and agonizingly. I stopped and faced him as he strolled through the door, holding it open for someone else. A nurse followed him in, and my heart froze in place. She was one of the nurses who had cared for Charlie when he had his head injury. She wore blue scrubs and had a stethoscope dangling around her neck. I wondered if she was here with news.

“Hey, Geo, this is Harper. You remember she was one of Charlie’s nurses?” Ben looked handsome in his dark Polo and white lab coat. Being a doctor looked good on him. I always knew it would.

“I do,” I said, holding my breath. It was tormenting not knowing what was going on. “Does she have news?”

“No, sorry, Ms. Lane.” The polite nurse offered a sympathetic expression. “I’m Ben’s good friend. Dr. Thorpe is my husband. I’m just here for moral

support.” She reached into a scrubs pocket and pulled out a tissue, reaching it toward me. Why did everyone think I needed tissues?

“Thank you,” I told her, accepting it.

“You’re welcome.”

“Ben, is there any news?” I focused on him, not sure how a complete stranger would be moral support for me, but that was probably selfish thinking. Ben was probably as worried about this as I was.

“Nothing . . . Just be patient. Have you eaten? Should I get you a snack?” He always fussed over me. Sometimes, it was sweet. Right now, it was annoying. I didn’t want food. I wanted my baby out of surgery and recovering now.

“I’m fine.” I slumped into a seat and rested my elbows on my knees, burying my face in my hands.

“Maybe I should go . . .” the woman, Harper, said.

“It’s okay,” Ben reassured her. He sat next to me and rested a hand on my back, rubbing in a small circle. It was comforting, and it soothed away some of my nerves. We knew each other so well. I could always tell when he was tense or stressed, and he knew the same about me.

“What if something horrible is happening?” I asked him, hands covering my face. “What if they are having complications?”

“What if they are almost finished and about ready to walk through the door with great news?” Ben’s calm demeanor wrapped around my heart like a warm blanket. “It’s going to be okay, Georgia. Owen is the best surgeon in this state. He is taking great care of Charlie.”

I shivered, anxious and unable to warm up thanks to the air conditioning. I didn’t even have to ask. Ben took his coat off and wrapped it around my shoulders. His love overwhelmed me and brought me to tears again. When I looked up, Harper sat on the other side of him, chewing her lip. Even she cared about Charlie, and she knew even less about him than Ben.

“Thank you for being here,” I whispered to both of them through my tears, and they both offered reassuring words.

When my phone began to vibrate in my pocket, I accepted the welcomed distraction. The call was from my boss. I considered ignoring it, but with what was happening, I wanted a reason to think about anything other than Charlie right now.

“Halie, what’s up?” I asked, trying to make my voice calm and steady. It was anything but.

“Did I call at a bad time?” Halie asked, and clearly, she heard the tremors in my voice.

“It’s a good time.” I lied because whatever she had to say was important. She wouldn’t have called me otherwise.

“I called about the rest of the summer. Look, Georgia, I didn’t want to have to do this, but the big wigs up top are calling the shots. They are hiring a new girl to fill in while you’re gone.”

I stood, suddenly wishing I hadn’t taken the call at all. “What do you mean?” I asked, moving straight to the door. I didn’t want Ben to hear this. He’d just get the idea that I could stay here, and I wanted to fight for my career.

“I mean, they’re hiring Sophie Tanner, that singer from the Carnival lines. She is going to do everything until you return. When you return, you’ll have to split weeks with her.” Halie sounded upset by the fact, but I knew she had no choice. She didn’t own the fleet. She answered to the man just like me.

“But Halie, my son is having brain surgery. They don’t understand that I am coming back when he recovers?” I felt panicked, now walking as fast as I could down the corridor toward the exit doors. I felt like a caged animal ready to escape.

“They understand, but it’s not personal. This is a business, Georgia. They have to keep passengers happy, which means entertaining them. You’re not here. They need a singer.”

“Halie, you can’t let them do this to me. Where will I live on off weeks? I have no way to make up for that lost income, either.” Tears streamed down my face even faster. My whole world was imploding. I needed stability, not more issues. “How do I save my job?”

“The only way is to come back faster. Like, now.” Her answer was a kick in the gut.

Charlie’s surgery meant a minimum of a week in the hospital, a few more at home resting, and some therapy before he could go back to sea with me. “It will be Labor Day before I can return, Halie. Charlie is really not well.”

“I’m sorry, girl. My hands are tied. I’m fighting to keep my job over this too.”

My heart sank. For a split second, I considered whether Ben would let me leave Charlie with him so I could do a few weeks at sea and save what I had left of a job, but my heart would never let me do that. My son was too

important to leave him with complete strangers while I was on a ship somewhere singing.

“Yeah, I get it. I’ll see what I can do.”

“I’m sorry, Georgia. I really am. Let me know if anything changes.”

Halie hung up, and I stopped dead in my tracks. This wasn’t fair. I was so upset by the notion that my absence was going to mean losing my job, at least partially. I had worked so hard for this, and I tried so hard to hang on to hope, but nothing was going right.

My phone buzzed again, and I looked down at it. It was a message from Ben. Dr. Thorpe had come with an update. I turned and raced back to the room, almost slipping on the highly waxed floors. Dr. Thorpe was standing next to Harper, arm around her waist. He looked comfortable and confident, two things that brought me some comfort before he even opened his mouth.

“There she is,” he said, turning both himself and his wife to face me as I entered.

“How’d it go? Is it over?” I asked breathlessly as I took my spot next to Ben. He tried to put an arm around me, but I shied away, taking his hand as a gesture of compensation.

“All done,” Owen said, beaming. “Charlie is a champ. He’s in recovery now, but we will keep him sedated for at least twenty-four hours to make sure there are no complications or swelling. We shaved his entire head this time, so he’ll look a bit different when he comes out, but the mass came out cleanly. His EEG is normal and has been for the past forty minutes. We had absolutely no complications.”

The more he said, the better I felt. More tears welled up, this time in relief. It was finally over. Charlie could really start healing now, and so could I. “Thank you, Dr. Thorpe,” I said, reaching out to shake his hand.

“Call me Owen. Any friend of Ben’s is a friend of mine.” He smiled and squeezed my hand warmly, but I was overwhelmed. I threw my arms around him and sobbed for a moment, then Harper handed me yet another tissue.

As I backed away, I said, “Thank you, Owen. And thank you, Harper, for being here. When can I see Charlie?” I dabbed at my eyes and found Ben putting his arm around me. This time, I didn’t move away.

“I highly suggest you two go rest. It will be tomorrow. He is in ICU just to make sure we give him all the attention he needs. He can’t hear or respond with the drugs he’s on, so it’s best that you just eat and rest. We won’t wake him up until you’re here tomorrow afternoon.” Owen backed away, nodding

at his wife. “Harper, a word?”

She followed him out, and they said goodbye as I turned to Ben. “So, what now?”

“Well, we should follow doctor’s orders.” He let me go and took the soiled tissues from my hand and put them into the pocket of his lab coat. “Everything okay? Who was that call from?”

“It’s fine,” I mumbled, reaching into my pocket for the last tissue I had. “I don’t want to talk about it right now. Just take me home so I can shower.”

Ben nodded, and I followed him to the door.

The waves of emotion kept pulling me under. I felt like a rip tide had been sent by God himself to suck me under as punishment for keeping Charlie a secret for so long. As soon as one problem was starting to resolve, another one reared its head.

God, make it end!

Ben

The door swung shut behind us, and Georgia headed straight for the bedroom, locking herself in. I knew she was too upset for this to be only about Charlie. The news that he was out of surgery and ready to fully recover should have brought her relief, not this much more upset. I wondered what that call was about, who it was from. I had a suspicion it was about her job, but I didn't want to pry and make it worse.

I got a glass of water and a cookie and went into the bathroom, hoping she hadn't locked that door too. She hadn't, so I walked in and found her curled in a ball on the bed, sobbing. I knew this was beyond what a cookie would help with, but I wanted to comfort her.

"Hey, Geo, sit up here," I coaxed, sitting next to her. I placed the cookie and water on the nightstand and nudged her. She didn't sit up, but she did crawl closer and lay her head on my lap. "What's got you so upset? Charlie is going to be fine. You heard Owen. No complications means it went really well." I smoothed her hair around her ear and tried to dry her tears with my hand, but they kept coming.

"I'm scared, Ben," she mumbled, but it was barely audible.

"Of what? It's going to be okay. I'm here. Sit up and talk to me, babe." I held her hand and pulled it up, and she sat up, leaning against my chest. Still, she didn't say anything. "Do you want a cookie? Want to eat something?" I asked her, knowing it was only just lunch time. She shook her head no. Even her go-to source of comfort wasn't going to help with this. I knew it had to be

about her job.

“Just hold me, okay?” She curled into me harder, wrapping her arms around my waist. I felt closer to her than I ever had. I loved that she clung to me for comfort and hope.

“I would do anything in my power to take this pain and fear you’re feeling and help you so you never felt that way again.” I kissed the top of her head, and she turned her lips up to capture mine. “I mean that, baby. I don’t want to see you hurting like this. What can I do?”

She just stared into my eyes. It was magnetic, drawing me into her green pools as I leaned down to kiss her again softly. “Distract me then, because I don’t know how to get my mind off this. I’m really hurting.”

“Distract you how?” I asked, pushing hair out of her eyes, and she responded by kissing me again. Her lips brushed over mine, then her tongue penetrated my mouth. Sex as comfort had always been her thing. Mine too if I had to be honest, so I had no problem offering that to her.

I deepened the kiss, cupping her cheek and turning her head so I could part her lips more. As we continued to kiss, I could feel the tension in her body beginning to ease. I slid my hand down her back, feeling the curve of her spine beneath my fingertips. She moaned softly into my mouth, and I knew I was doing the right thing.

With one hand still holding her close to me, I used the other to begin unbuttoning her blouse. Her skin was soft and warm beneath my touch, and I could feel the heat between us growing with each passing moment. As I slipped off her blouse, I let my hands roam over her body, exploring the curves and contours of her flesh. She gasped when I brushed my thumb over her nipple, and I knew that she needed my comfort more than ever. Without breaking our kiss, I lifted her up and laid her down on the bed gently, then began to strip off my own clothes. She watched me with pain in her gaze.

As I climbed onto the bed beside her, I could feel her relaxing beneath my touch. I kissed her again, my hands roaming over her body. Then, I began to kiss my way down her neck, feeling her pulse racing beneath my lips. When I reached her breasts, I pulled one cup of her bra down and took it into my mouth, sucking gently on her nipple. She moaned again, and I could feel her body arching up to meet mine. I continued to explore her body with my mouth, kissing through her cleavage and nipping at the inner curves of her breasts.

"Ben," she moaned loudly. Even hearing that was encouraging to me.

After so many lovemaking sessions where she had to stifle her natural inclination to be loud, it felt right.

"I know," I whispered in her ear.

I kept kissing her, moving down over her stomach. When I reached her belly button, I buried my face in her belly and nuzzled there for a moment. She giggled at that, and I smiled at her reaction. I kissed up her body again, then unfastened her pants and slid them and her panties off in one go. I could see her gazing down at me, and she looked almost shy.

I kissed the inside of her thigh, moving my way down to her knee. I paused just above her kneecap, and she quivered under my touch. Then, I continued moving down to her foot. I kissed the top of it, licking from her heel to her toes. I took her big toe into my mouth, and she giggled again.

"You always liked that," I said.

"Yeah, I guess I did," she said. "It's been a long time."

"I know," I replied.

I returned up her leg, then nipped at her inner thigh. She looked down at me, her face a mask of pleasure. I could tell that she was getting aroused, and I was determined to push her over the edge. I stopped when I reached her pussy, just inches from her wet folds. Then, I kissed my way down her other leg and back up. She moaned deeply, and I knew that I was on the right track. I finally reached her pussy and began to kiss her lightly, just above her clit. I could feel her tense with anticipation, knowing that I was teasing her. I continued to kiss her there, moving a little farther down, then moving back up and finally reaching her clit.

"Ahh," Georgia groaned as my mouth finally met her most sensitive spot. I took it gently into my mouth, suckling lightly on it. "Ahh."

I licked her clit, then ran my tongue up and down her pussy. Her hips moved, and she took my head in her hands. She began to finger my hair, and I could feel myself getting a little aroused. I found myself enjoying it every time we connected. I licked her pussy, then took her soft nub into my mouth again. I moved my tongue around it, and she moaned loudly. Her grip on my head tightened, and she began to push me down as she bucked against my face. I could feel her pussy getting wetter and her clit swelling.

"Oh, Ben," she said. "Mmm."

I put my hands to her hips and pulled her down to me. She whimpered, and I could feel her body shaking. I began to suck on her, hard. She let out a loud moan, and I licked her again. Her hips bucked wildly, and she grabbed a

handful of her hair as she began to come. She shook and shook, and I could feel her juices flowing into my mouth. I licked her pussy as I felt her convulsing, moaning loudly.

The emotion in her voice fueled me, and it wasn't just because we were having sex. We were connecting on a deep emotional level we hadn't been on in years. She began to cry, sobbing through the orgasm as she bucked again. I knew it was a good one, and I hadn't even penetrated her yet. She was letting her guard down with me.

As she calmed, I licked again, drinking in her juices until she tightened her grip on my hair again. "More," she moaned, and I knew she was ready for me. "In me."

I want her really worked up, though, so I pushed a few fingers in, thrusting slowly as she moaned again.

"Oh, God, Ben," she said, her grip tightening. "More. In me."

I pulled my fingers out, and heard her moan in protest. "I'm going to make you come on my cock," I said.

"Yes," she moaned. "I'm ready. Please, Ben."

I reached for a condom in the drawer and tore it open and rolled it on. Then I grabbed my cock and pushed slowly into her. She was so wet, and I could feel her squeeze my shaft. It was amazing, having her around me like that. She put her hands on my chest and began to move up and down. She was slow at first, then quicker. I felt my cock throbbing as it slid in and out of her, and I put my hands on her hips and began to move with her. It was incredible.

"Oh, God," she moaned. "Oh, it feels so good." I knew she was close again. She sped up, and I felt the pressure of her orgasm clench around me. She arched her back, and her breasts bounced. I pulled her against me, and she moaned loudly as she came again.

"Oh, Ben," she said. I pushed into her again, hard. She cried out, and her body tensed again. She began to shake and claw at my hips.

"Come on my cock," I said.

"Oh, Ben," she exclaimed as I kept thrusting into her.

I could feel her clench around me, and I pushed hard into her one more time before I felt my cock throbbing. "Oh, God, Geo," I groaned as I felt my cock pump inside her. I could feel her tighten around me, and I thrust into her again.

"Oh, Ben," she moaned loudly as I felt myself explode. She clenched

again, pulling my body down until I was lying across her, my dick pulsing as I filled the sleeve. She moaned and cried out, music to my ears.

"Oh, Ben," she moaned again, and she bucked against me. "Oh, oh, oh," she cried, and she bit my shoulder.

When her body relaxed beneath me, I slowed my thrusts, not wanting this moment to be over. But I was spent. I pulled out and rolled to the side, pulling her against my chest. We both lay there panting until we calmed down. It was an amazing feeling connecting to her in such an intimate way. I never wanted this feeling to end.

"Feel better now?" I asked her, kissing her temple. She was moist with sweat after that workout, and I didn't mind the salty flavor. After drinking in her juices, it was just as delicious to me.

"It was my boss," she sighed, and I propped myself on my elbow to look into her eyes. She rolled to her back. "She called me, so I left the room."

"And?" I asked her. I had already deduced that much, so it wasn't really news to me.

"They're hiring someone to replace me immediately. When I go back, I've lost my position as headliner. I have to share the spot now." The harsh emotion was gone, calmed by our sex and the release of endorphins, but I could tell she was still upset by it.

"Ouch, that's harsh." I didn't know what to say, so I said the only thing I could think of. "Look, we'll find you a good job here. Okay? Maybe a singing diner, or you like to paint. You could sell paintings. We could get a bigger place and you could have an art studio where you—"

"Ben," she snapped, sitting up. "The ship is my home. It's my life." Georgia climbed out of bed and scrambled for her clothing, fixing her bra.

"Babe, I didn't mean anything by that. I was trying to comfort you. Please don't be this way." I followed her, trying to calm her down, but I'd clearly made a mistake with my words.

"Be this way? What way?" Tears were streaming down her cheeks again, and I knew I screwed up big time.

"Geo, please. Let me explain." I reached for her, but she swatted my hand away and dressed.

"I told you I'm leaving when Charlie is better, Ben. I'm not staying here. I don't want a job here. I want my job on the ship. I want my normal life."

"When will you accept that change isn't a bad thing? Charlie would be happy here. You'd be happy here. We would be together again. It would

work out. You're trying to control something the universe is telling you needs to change."

"Oh, my God," she said, scoffing. She jammed her feet into her shoes, walked to the dresser where she left her purse, and turned to look at me over her shoulder. "I'm going back to the hospital. I'm going to stay with Charlie until he wakes up."

And then she was gone, and I was standing in the middle of my bedroom with a semi-flaccid dick, condom dangling from the end of it, ready to make a mess. How did I always manage to screw up so royally?

Georgia

It was a long night, sleeping sitting up in a hard chair with wooden armrests, being awakened every fifteen minutes with alarms sounding around the ICU and nurses checking on my boy. My neck hurt, my body ached, and I ignored seventeen calls from Ben, though I did listen to the voicemails. He begged me to come home and listen to him. He even apologized and asked me to forgive him again. I knew he felt bad, but this was all my fault, not his. I had let him get into my head, and now I was paying the price.

I never intended to stay in Hudson, even though I had thought about it. Now, the idea of losing my job to Sophie Tanner made me sick in the gut. I knew she was good, really good, but that was *my* spot. Now, I was wrestling with even stronger emotions. I wanted to stay. I just didn't want Sophie to win. And above all, I wanted Charlie to be happy and cared for, which warred against what my heart felt too. I lay draped over the foot of his bed, my butt planted in the hard chair. This whole thing would have been easier to handle if my mother and I were on speaking terms, but as it was, the minute I told her I was pregnant with Charlie, our relationship ended. I never got over that, and now when I needed her comfort and wisdom the most, I was alone.

“Ms. Lane, we have to clean the IV port again. The IV alarm says his blood is clotting there.” The stout nurse with a commanding presence brushed me off the bed like a dust bunny. I stood, knowing the other nurse would be in here again. Charlie's IV had clotted two other times during the

night, and each time, they asked me to wait outside, so I moved without being asked, leaving my purse on the seat and walking into the hallway.

I glanced at the time on my phone. Seven a.m. Ben would be waking soon, and I knew he'd call again. I didn't know if I'd answer, though. When I checked the time, I also saw a notification from Halie to call her, so I did.

"Hey, you said to call you?" I asked her when the line connected. A few nurses walked past chatting, making it difficult to hear. The line crackled with static. It was a bad connection.

"Yeah, I just wanted to follow up. Any updates?" Halie sounded fresh as a daisy, the polar opposite to my exhaustion.

"He's out of surgery and recovering. I think they're moving him to his own room soon." The nurse told me earlier that Charlie would be moved to pediatrics to recover this morning sometime and that Harper was his nurse there. I didn't mind. I knew Ben trusted Harper, and she seemed like a great lady. Plus, she had done well when Charlie was in with his concussion.

"So, what, a week or so?"

"Halie, he had his head cut open. He has to be in the hospital a week at least, then bed rest for several more." I stepped aside as the nurses exited the room, but in order to not disturb Charlie's sleep, I didn't go back in quite yet.

"Geo, if you don't come back soon, you know you'll lose the position as headliner." Halie sounded upset, even frantic. I didn't understand why, except that maybe our friendship meant more to her than I thought. That or maybe she hated working with Sophie.

"I can't. My son has to recover. I need to be with him."

"You can't leave him with someone? Sign over medical care to them?"

I wasn't upset with her for suggesting it because I had for the briefest of moments considered that, but my heart was firm. "No, he's my son." I was discouraged, but I was not giving up. "If I have to share the slot, I'll share it. I can't leave Charlie when he needs me most."

"Yeah, okay . . ." Halie sighed. "Let me know if anything changes." She hung up, and I felt hurt by her insistence that the job was more important than my son. That wasn't at all the type of boss I wanted to work for, but salaried jobs as full-time cruise entertainers were hard to come by.

I leaned against the wall, pressing my head against the cool brick, and the nurses breezed past me again. When I looked up, it was a smiling younger woman. "Come to move the boy up to his room on the third floor. You can meet us up there or you can follow."

I nodded. "I'll go on up. Just need to get my purse," I told her, ducking into the room to get my bag. "What room?"

"Three seventy. Your nurse should be there when you get up there." The polite younger woman's face was heart-shaped, reminding me of Charlie when he was born. I thanked her and made my way to the elevators, then to his room.

It was a much larger room than the ICU. Large plate glass windows shrouded the room in light, something Charlie would love. There was a pull-out sofa, which I might end up using. I didn't know if I could face Ben again. Every time I saw him, I wanted him and only him. But every time I was away from him, my heart longed for the sea and a ship. When I looked at my son, however, I was torn in two.

I sat on the hard blue couch and dropped my purse to the floor, slumping my shoulders. I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. I wanted someone else to be the mom now and make the decisions so I could rest.

"Everything okay?" a chipper voice asked. I looked up to see Harper walk in. Her green scrubs really complimented her eyes. She was a gorgeous woman.

"It should be now, but it's not." I didn't want to get into details, but there was no point in hiding how I really felt. She'd see right through me the way Ben did.

"I've been over Charlie's chart. He's a fighter for sure. I asked to be placed as his nurse so I could give Ben more reassurance. He's doing really well." She came to stand in front of me. If my worries were about Charlie, those words would have comforted me. But my worries had nothing to do with him.

"Thanks . . ."

"Do you like it here?" she asked, and I felt like she was prying. She knew Ben too well. They were close. I could tell. Ben told me they were friends, and I guessed probably best friends. I wondered if he'd put her up to asking me. I hated feeling insecure about things like this.

"I like it well enough, but my home is a ship." Ben left me high and dry eight years ago. I knew he was responsible now, at least when it came to his job. He had some success. What he didn't have was proof that he could make a sacrifice large enough to be a real parent. I had made that sacrifice by carrying my son to term, keeping him even when I was a single mother, and

risking my career to help save his life. Ben wasn't even willing to support my career. How would he support a child?

Harper bustled around the room, I assumed getting things ready for Charlie when they got here with his bed. "Well, you should know it's pretty amazing. Great schools, great parks. And it would be great to have another lady here to hang out with."

"People just leave, Harper. It's what they do. They don't stay in one place long enough to build anything of substance." I felt a weight in my chest as I said the words. I meant them. People left jobs and relationships all the time. And Ben left me. That was the problem. I wasn't afraid of commitment to the right person. I was afraid of commitment to Ben. My commitment was to my job because it was the steadiest thing in my life for the past eight years.

"People can change, though, if you let them." She turned to face me as they wheeled Charlie in the room. "I mean, look at Ben. He's had several requests to go to other hospitals. He refused every single one. He's just committed."

My intuition told me she was pushing me toward him, so I politely said, "Thank you, but I need to take care of Charlie now."

Harper nodded and walked away. After that interaction, I knew Ben was meddling. I hated that, but I understood he was grasping at straws. I was too, just different ones. Straws that were supposed to hold answers no one had for me.

I sat in that chair for forty-five minutes while they untangled lines and got Charlie situated. When the final nurse left, I heard a knock at the door and braced myself to see Ben's face. Instead, it was Mindy.

"Oh, hey," I said, standing as she entered. "Just a short time until they wake him up. You can stay if you want."

Mindy strolled in. She wasn't in her typical lab coat or scrubs. She wore sandals and jeans, a bright blue top that made her eyes sparkle. "I'd love to stay and chat. How are things going?"

My damn was ready to burst, and after the argument with Ben, the rough night of sleep, then being hounded by Harper, I wanted to vent.

"Things aren't so good at all. Charlie is fine. He's great. Doc says he will be mending quickly now. I just don't think staying at Ben's house is feasible at all anymore. He doesn't seem to understand that I have to leave when Charlie gets better. I tried to get a job around here, but I can't find anything. I have to return to the ship as soon as I can."

Mindy sat on a chair at the foot of the bed and grimaced at me. “I totally get that. I’m sorry he’s not being supportive. You don’t have any other friends here? No one you could bunk with?”

“No one but you, and I’d never impose on you. I think I’ll have to ask for an advance on my salary and stay at a hotel or something. Do you think they’ll let Charlie stay here?” I chewed on my lip, realizing what I was saying, that I wasn’t going to go back to Ben’s house.

“No, when he’s released he has to have a safe place to go to, but you know what, the Ronald McDonald house is just across the street. You can both stay there for free as long as he needs regular treatment. I can help you file the paperwork if you want. It’s super easy. I’ve done it a dozen times at least. It’s safe, clean, and free.”

I was so full of indecision for so long I’d left my chest tied in knots. This time, I needed to make a decision and not just toil over it. “Yes, let’s do it,” I told her confidently. “Sign me up because I am ready to just put this truck in high gear and get a move on.”

Ben would be hurt. There was no escaping that, but it had to be done. I should have done it right away and never have let him get into my heart again. Just as I thought it would, it complicated everything. I didn’t blame Ben for pushing my boundaries so many times. They weren’t firm at all. Even I had broken them down because I wanted comfort or because I was horny. But it was time for me to start being the independent woman I knew I was, the woman I told Ben I was.

For now, Ben would still be able to visit Charlie in the hospital, but we would have to see a lawyer about what rights he had for visitation. Ben wasn’t listed on Charlie’s birth certificate, but a simple DNA test would prove his connection. I had no intention of keeping Charlie from Ben. I just needed space for a while to think. I was returning to the ship—that much was certain in my head. What we would do moving forward had to be worked out, and it was something I had no mental energy to apply in thinking about it right now.

Once things calmed down and I wasn’t arguing or having sex with Ben, I would come up with a plan, hopefully one he agreed to.

Ben

I couldn't even begin to tell Georgia how hurt I was that she was moving out of my house. After spending the past week passing like a ship in the darkness, today was the day she would settle into her apartment at the Ronald McDonald house. She'd only come back to my place to shower and change, do a load of laundry or eat, and only when I was at work. She slept on the pull-out sofa in the hospital despite my urging her to come back and sleep in my bed. I swore I'd behave and not start fights, but she was cold toward me.

I knew what she was doing. Georgia's defense mechanism had kicked in the minute she feared losing her independence. If she lost that job, she'd be vulnerable, and because she would have no way to provide for herself and she'd be in need, she would have to trust me—which was something she couldn't do because of how badly I'd hurt her. She would never admit to any of this, but I knew it to be the truth. Which is why when I opened the door to her temporary two-bedroom unit, I controlled my emotions.

She had made her decision, and like a lot of her decisions in life, it was based on fear. I had spent the past two months groveling and trying to make things right, but sometimes, there was nothing you could do to unbreak a heart. I'd already resigned myself to the fact that I might have lost her forever. Begging her to stay or even trying to logically explain how it wouldn't be so bad to change would never work on her. Nothing but her facing that fear and realizing the truth would make a difference.

“It’s tiny,” I remarked as I took in the sight. Bare white walls surrounded bland tan furniture. A simple small television hung on the wall. The main living space was a studio-style apartment with three doors on one wall.

“The guy said it’s a two-bedroom, so I guess those are the bedrooms and the bathroom.” Georgia gestured to the wall of doors and shrugged. “I’m sorry Mindy was busy today. I know this must be difficult for you.” She turned to face me, but I controlled my expression.

“You made up your mind. I respect that.” It was the most diplomatic answer I could offer.

She looked a little disappointed that I wasn’t fighting for her, but she knew as well as I did what she would do. She’d be hurt and angry. If she wanted me, she had to come to it by herself.

I shut the door and walked in, dropping the duffel bag of things she had packed onto the tiny dining table. There were only two chairs there, as if they had planned for only a parent and patient, or two parents, to stay. The entire place seemed only slightly larger than a hotel room.

“I can’t see how you’re going to be comfortable here for a month.”

“Three weeks,” she corrected and shrugged as she tossed the bag she carried of Charlie’s things onto the table next to hers. “It’s way larger than a state room on a ship. This is plenty big enough for a few weeks.” She crossed her arms and sighed. “I guess you should get going. I want to rest before I shower, and I have to be back at the hospital first thing in the morning. Thank you for helping me.”

This felt so wrong. Fate had not ordained for her to reenter my life, only to walk right back out the door the instant things got tough. I turned to go, but as my hand rested on the knob, I froze. I didn’t want to leave. I wanted to fight for her. I wanted to break down that damn wall around her heart and make her see the light. So I stood there with my back to her and did the only thing that had ever worked.

“Just because you’re leaving town in a few weeks, doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun. We used to do this all the time, remember? You’d say you were leaving. I’d beg you to come over and give me that delicious booty.” I didn’t turn around. I didn’t want to know if there was a glare on her face instead of a smile. If I didn’t look back, I could remember her face happy. That’s what I wanted, at least for now. When we sat down with a lawyer in a few weeks, it would be a different story.

“You know, you’re right.”

The words made the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up like tiny soldiers reporting for duty. “Yeah?” I asked, finally turning to look at her over my shoulder. She had a smirk on her face.

“Yeah. I mean, it’s just sex. We both like sex. We’re alone. We can be loud and raunchy, and I have a toy in my bag we can break out.”

My pulse raced as she walked toward the duffel bag on the table. “What type of toy?” I asked, watching her. I retracted my hand from the doorknob but slid the deadbolt into place.

“Might be a vibrating dildo.” She snickered, unzipping the bag. “If you have a condom.”

“I don’t. I wasn’t expecting to—”

“No worries, I have two holes.”

God, this woman made me think unholy things. “But this is just meaningless, no-strings-attached sex. Right? Like nothing beyond this, no emotion.” Rehearsing those words out loud, I tried to tell my heart to stay calm and not let it affect my emotions, but I was kidding myself. I was totally head-over-heels in love with her.

Georgia reached into the bag and sorted through it, extracting a pink-tinted clear dildo in a zipper storage bag. “Already cleaned and ready,” she said, dangling it in front of my face. She didn’t have to ask twice. I grabbed it from her, backing her against the wall and sliding her jeans down her hips. I parted her legs with my knee and kissed my way down her stomach to where her pubic hair was just visible. I glided my tongue through it, and she let out a sigh, the sounds of pleasure making me smile.

She stood there with her pants around her ankles and me on my knees with hands full of her butt cheeks, sucking at her clit. “Get it out,” she moaned, grabbing at the bag still clutched in my hand. I let my lips fall from her pussy and peeled the bag open as she kicked off her jeans and tore off her shirt and bra. She stood naked in front of me as I took the toy out of the bag and tossed the baggie aside. Then I turned the dial on the end and held the tip of it to her clit, vibrating her.

“Oh, God, not yet,” she moaned, gripping it. “Not too soon . . .” she coached, using a hand to guide my chin upward. “Take your clothes off.”

I pulled off my shirt over my head, then my shoes, socks, pants, boxers. I stood there for a moment in all my naked glory, my cock at half mast. Her eyes drank me in as she guided the dildo toward her entrance.

“You’re really frickin sexy, you know?” I told her as she slid it in,

gripping my wrist and thrusting into herself like my hand was an extension of the toy. We locked eyes, engaged in a silent, slow-motion, sexually charged dance, moving in a steady rhythm as I watched her body undulate.

I kissed her lips, and she opened her mouth and welcomed my tongue. I could feel her heartbeat in my hand, I could feel her breathing, I could feel her desire. I could feel her vaginal muscles tightening around the foreign object, the walls of her sex contracting and expanding, pulsing in a rhythm of their own. Her entire body was responding to the dildo, to me, to the pleasure. My pulse raced as I watched her. I felt her lips on my neck, on my chest, on my nipple as she licked at it. Her breathing increased in pace, and I matched my strokes to hers. Her body was trembling and she was moaning, her mouth open wide and her eyes shut.

"Oh, I'm gonna . . ." she moaned, gripping me tight. I could feel her body rocking with a rhythm of its own, her hips rocking and grinding against my hand. "Oh, oh, oh . . ." she moaned, her head back and her hips thrusting against my hand. I could feel the dildo slipping in and out of her, and I could feel my own erection pressing against her thigh. She looked down at it, smiling, and reached down to stroke me, her hand moving up and down my cock. "God," she moaned as the orgasm rocked through her.

I had to brace her as she went weak in the knees, nearly dropping to the ground. I pinned her body against the wall and whispered in her ear, "You like your pussy filled with that toy?"

"I love it," she breathed, kissing me and wrapping her arms around me. "I love it when you fill me up."

I rubbed myself against her leg as she slowly came down from the orgasm. I could feel myself getting harder. I wanted to feel her tight walls around me, her juices dripping from my dick.

"I want you inside me," she whispered, her lips against my ear.

"I want to see you when you come," I hissed, biting her earlobe. She gasped, raising a leg to wrap around my waist. I didn't see how she was going to pleasure me like this, at least not if she wanted anal, so I pulled her with both hands against myself and backed toward the chairs.

As I sat, she lifted a leg and rested her foot on the table, knocking one of the bags off. We both laughed for a moment before I got the hint. She wanted me to eat her out, and I was fine with that. I leaned forward, flicking my tongue over her clit gently while I stroked myself. "Oh . . ." she moaned, her hands on my head. I moved lower, teasing her entrance with my tongue

before plunging in. She was dripping wet, and I heard myself slurping at her. She tasted amazing, like water in a desert.

I fought every last emotion inside me, tapping into the raw, animalistic sex I knew she wanted. I still had her vibrator in hand, so I slid it up into her, thrusting slowly at first until her moans became more frantic. I sped my movements, sucking her clit while penetrating her with the toy until her juices dripped down the shaft and onto my hand, soaking me.

"Oh, God. Oh, my God!" she yelped, whimpering. Her hands pushed at my shoulders, balancing on my body as I worked her pussy good. It continued to drip as I pushed the toy into her. It became harder and harder to push in as her body contracted around it, a second wave of orgasm crashing down around her.

I pulled away, using my fingers to swirl around her hardened clit as I said, "Yeah, that's it. Come for me, baby. Come so hard you squirt, just for me." She moaned again, her body shaking, and I sucked her clit. Her moans became louder and louder as she moved her hips in time with my tongue, the toy sliding in and out of her.

Her legs shook, and I placed a hand on her butt, the other still between us. When her writhing was reduced to tiny spasms, I slowly stopped thrusting the toy. I pulled it out slowly, licking her juices off it, and I saw her shudder. She looked at me with her piercing eyes, and I saw pure lust. Every inch of her body looked like it had been torn apart and put back together. I tossed the toy aside and stood up.

"I need to be in you . . . now." My words were husky, and I pulled her toward me.

Georgia stumbled a few steps, straddling my lap as I sat on the chair. I laid the dildo on the table, but she picked it up right away, licking more juices off it. "God, you are so hot," I growled, gripping her hips. She rose up slightly, sliding my cock into her moist hole.

"Just need some lube for this," she moaned playfully, riding me gracefully. Her tits bounced as she rose and fell, driving me mad. When she rose up again, guiding the head of my dick to her back hole, I grunted. She knew exactly how to make my heart race. "You want pure, raunchy sex, no-strings-attached, and this is how you get to come in me."

The instant she started to lower herself around me, I gritted my teeth. I usually had so much control over my climax that I could easily go twenty or thirty minutes, but the way her eyes were heavy-lidded with lust, I feared I'd

last seconds.

With a smirk on her face, she slid the dildo into her pussy as I sank into the tight ring of muscles behind it. The sensation of thickness in her pussy while I thrust upward into her other hole was intense, but the vibration was over the top. I found my hips pushing in involuntary pulses. If she didn't stop that, I was going to explode.

Georgia

I straddled Ben on that chair, dildo in my pussy with him in my other hole. It felt so amazing I didn't even restrain myself when it came to noise, and I prayed the apartment was soundproof or my neighbors would think I was starting a brothel.

"Geo . . . God, you feel amazing," he moaned before biting down on my breast. He caught a nipple in his teeth and flicked his tongue over it. Then he sucked it in and released it with a pop.

"Oh, wow . . ." I moaned. He moved his hands up to my hips, and I could feel his nails biting into my skin as he gripped me to thrust harder. I looked down and could see his head moving up and down as he sucked and kneaded my tit with his mouth. His hair was moist with sweat, just like my chest, glistening in the light.

"Mmm," he moaned, growling against my skin as he rose up into me. Having something in both holes had always been one of the best sexual experiences, but I hadn't ever done that with anyone but him. It was special to us. The intensity of the pleasure was almost too much to bear. I felt like I was about to come but held off, not wanting the experience to end. Ben's movements became even more urgent as he felt me resisting my own orgasm. His breathing became labored and his grip on my hips tighter. I loved every second of it. We moved together in perfect harmony.

"God, Ben, you know how I like it." I panted, reaching to massage my clit. The dildo was pinned against his pelvic bone, so every time he pushed

into my tight hole, it thrust up into my pussy in the same rhythm.

The chair squeaked, straining under the weight of both of us, but it didn't deter him. He continued to ram himself into me. I clawed at his shoulders, howling in pleasure with my head thrown back like a banshee. I was so close to orgasm again for the third time, and I knew every one was more powerful than the previous.

His grunts and groans began to increase in pitch and volume as his moans increased in frequency. I looked down to see his hair splashed with sweat, and his eyes were half closed. His tongue flicked across his lip, and then he gritted his teeth.

"God, I'm close," he groaned.

"Come in me," I gasped, urging him on. "Go faster."

His thrusts became erratic and short, pounding into me, and it brought the climax my body was reaching for. A pleasure-induced whimper leapt from my tongue. "Oh, God, Ben, oh, God, yes . . ." It was all I could do to hold on. I knew my fingers were probably drawing blood on his shoulders, but I didn't look at them. My whole world was focused on the waves of bliss rolling over us together.

"Come for me, Georgia. Squeeze my cock and milk it. Do it like you used to do it. Clench down, you know it makes it better."

I did. I tightened my muscles as hard as I could around him and the dildo, and he was right. The orgasm intensified, flooding me with pure pleasure. My toes curled and my body went rigid. I howled as the waves of bliss rolled through me, leaving me in a state of pure euphoria.

"Mmm! I'm coming!"

My pussy contracted hard around the dildo. I clawed at Ben's shoulders and milked his cock as I rode out the wave of pleasure that was washing over us both. Ben pushed himself deeper into me, letting out a long moan. He held himself still for just a moment before he let out a guttural cry.

"Nnnngggh!" He threw his head back, closing his eyes tightly as he thrust into me one last time. His cock pulsed as his cum blasted into me, seeping its heat into my body.

We both gasped for breath as we came down from our orgasmic highs, and I fell forward against his chest, my heart racing. I didn't have the energy to lift myself off him. I looked up at him, his face full of bliss.

He reached up to brush my hair back from my face. "God, I love you," he said and kissed my forehead. I tensed, not sure how to respond to his

confession. How many times had he said it now and I hadn't responded to him? I felt bad for not returning the words knowing full well I felt the same way. I just knew it would be better if he didn't know how I felt. He would hurt more when I left, and I was definitely leaving. I called Halie this morning to let her know my date was the Friday before Labor Day, which meant I would get the Alaskan cruise out of Los Angeles.

So I chose not to react. I stood, letting him extract himself from me, and he caught the dildo as it slid out too. "I'm going to go wash up," he said, setting the toy on the table. He barely made eye contact, as if he were ashamed that he'd let his love confession slip out. He hastily picked up his clothing from across the room and dashed to the doors, opening one after the other until he found the bathroom.

I picked up my clothing and used a paper towel from the kitchen counter to wipe myself clean, then tossed it and got dressed. NSA sex was all it had ever been, so why did this feel so wrong? I had done this hundreds of times with him, found ways to be kinky and playful. My free spirit came out when I did this with him. It made me feel alive, normally. Now, I felt dead inside, like my heart was missing something significant.

When he returned, I had washed my toy and hidden it back in my bag. All evidence of our encounter was gone except for the position of the chair. "Think we should get back to the hospital?" I asked, nodding with my head at the door.

"Sure," he mumbled, dejected. His shoulders weren't squared. There was no smile on his face. I felt like I had hurt him and I didn't know how to fix that.

We rode in silence for a part of the ride, then he asked me, "So, how are we going to work out visitation?"

The words hung in the air like smoke. I felt my throat constricting. I wanted to escape, but the car was moving and I couldn't just jump out. "I think we need to discuss it in a few weeks."

"But we will discuss it?" he asked, not looking at me. His eyes stayed trained on traffic, but I could tell he was upset. I sensed that he was having the same internal response to our NSA sex that I was. It wasn't the same. It would never be the same. We loved each other too much to hurt each other by destroying either career.

"Yes, I promise. We will. I just think Charlie should be a part of that. I don't want to decide without his input because he's old enough to express

that.” I clutched my hands to my stomach, feeling knots tighten.

“I think that’s a good idea. He deserves to have a say.” Ben turned into the hospital parking lot and found a spot, but instead of letting him open the door for me, I climbed out before he got around the car.

Sadness was sinking in and I just wanted to be with my boy. “Let’s head up,” I told him, leading the way to the doors.

When we walked into Charlie’s room, Jordan was there. They both sat on the bed, though Charlie lay reclined back. His head was bandaged and he had an oxygen line running beneath his nose. Jordan’s mom sat across the room reading a book. She looked up and waved at us as we walked in.

“Oh, Dr. Wilks, it’s so cool that you’re Charlie’s dad!” Jordan held up a hand to high-five Ben, and it drove a nail into my heart. “Does this mean we get to hang out more?” Another nail in my heart.

My cheeks burned as I sat down next to Jordan’s mom. I watched the boys interact as she chatted to me about the way the nurses treated Charlie. I zoned out, not hearing much of what she said but adding an “Oh, yeah?” or “Wow” in at appropriate times. Was I about to limit Charlie’s life, put walls around him simply because I wanted a career? And did that make me selfish or dedicated?

Ben stood by the boys, laughing and joking with them while I retreated into my own mind having an existential crisis. Charlie really did have no friends on the ship, and I was lying to myself to think he would be happier there. He was flourishing here during one of the most traumatic events he’d ever lived through. I hated myself for feeling so strongly about my career, but I had put my foot down and there was no going back now.

Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. I didn’t have a job here, or a life, or friends. I couldn’t depend on Ben. How was I supposed to trust someone who’d left me without any goodbye? My mind reeled with memories of how hard I fought to get to where I was, memories of how much I hurt, how many times I cried myself to sleep.

The day Charlie was born, I swore to myself that he would come first, but now I found myself warring with selfishness. Stay here and end up being stuck with someone I’d never trust, or go back and have freedom? But Charlie came first, right? So why was it such a difficult thing to choose?

“Are you okay?” Jordan’s mom asked, and I turned to her.

“Uh, I’m not sure. It’s been a really rough few weeks.” I was as honest as I was willing to be with a complete stranger.

“I know a good therapist if you need one, honey. All moms do now and then.” She stood, strapping her purse onto her shoulder, and her shoes squeaked across the tile floor as she moved toward her son. “Jordan, it’s time to go. Say goodbye. We’ll visit tomorrow, and he can come for dinner when he gets out of the hospital.”

“Aw, Mom,” Jordan whined, but he listened. “Bye, Charlie.” Jordan wiggled his fingers in a tiny wave and walked with his mother, hand in hand, out the door.

“Mom, can Dad sleep with me tonight instead of you? I want to watch cartoons with him.” Charlie’s eyes pleaded with me to say yes, but my heart was so heavy. It was normal for a boy to want his father as much as he wanted his mother, but Charlie had never had a father, so his asking for comfort from someone other than me hurt.

I looked up at Ben with pain in my gaze and he met that gaze. I could see his emotions rise and fall just like his chest. He was thrilled to be asked, but I knew his answer before he said it. “Bud, I can’t stay.” He pulled his eyes away from mine and looked at our son. Our son . . . “I have some very important meetings first thing in the morning and I have to get up super early. Okay?”

“But your meetings are here, then you won’t have to drive across town.” Charlie was a genius at times, especially when it got him what he wanted.

“Yes, you’re right, but my bed is more comfortable. I think Mom will stay, okay? I’ll come visit after my meetings.” He patted Charlie’s knee and stepped back. “I love you guys,” he said, backing toward the door, and he took my freaking heart with him.

Charlie was sad, and my soul was crushed. What would I do if Charlie asked to stay with Ben instead of going on the ship with me?

Ben

One by one, Lily stacked the blocks higher and higher until they were almost as tall as she was. I held the block tower in two places to steady it as it leaned and swayed. And when she had placed the last block on top, she clapped and cheered. At almost five years old now, she was adorable and growing like a weed.

“Yay! I did it!” she squealed with delight.

“You did so good, baby,” Harper said, dropping to her knees next to us. She carried baby Owen on her chest like normal. At less than six months old, he still slept most of the time. I couldn’t wait for him to get a little bigger so he could romp with Lily and me.

“Great job, Lily,” I cheered, then I let go of the tower and the blocks tumbled to the carpet. Lily erupted into giggles and clapped her chubby hands again.

I scooted back, glancing at the kitchen where Owen was cleaning up after dinner. Harper had made an amazing casserole, and both of them insisted that I rest and spend time with Lily, not help clean up. So we built block tower after block tower. I thought chilling with my best friend and her family would be therapeutic for my angry, upset heart, but the more I interacted with Lily, the more I thought of all the things I’d missed out on with Charlie.

“You’re doing it again,” Harper said, grabbing a few blocks to help Lily begin her next tower. She held them in place but trained her eye on me.

“I know,” I sighed. “I just can’t help it. Even things I love doing just

remind me of how badly I'm hurting, and it affects my mood."

Lily continued to stack blocks, giggling every time one fell off the growing tower. Her laughter was calming. It was good to be reminded of normalcy in my life. I spent a lot of time with this family, and the entire evening felt routine. If only my mind would let go of the questions and frustrations I had.

"Hey, sweet girl," Owen crooned as he walked into the room, "I think it's time to put blocks up and go to bed."

"Awe, but I don't want to," Lily protested, but Owen scooped her up. He must have sensed that I was needing to talk. Lily's disappointment almost made me want to tell him to let her stay, but I didn't want her to get an idea that she could get out of listening to her parents if I was there.

"Goodnight, Lily." I stood and kissed her cheek, ruffling her hair. She swatted at my hand playfully and blew me a kiss, and Owen carried her out of the room. I knelt by Harper again and helped her put the blocks back into the toy bin. "I'm tired, you know?"

She smoothed her hand down the front of her jeans and sat back on her heels. "You're tired?" She chuckled and almost snorted. "I'm feeding a tiny human with only the power of my mammary glands."

I smiled at her and tossed the last block into the box, then helped her stand up. We walked to the couch and sat down. It must have been exhausting having two toddlers at once. Harper was one strong woman.

"Talk to me," she said as she unwrapped Owen from her chest and laid him across her lap. He cooed and squirmed, then nestled against her and fell back asleep quickly. "She's not staying?" Her eyes drilled into me. We'd spoken about this before, and she insisted I could convince Georgia to stay with the right amount of groveling and patience. It wasn't working.

"I don't think so."

"Darn it. I really tried hard to talk to her every time I saw her at the hospital." Harper's concern might have been more like meddling at times, but I appreciated that she wanted to help.

"I know, thanks. I just think Georgia was too hurt by what I did. I admit how I failed her, but I thought for sure she would be able to forgive me." Raking my hand through my hair, I leaned my head back on the back of the couch and closed my eyes.

"So you get a lawyer. She can't take your kid away from you, Ben."

I snapped my head up and sternly said, "No." I was not that person, and I

never wanted to be that person to her. Owen appeared at the end of the hall with empty arms, having left Lily in her bedroom. He had the baby monitor in hand and a confused look on his face.

“No, what? You sound upset, Ben.” Owen walked over to the couch and sat on the other side of Harper, scooting up behind her. She leaned into him and sighed.

“I wasn’t trying to upset you. I just got a little zealous. Look, my point was, you have rights. If you have to push the matter, you need a lawyer.” Harper adjusted Baby Owen on her lap and frowned. “I’m sorry.”

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. The couch squeaked, startling the baby. His tiny hands reached straight out, and Harper held one to her lips and kissed it. Every little interaction was torture to me. I should have been there for my son, but I didn’t even know he existed.

“I know that option exists if it comes to it. I’d rather try to talk things out than do that. I understand in the end, I will get to be a part of my son’s life. I’m not worried about that.” I pinched the bridge of my nose as my chest tightened. “My problem is that I’m completely in love with her. My relationship with my son will continue. It’s my relationship with her I’m worried about.”

“God, that’s hard,” Owen said. I looked up at him. He reached for Harper’s hand and held it, curling around her farther. They were so good together—like me and Georgia. Why couldn’t my love story turn out like theirs?

I looked around the room full of kids’ toys, stuffed animals, baby gear, and chunky leather furniture. This was a home made for a family. A home that was full of love and happiness, where both parents were there for their kids and were totally in love. I wanted this so badly, I’d willingly give up everything in my life at this current moment to have it.

“I’m so sorry, Ben. Coming from someone who was also seriously hurt by an ex, I’m telling you if she hasn’t forgiven you yet, she probably won’t.” Harper handed the baby to his father and stood. “I gotta run to the toilet. I’ll be right back.”

Owen held his son to his chest and shook his head. “Don’t listen to her, Ben,” he said as soon as she was shut into the bathroom. “She was hurt in a different way. Georgia stayed at your house, ate dinner with you, even ‘S-E-X’.” He spelled it out as if the baby would know what he was talking about, and I laughed at him.

“Yeah, even sex.”

“So she’s not that angry anymore. It’s likely just a trust thing. She probably wonders if you’ll keep your word. Maybe she’s thinking you’ll just make decisions without consulting her or not be there when she needs you most. You want my advice?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course, that’s why I’m here.” I gestured for him to continue and sat back on the couch, making it squeak again.

“Be there for her. Show up for her in every way, every day. Make tiny promises and keep them.” He patted the baby’s back and continued, “Even if she leaves on that ship, you just keep doing it. If she is really the one you want, then you don’t quit. You be the man she needed eight years ago every day of your life, in every single way possible. It will show her you’re serious.”

“That makes a lot of sense . . .” Owen’s words got me thinking. I had been going about this the wrong way the entire time. I had missed appointments for Charlie due to work. I had allowed Georgia’s new friend Mindy to take the responsibility of helping her with certain things. I hadn’t been showing up for Georgia, not like I should have been. And it was about time I did.

After a bit more conversation, Baby Owen got fussy. Harper needed to nurse, so I excused myself and headed home. I felt so much better after talking with Owen. I didn’t realize what a difference it made to have another man to talk to about things like this, but the more I got to know him, the better I enjoyed our friendship.

At home, I did my usual and took the stairs. The few weeks with Georgia around had gotten me off my game. Taking the stairs helped me stay in shape and keep my step count up daily. I had even gained a few pounds, whether from her delicious cooking or lower activity level I wasn’t certain. Probably a combination of the two.

When I got to the floor Jordan lived on, I heard voices in the hallway. I stopped in the stairwell and listened. A quick peek through the window revealed that it was Georgia and Charlie. He had a pillow in his hand, and she carried her purse. I didn’t want to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help but overhear that Charlie was having a sleepover with Jordan tonight. It sent my pulse racing, and my feet too. I quickly descended the stairs, hitting the ground floor almost the same time as the elevator doors swished open and Georgia walked out. She was looking down into her purse and ran right into me.

“Oh, God, I’m so—”

I reached out to steady her as she stared up into my face with surprise. “Hey.”

“Ben, I’m sorry.” Georgia backed away, looking flustered. “Charlie is sleeping over with Jordan tonight. I’m just going to have a walk in the park and then I thought about seeing a movie or—”

“Supposed to rain tonight.” I shrugged one shoulder. I had no idea whether it was supposed to rain tonight or not. I just wanted an excuse to keep her here longer. “Movies are overrated.”

She smiled softly and looked down, her cheeks flushing pink. “Ben, we can’t do this.” As her head rose again and she looked at me through her long lashes, I could see the desire in her eyes. It didn’t look like sexual desire. It looked to me like she wanted to be cherished and loved.

“Do what? We’re just two friends talking. Besides, you left a few of Charlie’s socks in my dryer. Want to come up and get them?” I gestured at the elevator, then pushed the call button. The doors slid open again and I held them.

“I can just stop by when I pick him up in the morning.”

God, she was gorgeous. What the heck was wrong with me? Why had I hurt her so badly?

“Then, you must be hungry. I can cook you something for dinner.” I wouldn’t tell her I’d already eaten.

“Already ate.”

“Thirsty?”

She reached into her purse and pulled out a water bottle. “Really, Ben, things are already complicated.”

Despite the lighthearted banter and snickering between us, I was growing disappointed. My mind raced for the next excuse to make, some reason to get her to stay and be with me so we could talk. So I could apologize again.

“Okay, I’m really trying here, Geo. Throw me a bone.” The muscles in my arm burned as the elevator doors tried to shut, but I held them open. She glanced into the elevator and lifted the corner of her mouth in a smirk.

“Booty call?” she asked. If I wasn’t mistaken, I thought I saw a flash of reservation, as if she was offering herself to me to sate my lust. That isn’t at all how I wanted her to feel, though I was humbled and honored that she would offer. I would do that for her any day, even if I got nothing out of it.

“You’re not a toy.”

“You want me to stay or not?” Her tiny smirk turned into a full grin, and I belly laughed.

“You convinced me. Now get in the elevator or you’re taking the stairs.”

“Fourteen stories? No way,” she joked, pushing past me into the cage.

Now, if I could only find the words to say to help her understand I was going to start showing up for her in huge ways.

Georgia

“**S**ee, I wasn’t lying. There are Charlie’s socks.” Ben gestured at the coffee table where a pile of random socks lay. I shut the door behind us and bent to scratch Hank on the head as he hobbled around my feet.

“I missed this old guy,” I said. “Won’t be the same on the ship without him.” I strolled to the couch and sat down, putting my purse on the table.

“So do you have a date yet?” Ben sat next to me. I hadn’t been expecting to discuss this with him so casually. He didn’t seem angry at all. I was shocked.

“We do.” I nodded. “Charlie’s doing really well. Doctor Manning and Owen both say he can return to full activity in two weeks. Still no running and jumping right now. I’m a little concerned about this sleepover, but Jordan’s mom assured me she’d keep them calm.” I played with the hem of my shirt as I talked. It was a little crocheted number, cream-colored, with fringe on the hem.

“I see . . . so, you’ll fly out, then?” Ben’s nonchalance was comforting. He wasn’t trying to convince me to stay or pressure me. This was the most supportive and encouraging he’d been toward me since the day I got this job and he drove me to the interview.

“No, actually. On the twenty-ninth, the ship is in port here in Manhattan again. Last one for the season before hurricanes flare up. Then I’ll be doing South Pacific cruises until Christmas.” His eyes met mine, and I found it hard

to hold his gaze. Still, I controlled my emotions. Being this close to him made me feel things that only made me want him more.

“Will I get to see Charlie at all this fall?”

“I think we should just talk to a lawyer about what needs to be done there.”

My head dropped. I didn't want to think about this at all. It was bad enough that Charlie was now telling me how much he didn't want to leave. I'd searched for a job for weeks, and without a job, I couldn't stay.

“Yeah, okay. We don't have to talk about it. I just want you to know I want you to come back to Hudson as often as you can.”

“Well, I know we are here more often in the spring and summer months. I'll make sure you and Charlie get time.”

“What about you and me?”

The question caused me to look up at him again. “You mean a booty call when I'm in port?” I smirked slightly, sensing him being a bit playful. This was so different from any conversation we'd had to this point. I felt like this was the Ben I knew ten years ago.

“Every single time . . . but I have a condition.” He inched toward me, and I leaned closer to him.

“What's that?” I asked, feeling an ache growing inside my groin. I clenched instinctively, and Ben's eyes stared at my thighs as if he could see my pussy closing in on itself.

“If I'm your booty call, I'm your only booty call. No one else. I want exclusive rights.” He scooted closer still, reaching to curl a stray dark hair behind my ear.

“Oh, yeah? And what if I find a man who falls in love with me?” I licked my lips and looked right into his eyes.

“You already have a man who loves you. You don't need another one,” he reminded me, and I scooted so close I could feel his breath on my face.

“Hmm, well I suppose I could meet that condition.” I pressed my lips against his, feeling that same closeness I did the day he took me to my temporary apartment. There was a spark here between us that I thought had died and would never come back. I parted my lips and slid my tongue over his, letting it dance across his teeth.

“It sounds like we have an agreement then.” Ben's hand gripped my bicep and drew me against him, my breasts pressing against his chest. I could feel his erection under his pants and I pressed my hips against it.

"Sounds like it to me." I licked his ear and he let out a groan.

"Come here," Ben whispered, pulling me on top of him. I straddled his body and let him slide my shirt up my body. I gasped as the cool air in the room kissed my skin. He pulled my shirt over my head, and I leaned over him, my hair surrounding us like a curtain. "Your pussy is mine. Your ass is mine. Your body is mine." His fingers deftly unhooked my bra, and he peeled it off me. I took it and threw it to the side and let my breasts spill out onto his chest.

I moaned as he sucked my nipples, letting his teeth press against them. I arched my back, offering him more of myself. Then he kissed me again, pushing his tongue into my mouth and tasting me. I could feel my pussy getting wetter and wetter as he played with my breasts. He pinched my nipples, and I cried out. I could feel my clit throbbing, desperate for attention.

"Get those jeans off," he ordered, and when I stood to strip them off, he pulled his shirt off and kicked off his shoes. He hadn't even gotten to his pants before I was back on top of him.

Ben moved my panties to the side and slid his finger inside my pussy. I moaned his name as he fingered me, barely able to hold myself up. I felt the weight of his thumb pressing on my clit.

"Your pussy is so wet," he moaned. "I really make you that aroused?"

"You're the only one who ever has," I groaned into his ear. I licked his earlobe, nipping at it and pulling it. His hand thrust into me harder, like he was trying to see how deep he could go. "God, that's so deep."

"Mmm, I could bury my whole fist in you." He wiggled his fingers in me, finding my G-spot and teasing it. I clenched, shuddering as he massaged my clit with his thumb. The way he did that was so amazing. Even the best vibrator in the world didn't do that.

"I need you inside me," I moaned.

"You need my cock, huh?" he asked, his fingers sliding down my stomach. He traced my belly button with his fingertips.

"Yes, I need it," I murmured. I reached down and unbuttoned his pants. I slid the zipper down and reached into his boxer briefs. I took his erection in my hand and stroked him lightly. He moaned, and I could feel his cock get harder in my hand. So, I lifted myself off him and pulled his pants and boxers over his feet.

Ben kicked his pants off and slid his hands up my thighs. I shivered as his fingers stroked my skin. "Oh, I'm going to like this," he whispered. Without

warning, he buried his face between my legs as I stood in front of him. His tongue lapped at my soft folds, sticky with moisture. I lifted a leg and rested my foot on the sofa next to him to give him room to work as he pushed his fingers back into my entrance. I let out a moan and gripped his shoulders. I closed my eyes and felt the pleasure building inside me. His tongue felt so good.

"Oh, wow, I'm already so close . . ."

His fingers thrust faster, matching the tempo of my panting. "Yes . . . please, yes . . ." My body trembled, doubling over, and I nearly fell down. The powerful orgasm hit me with convulsions that started in my pussy and shook every muscle in my body.

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God . . ." I was subconsciously rocking my hips into his face, my orgasm ripping through my body. I felt the tip of his tongue pass over my clit and I shook. I was still shuddering, my juices dripping from my pussy, when he stood up. He grasped my waist to steady me.

I leaned into him, twitching and panting. His cock was hard against my hip. He turned me around and pushed me back on the couch. I lay on my back, and he leaned over me, his shaft touching my thigh. He kissed my breast, sucking on the nipple and teasing it with his teeth. I moaned as he did that, feeling shockwaves all the way to my pussy.

"You like that?" he asked.

"Mmm . . ." I moaned.

"I think I want to see how many times I can make you come," he whispered. He gently kissed my neck and slid his hands up my thighs. He gripped my hip and squeezed, then hooked his fingers in my panties and slid them down my thighs. I lifted my feet as he pulled them off and tossed them aside.

I shivered as he lay on top of me. His cock was hard against my thigh. He kissed me, and I wrapped my arms around his neck, moaning into his mouth. He slid his tongue into my mouth, and I sucked on it, tasting my juices on his tongue. He thrust his hips against my thigh, pressing his shaft against me, and he drew his fingers up my legs. He trailed kisses down my neck and along my collar.

"I think I want that too." I gently pushed his shoulders, urging him to eat me more, and he didn't disappoint.

Ben's tongue was like fire and ice all at once, sending pleasure racing through my body. Each lick and kiss was slow, deliberate, teasing. I moaned,

begging for more as he teased my clit. He circled the tiny bud, and I spread my legs, my hips bucking against his face. I whimpered and moaned, arching my back. I wanted to enjoy this torture, the slow build up to ecstasy. I wanted to beg for it, to beg him to eat me faster, to finish it, to make me come.

"Mmm, yes, yes, that feels so good!" I moaned.

He smiled at me and kissed my thigh. "You taste so good, too. I could do this for hours." I whimpered and moaned, "Please, faster, harder, make me come!"

His fingers were magic, sinking into my pussy just as the first wave of the next orgasm began. I clenched on his tongue, and he rubbed his face back and forth on me, his nose stimulating my clit. "Oh, God, yes . . ."

I was wild, gripping his head so tightly he could have suffocated or drowned in my moisture. I held him to my body, his tongue and fingers in me as I flailed my hips up off the couch. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God," I cried out, soaking up every last ounce of pleasure.

As my body came down from the high, he pulled his fingers out, using his hands to spread my thighs and pull my pussy lips wider. "I can almost see into you. God, that's so hot. I want to . . ."

"God, Ben, that was incredible," I moaned.

"I'm not done yet." I felt him push both of his thumbs into me. He stared at my mound, eyes wide with curiosity and pleasure as he pulled his thumbs apart, stretching me open. "Oh, wow, that's so hot," he groaned.

I reached for his shaft, stroking him as he looked into me. "You like seeing inside me?" I asked him seductively. His dick dripped with moisture. I used my finger to wipe it away then licked my finger clean and returned my hand to stroking him.

"Yes," he moaned, his hands still working my pussy open. He leaned in and licked my clit. I cried out—I was still sensitive from the orgasm he'd just given me. His tongue was soft and slow, a welcome respite from the hard work he'd been doing with his fingers.

I stroked him a little faster, and he pushed his fingers into me a little deeper. He looked at me, his eyes wide with pleasure. He pulled his fingers out and licked them clean. "You taste amazing," he moaned. He leaned in and licked my pussy lips, on the inside, then on the outside, teasing me.

I leaned back on the couch, and he pushed his face into me, his hands on my thighs, holding me wide open. He sucked and kissed, slowly, softly, sensually. He was driving me wild.

I felt him spread me with his fingers again, and he pushed his tongue inside me. I moaned, raising my hips up off the couch, holding his head to me. He licked and probed, swirling his tongue all over my pussy as he held my lips open.

"Oh, my God, that feels so good," I moaned.

He moaned and sucked, his tongue darting in and out of me. I felt my whole body filling up again with the need for release, with the desire to orgasm. I felt myself clench around his tongue, my pussy tightening against his mouth.

I heard him moan, felt him suck on me harder. I was getting close again. So very close. "Mmm, yes, please . . ."

I felt him push his tongue into me as far as it would go, his nose pressed up against my clit. I came hard, my body spasming. I was barely done when he stood up and grabbed his dick. I reached out to him, but he pushed my hand away. He stood over me, his legs spread, his hips thrust forward. He stroked his dick, his eyes focused on my pussy. "I'm going to come on your pussy," he said, his voice low and deep.

"I want you to," I told him. He grunted then groaned, his hands working his shaft as he pointed his dick down and stroked. Thick white ropes of cum sprayed my mound, coating my pussy, dripping down into my crack. He grunted again, his body shuddering as he held his dick high in the air, spraying me. He came for what seemed like minutes, his body swaying back and forth, his balls emptying onto me.

I grabbed my tits and squeezed them, my hands covering my nipples, my body tingling. I moaned, my head thrown back, my eyes closed. He was still spraying me, his dick still hard, his hands still working his shaft. The sticky, hot cum landed on me feeling like lava.

"Yes, yes, yes," I moaned, my body on fire again. He grunted, spraying me, his orgasm finally ending. He pushed his dick down, and it bounced up, hard and thick. "In me . . . put it in me before it goes down."

Ben knelt between my legs and slid his cock into me and started thrusting. My fingers worked my clit feverishly until I was on the edge again. The last one was the best one, filled with his thick girth. I relaxed into it, gasping and letting guttural noises escape my parted lips. His cock was always the best, especially with no condom. I spasmed around him, clenching and releasing. "Oh, God, Ben, yes . . ."

"That's it . . . good girl, Geo. Come for me." He thrust into me, but I could

tell his erection was going down. He lasted just long enough for me to have one more orgasm and then he was done. He pulled out, and I was a limp noodle. I lay there as he leaned in and kissed me, then vanished. When he returned he had a warm, wet wash cloth, and he washed me clean, wiping away his cum and cleaning my pussy.

It felt amazing, the heat of the rag while he massaged me. "That might be a new record. Was that four or five?" he asked.

I propped myself on my elbows and watched him washing me seductively. "We could go for five . . ." I smirked at him, and he chuckled.

"Stay the night and I'll make it twelve. I just need twenty minutes to recover." He stood and walked back to the kitchen, and I collapsed back onto the couch. How I would love that, but I couldn't. Being in Ben's place having NSA sex was one thing. Sleeping here overnight was off limits. I already didn't want to leave anymore. I wanted to stay here, be with him, have a family. But how? And what about my job?

"I can't," I muttered, forcing myself up. If I stayed, I would never leave. And I had to leave. "I have to call Halie about the cruise and set some plans." I stood and collected my clothing. "I leave in two weeks, remember?"

Was I reminding him or myself? I didn't even know anymore. My heart was so confused. What if I left, and the magic left with me? What if I came back to Hudson and Ben had met someone else? When he said he claimed me, I liked it. Now I wanted it for real. Even if it came with the risk of having my heart broken again.

I just couldn't.

Ben

“**H**ey, slow down!” I called after Jordan and Charlie, who heard the sea lion roaring and took off to see it. Georgia laughed at the antics and grabbed my hand.

“Come on, be a kid again.” She pulled me along, though I continued at a bit more respectable pace. The Central Park Zoo was much smaller than I imagined, but the boys loved it. Large shade trees draped us in a veil of shade that kept us cool. For mid-August it was hot but not sweltering.

“Look, look, Dad!” Charlie stood on the fence and pointed at the largest sea lion who barked out his roar. His black eyes reflected the sunlight, his head thrown back to the sky. It was a magnificent sight.

“That’s pretty awesome. I wonder what he eats.” I came to a stop right behind the information placard that gave fun facts about the lions.

“Says here he’s a Galapagos sea lion,” Charlie said, pointing at the words. He hopped off the fence and read the entire placard to me and his mom. Jordan was too amazed by the sounds the animal was making. He remained standing on the bottom rung of the fence, leaning over it. “He has external ear flaps, and look, it says he eats penguins and krill. What’s krill?”

He looked up at Georgia, who shrugged. “I think it’s like a bacteria or something.”

“Krill are small crustaceans.” I chuckled and winked at Georgia. “I guess he hasn’t learned about classes of animals yet?”

“He’s eight, Ben.” She rolled her eyes at me. “He has learned his letters,

numbers, and how to tie his shoes. We'll get to crustaceans and mammals a bit later on."

I sighed contentedly. For his age, he was already doing well. I was impressed that he could read the sign to me, though he did sound things out as he went. "You're doing a great job homeschooling him, you know?"

Georgia looked down, her cheeks pink, and I realized we were still holding hands. I didn't pull away because I didn't want to let go. She didn't seem to mind, either. "Thanks. I am trying my hardest. I know I won't always be able to do it, but I'm going to as long as I live on the ship."

She looked up at the sea lions while Charlie read more of the placard. My heart felt hollow. With only a week and a half left with them, I wanted to try to focus on the positives and be there for her, exactly like Owen suggested.

"What do you say we get some street food? I saw a hot dog cart not too far down the sidewalk."

Charlie scrunched his nose up at my suggestion. "I say ice cream!"

Jordan turned abruptly at the mention of ice cream and cheered. "Yes! I say ice cream too. Dippin' Dots. That's what I want." He hopped off his perch on the fence and jogged over to us. "Do they have those here?"

"I think we should eat some real food," Georgia told them, finally pulling her hand away from mine. She adjusted her purse strap on her shoulder and cocked her head. "Street food sounds yummy, Ben."

"Then off we go. Mom's orders!" I led the charge, though it seemed like I was playing keep up with two very energetic boys. When we exited the zoo, the street vendors were only a few paces away. They sold soft pretzels, hot dogs, sausages, gyros, you name it. Everything smelled so delicious.

We ordered hot dogs and pretzels and a round of sodas for everyone and then sat on a bench in the shade to eat. Traffic zipped past us, causing the trees to dance in their breeze, and the subway beneath our feet rumbled the entire street and sidewalk.

"I like the city," Charlie said, talking with his mouth full. "It's got tall buildings."

"Yeah, really tall," Jordan chimed in. "That one is like touching the clouds. I never seen one so big." He craned his neck and pointed upward at the skyscraper.

"You should see the Empire State Building," Georgia told them. "It's over a hundred stories tall. It used to be the world's tallest building."

"What's taller now?" Jordan asked. His lips dripped with ketchup. I used

my napkin to wipe it away. I was amazed at how good Georgia was with kids. She should have been a teacher.

“Well, now, the tallest building is the Burj Khalifa building in Dubai. It’s 163 stories.” She took a bite of her hot dog and grinned at the boys’ amazed looks. Charlie shook his head.

“Makes me dizzy.” He rolled his head around in circles and made Jordan cackle. Soon, both of them were doing it.

After a lot more walking to take in the sights and a crazy ninety-minute commute through bumper-to-bumper traffic, we stopped by my building to drop Jordan off. The plan was for me to take Georgia and Charlie back to the Ronald McDonald house, but as soon as Jordan was back inside his apartment with his mother and the door was shut, Charlie raced to the elevator and pushed the call button to go up.

“Hey, no, bud. We’re going down.” Georgia tried to push the down button but Charlie put his hand over it.

“Please, can’t we go to Dad’s? I want to sleep over.” He pouted, his little lip jutting out. It had been a long day. I was surprised he hadn’t fallen asleep in the car on the way back. He looked tired, eyes heavy with fatigue.

“We gotta do what Mom says, buddy. She’s the boss.” I coaxed his finger off the button, and he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Alright,” Georgia said, relenting. “We can go to Dad’s.”

Charlie’s hands shot into the air in a celebratory fist pump just as the elevator doors slid open. He charged in, and Georgia hooked her arm through mine. I led her in and pushed the button for floor fourteen. Charlie tried jumping up and down to shake the elevator. It amused me how curious he was. He had such a vibrant, active mind, and I loved seeing him exploring his environment all day today.

When we walked into the apartment, Hank greeted us at the door. His sleepy eyes matched his wagging tale, blinking slowly. Charlie dropped to his knees and pulled old Hank in for a bear hug.

“Gotta pee. Be right back,” Georgia said. She vanished into the bathroom, and I sat down on the floor next to Charlie, scratching my old hound.

“Did you have fun today?” I asked him, and he nodded.

“The toucans were my favorite, I think, or the skyscrapers. I like it here.” He found Hank’s ticklish spot, and the old guy’s chubby leg got going so much it made Charlie giggle.

“Do you like the ship?” My heart as a father was so torn. I wanted what

was best for him, but I didn't want to upset his mother.

"I like it here better. The ship is okay. There are lots of fun things to do, but I like your house. Do you think me and Mom can live with you now so we don't have to go on the ship again? It's small there, and I would miss Jordan."

My heart broke. "I don't know, bud. Mom's job is on the ship. She would be really sad if she didn't do her job." I patted Hank and stood, holding my hand out to Charlie. "Let's get you in bed, okay? It's been a long day and you need some rest."

"Aw." He pouted again, but he stood and took my hand. "Can you make pancakes for breakfast again?"

"Of course I will." I led him to his room, which I had left untouched. I hadn't had the heart to change a thing. He kicked off his shoes and took off his pants, sleeping in his T-shirt and underpants, and I tucked him in. "Goodnight, bud. Sleep well, okay?"

"Goodnight, Dad. I love you." His saucer eyes blinked slowly as sleep already played at the edges of his mind.

"I love you too, Charlie."

I shut off the light and closed the door and sat down on the couch to wait for Georgia. She took a while, and when she came out I could tell she'd been crying. Her red-rimmed eyes were devoid of the makeup she was wearing all day. Her hair was now hanging loose around her face, not up in the messy bun. It looked like she was trying to hide the fact that she was emotional, but I saw right through it.

"What's wrong? You've been crying."

She sighed and plopped down beside me. "Call from my manager. They want me to fly out tomorrow. They said if I leave tomorrow and get to the ship, I can keep my full-time position. If I can't be there tomorrow, they have no choice but to sign Sophie. We'll both be part-time."

"I thought you weren't leaving until next week." My heart went into instant fight-or-flight. I had another week before they were supposed to be leaving. This couldn't be happening. Not yet. I wasn't ready.

"That was only for the part-time. The thing is, Sophie has pushed for a contract. They won't have anyone for the cruise that leaves out of Santa Monica this week. If she doesn't get her part-time contract, she's walking. So they are telling me what's happening so I can get there and keep my job and they can kick her to the curb." Georgia pressed a hand to her forehead. "Ben,

what do I do?”

She leaned against my chest and sobbed hard. “It’s my dream. You know?” Her words came in between blubs of tears and gasps for breath. I hardly understood her. “I can’t find a job around here. I’ve tried so hard. I just wanted to do what I love. I am not a waitress or a cook. I’m not good at working with my hands. I don’t have a degree. I am a singer—a damn good one.”

“Hey, shh,” I whispered, rubbing her back up and down in smooth, gentle strokes. “It’s okay. I know it’s last-minute. Charlie still has a few checkups. What if he stays with me for the week? You go to the ship, do the week cruise. You’ll be in port in New York City next week anyway, right? I can bring him down to you.”

Her head shot up and she pushed away from me. “No!” she hissed under her breath. “I can’t leave my son with a complete stranger.” Georgia bolted, standing up and marching into the bedroom. I was there as she tried to shut the door. She was upset, and I wasn’t going to let her be alone in her pain.

“I’m not a stranger, Geo.” I forced the door open and slipped in. She was crying really hard now, but she wasn’t making many sounds. I kept my voice down even after I locked us into the bedroom and I followed her to the bed.

“I can’t, Ben. I’ve never left him anywhere.” Tearing three tissues from the box on my nightstand, she blew her nose and wiped her tears away, though the streams down her cheeks were immediately replaced by a fresh round of moisture.

“I was talking with him when I tucked him in. He asked if he could stay. I don’t think it’s a bad idea. It’s not forever. It’s just a week.” I really wanted her to see that I was supporting her job, trying to help her keep her dream alive. I wasn’t trying to get Charlie away from her.

“You talked to him without my permission?” Her voice rose a notch, and I glanced at the door.

“You’re going to wake him.”

“You had no right! He’s my son.” She rubbed her eyes furiously and sucked in stuttered breaths.

“He’s my son too, Geo,” I said calmly, trying to comfort her. “And I would never hurt him. I’m trying to help you keep your job.” I held her arms, hoping she would feel my heart through the gentle touch.

“I can’t!” Her wail was loud, loud enough that she could have woken him up. I covered her lips with mine, kissing her hard, swallowing the shout, and

she didn't resist me.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, and she pulled me closer, holding me tightly. Her body trembled as she sobbed into my kisses. I held her so tightly I thought she'd stop breathing. I wanted her to draw every ounce of comfort from me that she could, so I poured all my energy into it. It was a make-or-break moment.

So when she pulled away and smacked me, I thought everything was broken.

Georgia

I recoiled after the smack, instantly biting a nail. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . . I’m just.”

Ben ignored my blubbering and pulled me into his arms. He was only trying to keep me quiet. I should never have reacted that way. I was just angry that he would have the nerve to talk to Charlie about things without me.

“Geo, I’m not trying to upset you. I love you. I want to help you, that’s all.” His hands smoothed down my back. “I understand you’re scared. If I could take that fear and carry it myself so you never had to be afraid again, I would. You’ve been through some really rough stuff the past few months. I just want to make it better now.”

“I don’t want to give up my dream. I worked so hard for that full-time position, and they will just take it away if I’m not there, but I can’t leave Charlie here.” I broke away from him and paced, one hand gesturing wildly as I spoke, the other pressed to my forehead. “And what if Charlie likes it here so much that he never wants to go back to the ship? What if he was never happy? What if I’ve been failing him as a mother? I mean, I didn’t even notice the symptoms of a brain tumor, Ben. The ship doctor didn’t either. What kind of mother am I?”

Ben moved closer to me, but I avoided him. “Geo, we don’t want to wake Charlie.”

I knew he was right, so I lowered my voice, but I couldn’t calm down.

“You left me, Ben. You left me when I needed you most. I found out on that cruise that I was pregnant. I was going to ask you to stay in Florida, to be a dad. I had already talked to my manager at the time, and they were going to keep me part-time on the ship and let me do part-time working at their facility in Port Canaveral. We could have had a normal life.” I sobbed, covering my face with both hands, and sat on the edge of the bed.

“You were gone and my entire world turned upside down. I wanted to be with you forever, and now all I have is this job. Now they’re going to take it from me.”

“Or maybe we get a second chance,” Ben whispered. He tried to pry my hands away from my face but I scooted away.

“I was ready to give you everything, but you left.” I wiped my eyes, drying my hands on my pants. “So I gave everything to this job, and now I’m failing at that too. How will I make money and support Charlie?”

“Baby, listen to me. I’m not ever going to let you fail, okay?”

“How can I even trust you ever again?” I hissed, not in anger. It was sheer pain. My heart was in shards, and those shards, which I held in my hand exposed to him, had cut me into pieces. I just didn’t want to wield them like daggers anymore.

Ben got a very intense, serious look in his eye. I cowered, thinking he was enraged. I worried he would snap, shout at me, or be angry with me for having not moved on from the past. Instead, he grabbed my head, cupping both cheeks tightly. His eyes locked on mine, searching me.

“Now, you listen to me, Georgia Lane. Since the very instant you came back into my life, I have done everything I could to commit to you. I admit that there were times I should have shown up for you where I failed. But I am a thousand percent serious. I am here, and I am yours. And you are mine. Whether you are on that ship nine months out of the year or I have to leave everything I own to be a bartender on a beach in the Bahamas just to get to see you more often.” He shook me gently, his grasp growing tighter. “You can leave. You can take my son. You can stomp on my heart, spit in my face, and call me an asshole, but I am in love with you, and I am never making the same mistake again.”

My eyes hurt from crying, but more tears streamed out of them. Who was this man and where did Ben go? Because I had never seen him be so strong and loving at the same time. My heart was melting and healing beneath his touch. I tried to nod, but his firm grip made it difficult. “I’m sorry,” I

whimpered, licking tears off my lips.

"I love you." Ben leaned forward and gave me a passionate kiss. He continued to hold my head in his hands as he licked my lips clean of the tears. "And I am never leaving you again. You can trust that now. I am here to support you and that's it." He kissed me again, this time parting my lips. His tongue entered my mouth, tangling with mine.

I shook with emotion, desperate to feel his arms holding me. Ben pulled me to the edge of the bed and lifted me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he pushed me against the bed's headboard. He took his mouth off mine and looked at me with a combination of adoration and lust. "I'm not leaving." He ran his hands down the front of my blouse. "I'm not giving up on us. I'm not going anywhere. And even if you leave me, I'm not going anywhere." His voice was firm. I nodded again, this time free to do so.

I reached for his hips as he slowly lowered me back to the mattress. I needed skin-on-skin comfort—now. It was confusing and overwhelming, but feeling close to him was what I wanted. I needed the comfort of physical connection, and he was the only place I ever wanted it from again.

"Help me," I whimpered, yanking at his waistband. His hands made quick work of the fly, and he pushed them down as I pulled my shirt and bra off. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I didn't know what to think. I couldn't make any decision during a time of high emotion like this. All I knew was I didn't want to get on that ship anymore. I just didn't have a choice. I had no other job.

"You're mine, Georgia," he whispered, laying me across the bed. He reached up and undid my pants and pulled them over my hips and off, along with my panties.

"I know it. I've always known it." I scooted backward until my head almost hung off the other side, and he tore his shirt off and crawled over me.

"No," he said, sounding very serious. "I mean you're mine, Georgia." He kissed me hard and then pulled back and stared at me.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to me. "I know. Just make love to me." I kissed him, tasting the salt from my tears and the sweetness of our lips. His cock was hard, pressing into my thigh as he lowered his body onto mine. The weight of his frame was warmth and goodness. It felt like home, like where I was supposed to be. It only made me more confused.

"And I want to look at you," I said, pulling his face up to mine. He smiled

and kissed me, running his hands down my sides. He cupped my butt and squeezed as he ground against me. "I don't ever want to have to stop looking at you, and I don't ever want to stop touching you."

He groaned and rolled us over. I straddled him, my hair brushing over his chest as I began grinding on his dick. It slid between my lips, moisture slicking the movement. He reached up and cupped my breasts, his thumbs moving over my nipples. Then he raked his nails down my stomach. The touch sent a shock through me, and I moaned, arching my back. I continued to rock back and forth, working him with my body.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, his voice low and husky. He explored my skin with his fingers, and I found myself opening my eyes and watching him.

"I don't ever want to leave this moment. Can we stop time?" I asked before I lay across his chest and kissed him again.

"I wish I knew how because I would." I felt his hands curve around my backside, gripping handfuls of my flesh and pulling my body harder against his cock. I could feel my wetness pooling on his package. I rocked my hips faster, feeling him slide along my lips.

I was so close, so very close. "Please, don't stop," I begged, feeling the muscles in my stomach tighten and my orgasm begin. I dug my nails into his chest and came. I felt my body shake with the force of it, and then I was gasping for breath. He gripped my body and rubbed me against him, and I felt his cock throb and jerk beneath me.

"I love you," I whispered, feeling my heart tighten at the words as they fell from my lips. And I did, I loved him. I loved him with all my being, and the ache in my heart was a testament to that. I loved him, and I'd never see him again. I loved him and I couldn't leave him.

"I love you," I said again, and then I was crying.

I cried for all the loss that I felt, for all the pain that he'd caused me, and all the fear I had for what was to come. I cried for the life I was going to have to live, without the one person who had ever made me feel whole. I cried for the life I thought I'd never have and for all the things I thought I'd never experience. For Charlie, and my grief over mistakes I'd made, and for Ben because in this moment, he made me feel so deeply loved and supported.

"Hey, baby," he cooed, turning us back over again with his strong arms gripping me. He pulled back as my orgasm slowed, then dipped his hips and pushed his cock into me. I shuddered and gasped, feeling his full length

penetrate me. "I love you too, okay? We'll make it work."

I wanted to believe we would. Because even if I had to go back to my life, I couldn't let him go. I couldn't let him think that it didn't mean anything or that it wasn't real. Because it was real. He was real. We were real. And I'd do whatever it took to be with him. I would have to leave soon, but I needed to hold him and to feel him inside me for as long as I could. I needed to memorize his smell and his touch, his lips and his hands. I leaned up, kissing him and letting my tongue slide into his mouth.

Ben began to thrust, grinding his pubic bone against my clit. I sighed into our kiss and tried to slow my breathing. I wrapped my arms around him and ran my fingers through his hair. I held him close and kissed him harder. I savored every second that I could feel his skin against mine. I wanted this moment to last forever, and yet I wanted my orgasm to come and to be over. I wanted my hands on him, and I wanted my mouth on him. I wanted to feel his cock inside me, throbbing.

I gripped his shoulders, digging my nails into his skin as he moved. I tried to think about every little thing he was doing, every breath, every movement and every touch. I tried to memorize what I was feeling and what he tasted like. I tried to commit it to memory and to never forget how he looked as he made love to me.

"God, you feel amazing every single time," he groaned. I let my hands slide down his arms and ran my fingers over his nipples. They were hard, and I flicked them lightly, then rubbed them. He moaned and thrust into me harder, and I brushed my thumbs over them, then pinched them lightly. I smiled and leaned forward, taking one of his nipples into my mouth. I flicked it with my tongue, then sucked it. I bit down gently, then harder and clenched my pussy around him.

"I'm so close," I moaned quietly. My body began to tense, feeling the build of pressure in my groin. "I'm going to come again."

"Come for me, Geo . . ." His thrusts became erratic, prodding and grinding into me.

I moaned and pushed my hips up and down, rubbing against him. I felt my orgasm tightening and then exploding inside me. I could feel my muscles clenching and releasing and my pussy throbbing around Ben's shaft. I moaned, clutching his back and thrusting harder. I pressed my tongue against his nipple, swirling it around and then biting down. I gripped him with my arms, holding him against me, and I felt his desperation as his thrusts sped up

further. His cock throbbed, his fingers digging into my skin.

"Oh, God, I'm so close," Ben moaned. He gripped my butt cheek and pushed into me hard. The friction was amazing as I continued to convulse and twitch.

"God . . . don't pull out," I whispered in a moan. "Come in me. I want to feel it." I didn't even care if it was a mistake.

"I'm so close . . ." he moaned again. "I'm so close . . ." And then he thrust into me again. I felt his cock twitching, and as I squeezed it, my insides pulsed in time with his release. It felt like liquid heat, and it felt good. He filled me and kissed me as he did, sucking up my grunts of ecstasy.

His thrusts slowed and he pulled out, rolling to his side. We said nothing. I didn't know what to say. My mind whirled in confusion long after he was lightly snoring, cradling me. I knew I couldn't stay.

I slipped off the bed silently, wiped myself clean in the bathroom, then returned and got dressed. I scrawled a note on a sheet of notebook paper, leaving it lying on the nightstand, then let myself out of the bedroom. Charlie stirred a little when I picked him up and dressed him, but he was such a heavy sleeper that he went right back to sleep as I carried him to the elevator and then to the ground floor to wait for my Uber.

I couldn't say goodbye to Ben after that. I just didn't know what to do. My time had been reduced from one week to two days. The only solution was to take my son with me and make sure we made it to port in NYC in time to get back to his check-up with Dr. Manning.

I just had to survive the next forty-eight hours without seeing Ben.

Ben

I glanced up at the clock. Only six hours from now Georgia and Charlie would be boarding a plane to LAX, then getting a ride to Santa Monica where her ship would depart for a week. The note she scrawled on the paper and left for me on my nightstand had torn my heart out. I'd tried calling several times this morning, but she never answered. When I stopped by her unit, she wasn't there. I knew she had an appointment this morning for Charlie, so I rushed to the hospital, only to find that she had just left.

Distraught and emotional, I went through the motions at work. Harper had even tried to cheer me up, but knowing Georgia was about to leave town and not even say goodbye to me was crushing. I knew how she felt when she came back home that day and I wasn't there. I hated this feeling, and I hated myself for making her feel this. The worst part was it made me so irritable I was taking it out on everyone.

"I'm really sorry you're hurting, Ben," Harper said, squeezing my arm. "I wish I could fix this. I'm sorry if I made it worse."

"It wasn't you, okay? It was me. It was always me." I took the tablet off the nurses' counter and nodded down the hall. "Let's go check on Gavin." Harper nodded, obediently following along. We walked down the corridor in silence as we headed toward the little boy's room. He was recovering from surgery to remove his appendix after a nasty infection. There were several doctors on his case because it hit him pretty hard. I was just the one in charge of rounds for today.

“You should just show up at her place and wait for her to get ready to leave. I mean, yes, she can Uber to the airport, or you could offer to drive her . . .” Harper’s idea wasn’t a bad one. At least I’d get a chance to show up for Georgia one last time and maybe even say goodbye. Right now, though, I needed to focus on my patient.

We approached the door, and as we did, it swung open. Dr. Mindy Scriber appeared, smiling as she left Gavin’s room. She met my gaze and her eyes widened in a pleasing expression. “Ben, how’s it going? I haven’t heard from Georgia in a few days. How is Charlie?”

My chest tightened at the mention of Georgia’s name. “Uh, Harper, give us a second?”

Harper eyed me and nodded, going into Gavin’s room.

“Oh, I checked on him already. I didn’t realize you were doing rounds. After the report from the surgeon, I wanted to make sure he was recovering well.” Mindy’s expertise in internal medicine had been vital on this case. She may have even saved the boy’s life.

“Great, thanks . . .”

“You look upset.”

I sighed and scrubbed a hand over my five o’clock shadow. I didn’t even bother to shave this morning when I woke up alone. “She leaves today, in like six hours or something. They called her. If she doesn’t get on the ship first thing in the morning, she loses her full-time position.” It was painful explaining to Georgia’s friend what was going on. She should have been the one telling her, but maybe she didn’t have the heart for that either.

“Oh, wow. That’s so sad. I will miss her.” Mindy frowned. “I guess she didn’t get that position on Broadway, then?”

My ears pricked, and the tiny hairs on my arms stood up. “Broadway?”

Mindy shrugged and gestured with her hands as if it was old news. “She didn’t tell you? She sent headshots, videos, and an application for Broadway. She was waiting to hear from them. She was really torn up, Ben. She’s totally in love with you and doesn’t want to leave. She just doesn’t want to lose her job. She looked everywhere.” Mindy’s grimace grew as she spoke, probably because my face contorted into desperation, frustration, and panic all at once.

“She what?” I felt my pulse racing. “She said that?”

“No, she didn’t exactly say that, but I could tell. All she could talk about was not finding a job and her dream. But every time she spoke of you, it was about what a good man you are and how amazing you are with Charlie.”

I glanced at the door to Gavin's room and swallowed hard. "Broadway? She really wants to audition?"

Mindy chuckled. "Yes, and dang, does that girl have pipes. She can wail, man. Like seriously, if they give her a shot, she's a shoe-in." Mindy patted my arm as she walked past me. "You tell her to call me."

I had zero response because my mind was racing. If Georgia had applied for Broadway and hadn't heard back, that meant there was hope. They hadn't rejected her yet. And if there was hope, there was still time to work some magic.

Harper was smiling and talking to Gavin's mother when I entered. We tackled her questions, checked out Gavin's vitals, and finished up the visit. I had several more rounds to do, but before I could even think of them, there was something I needed to ask Harper. I was chomping at the bit by the time we walked out of Gavin's room and I had Harper to myself.

"Something wrong?" she asked, chuckling. I bet I had been speaking a million words per minute to finish that visit up.

"Listen, you know Cameron Marshal from Mercy in Yellow Springs, right?" I stopped her, not letting her pass me. This was crucial.

"Uh, I don't, but I know Owen is close with him and Chelsea, his wife." Harper looked at me with curiosity. "Why?"

"I have to go on to Betsy Sodder's room now, but call Owen. You tell Owen to have Dr. Marshal call me immediately. Tell him it's an emergency and don't say what." I started toward the next patient's room, but Harper caught my wrist. I turned to face her concerned look.

"What's going on, Ben?"

"Dr. Marshal might just have a miracle for me today, and it has nothing to do with medicine." I winked at her, suddenly on cloud nine. If Dr. Marshal could pull some strings with his connection to Broadway, I might just be able to change Georgia's mind.

I rushed through the next two visits, though I was careful to listen to my patients and their concerns. They were easy cases, a broken leg and subsequent surgery, and a child almost recovered from pneumonia. My hands shook with anticipation and nerves, anxiety roiling my gut. And when I finished the second visit and glanced at the clock, I had less than five hours until Georgia's plane took off. That meant I had less than two hours before I had to be at her place to catch her in time.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I jumped, startled. As I pulled it out

and read the number—one I didn't recognize—I knew it was Cameron. I swiped right and answered it, not even caring that I was just outside a patient's room.

"Dr. Marshal?"

"Hi, yes, this is him. Am I speaking with Dr. Ben Wilks?" The man sounded tired but friendly. I knew nothing about him except what I'd heard Owen tell me—that for their one-year anniversary Cameron gave them front row seats at Broadway because he knew a guy.

"Dr. Marshal, I have a huge favor to ask."

"What's that?"

I took a deep breath and dived into the entire story, relating everything as quickly as I could—my screw up, Georgia's secret, her career, Charlie, and when I got to the part about her application, Cameron cut me off.

"So you want me to call my brother-in-law and see what he can do?"

I felt stupid asking, but I was willing to make a fool of myself for her. I needed her in my life. "Yes. I don't even know if your contact there is able to do it, but I need someone to look at her videos and application. If I can get her an audition tonight before 5 p.m. she might just stay." My voice was full of emotion. "Please, say you'll do it?"

"Don't worry, Ben. I will make that call. Is it okay if I give him your number too?" My heart felt an explosion of energy.

"Yes . . . uh, yes. Please have him call me immediately."

As I hung up the phone, Harper walked around the corner grinning. Her cheeks were bright red and I knew she'd been eavesdropping. "So, Owen called him?" she asked, tiptoeing over to me.

"He did, and I'm getting her an audition." I thought my head would explode from the blood pressure inside it. "I'm taking off. Ask Dr. Peters to do the rest of the rounds." I pushed past her. "I have to go get my girl."

Georgia

Just as I shut the zipper on my suitcase, I heard someone knock on my door. I froze. I knew who it was and I was hoping to get out of this apartment before he came knocking. My heart had been so heavy I never slept last night. And dealing with Charlie all morning was a nightmare and a half. He moped about his appointment, demanding to stay at the hospital to see Ben. I urged him to come home, bribing him with the promise of ice cream.

Now he sat curled in a ball pouting because he really didn't want to leave. I had fifteen minutes until my Uber arrived to drive me to La Guardia, and all I wanted was to teleport there now instead of opening that door.

"Georgia, it's me. Are you in there?" Ben's voice echoed through the wood, and Charlie's face shot up.

"Shh!" I told him, holding a finger to my lips. Maybe if I just let him think we were gone already, he'd leave and I wouldn't have to say goodbye and wreck my makeup again. Unfortunately, given Charlie's emotional state and the way his face fell when I did that, I realized what a horrible mother I was being to him. My shoulders sank and I sighed. I couldn't take Charlie away and not even let him say goodbye to his dad.

So I slunk over to the door and pulled it open. Ben rushed in, not even saying hello, and pulled me against his body. He gave me the most amazing kiss I'd ever gotten, the kind where your foot lifts off the ground and you feel light-headed. Charlie laughed and clapped, then said, "Ew, get a room."

I started laughing and so did Ben, so hard we had to hold onto each other just to stand up, and when we calmed, Charlie ran up to us and wrapped his arms around us both. Ben took my breath away and gutted me at the same time. Goodbyes were too hard. How could I do this?

“Now, I need to explain something to you before you get upset with me. Okay?” I nodded against his chest but pulled away. I never wanted Charlie to see Ben and me being physically affectionate because I didn’t want him getting the wrong idea. I was already a little frustrated by that, but I’d let him speak. After all, that’s why he came—to beg me to stay. I knew it.

“Dad, are we staying? Can we move in with you?” Charlie held his hands out as if asking Ben to lift him up, so Ben did.

“I just scored you an audition.” He beamed, eyes sparkling with emotion.

“What?” I asked, backing away. “Where?”

“Broadway.” He sighed and laughed at the same time, then continued. “So, I knew Harper’s husband had a connection with Dr. Marshal. And a while back, I learned Dr. Marshal knew someone who worked at a theater.” He took a deep breath and shook his head. “He did me a favor.” Ben glanced at his watch. “It’s a two-hour, thirty-six-minute drive to the theater, and if we leave now and I speed a little, we can make it.”

I felt my knees going weak. “Wait. What?” I backed up until my feet hit the sofa. I sank down, planting my butt on the arm of the couch. “Broadway?”

“Georgia, don’t sit down. Look . . . if you audition now and they don’t make their decision right away, you can go on the first cruise and next week, maybe they’ll have made their decision. Baby, I don’t want you to give up your career. I want to take it to the next level. This could be it.” He set Charlie down and picked up our bags. “We have to go now.”

“Oh, my God, Ben,” I said, feeling the emotion welling up. I was going to cry.

“No, don’t cry.” He chuckled. “Let’s go . . . hurry!”

Charlie pumped his fists in the air and ran out the door, already to the elevator before Ben and I came out. It was a mad dash to the car, and Ben was right. He drove a little fast. My heart was racing the entire drive, even as Ben talked to me and tried to calm me down. I had never in a million years expected this to happen. I felt hope finally swelling in my chest. I wanted to give in to the hope and get excited, but I’d been let down too often to really let go of my anxiety.

“What if they don’t want me?” I worried out loud.

“Baby, anyone who has heard you sing knows this is the obvious next step. I’m not taking no for an answer.” He rested his hand on my knee, and I looked back at Charlie who was ginning. He pointed at our interlocked hands and covered his mouth. I couldn’t believe how much he understood having been so sheltered his whole life.

I snickered. “Ben, I don’t want to leave.”

“I don’t want to leave either!” Charlie announced. “So we’re not leaving. And I want a video game thing for my room, like Jordan has. Can I have one of those?”

“You can have anything you want, buddy,” Ben told him, and I pinched his finger. “If your mom says it’s okay,” he added, correcting himself.

“First things first. I need to land this job. God, Ben, if it doesn’t work, what do I do?” butterflies attacked my stomach.

“Too late,” he joked. “You already said you didn’t want to leave. And you told me you loved me, so that pretty much sealed the deal. Plus, after telling you that you belong to me, you agreed to that. It’s pretty much fate saying we belong as a family now. So what’s going to happen is, I’m going to support you fully, whatever happens. You get the job and want it? Good, I will drive you to the city myself every time you work. You want to quit your job and homeschool Charlie full-time? Good, I’ll buy all the curriculum, pay for the best co-ops, and take you on the most amazing field trips.”

Ben looked at me seriously for a second and sobered his expression before paying attention to the road. “You want to get back on that ship and live that life? Okay.” His voice cracked as he spoke, and I felt the weight of his words. “Then whether I stay in Hudson and see you sparsely through the year or I take a job on a ship too, we are a family. And family supports each other.”

My eyes welled up with tears and couldn’t blink them away. “I love you, Benjamin David Wilks.”

“Gross . . . can’t you wait to say that stuff when you’re alone?” Charlie said, followed by a gagging sound.

Ben and I laughed again. I was so overwhelmed by his love and affection that I had no words to thank him. “So, you can still get me to the airport on time tonight?”

“If you sing fast, baby. Just have to clear security and tell the pilot you’re a few minutes late.”

Ben made record time from Hudson to NYC. We paid fifty dollars for a parking garage for one hour, which was ridiculous, but it was the only off-street parking they had and the streets were packed. We ran four blocks to the subway, then rode it another seven before our stop. My hair was a mess. I was out of breath, and I was pretty sure I smelled a little sweaty, but we walked into the auditorium just as the most gorgeous woman I'd ever seen finished a rendition of "Lady Marmalade." If she was my competition, I might as well leave now.

I felt nervous, clinging to Ben's arm like a kid on the first day of school. "You'll do fine," he whispered, leading me deeper into the darkness of the theater. Our shoes squeaked on the floor, and Charlie hummed something, his voice echoing around the silence. Three people sat in one of the front rows with their backs to us. A few random seats were filled with people, but for the most part it was empty.

One person turned and looked at me, then said, "Oh, Ms. Lane, we've been expecting you. Please take the stage. It's your turn." Then he shouted, "Cue up her track, please."

My legs shook as I walked, glancing back at Ben and Charlie who sat down to watch. I wasn't usually nervous to perform, but this wasn't just any performance. Not only was this a Broadway audition, but it was a life-changing shot at a second chance for me and Ben. It was an answer to my silently uttered prayers that somehow, I could have everything I wanted while taking care of my child to the best of my ability.

I mounted the stairs, stood in the center of the stage, and waited for my cue to begin. The song's melody filled the air, horns and piano of the jazzy version of "Fly Me to the Moon" by Frank Sinatra. I had selected that as my audition piece when I submitted my application. I belted the lyrics out, unable to restrain myself. My body swayed to the music, I lifted my arms and spun around. I treated it as if I were on the stage on the ship, entertaining my crowd. I came alive under the lights the same way I did on the ship, with the only difference being that I had no microphone to magnify my sound. I didn't even need it. The acoustics of the auditorium were amazing.

When I finished, there was no applause except for a brief hand clap from Ben and Charlie, who suddenly stopped when no one else joined them.

"You may be seated," the man said, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. His tone wasn't welcoming at all, and I felt my heart sinking slightly as I walked back down the steps and sat next to Ben.

The room again fell silent. Ben clasped my hand, kissing my knuckles one at a time. I was nervous. I'd never done anything like this. He knew how challenging these things were for me when he took me to the interview to get my current job. I was a mess inside, but he whispered encouraging words to me the entire drive. Now, he leaned in and whispered, "You're so much better than that other girl."

I blushed but ducked my head. I didn't think so, but I wasn't objective. And I was hard on myself.

When the same man cleared his throat, the whole room went ice cold. I felt like I'd stopped breathing. He stood and turned to face the room.

"Ms. Lane, please see me. The rest of you are free to go. Expect a call later this week."

"I told you," Ben said aloud this time, not even shy about it. He grinned as we stood and walked toward the man who seemed to be the director. My heart swelled. I had to control my breathing too. I couldn't believe this was happening.

"Ms. Lane, I apologize for not getting with you sooner. When director Evers called me to put you on this audition list tonight, I had already made up my mind that I wanted you. I just wanted to see you in action, you know, make sure you have stage presence." He thrust his hand out. "See me first thing Monday morning for your contract and some specifics. We are eager to get you cast in your first show. Congratulations."

I shook his hand, speechless and overwhelmed. Ben had more than shown up for me. He'd moved mountains. I didn't have to leave him, and he was never going to leave me again. It felt like I was dreaming.

Ben

I didn't even wait until we were in the car. I had stopped by my apartment on the way home from the hospital and dug into my closet through a box of memories I kept from my parents. In it, I had my mother's engagement ring, given to me by my aunt who knew she wanted me to have it. I'd kept this ring because I knew I wanted my future wife to wear it. I had just never found a woman who matched my heart the way Georgia did, so it had been hidden in that box until just a few hours ago.

We stopped outside the parking garage and I caught her hand. She turned to face me, and without even asking, I slid the ring on her finger and kissed it to seal the moment. "Things are really weird, so I'm just going out on a limb here. I'm sorry I didn't plan anything special or have a private moment." A car drove by, honking its horn loudly. It cut her off as she started to speak. I didn't want to hear a rejection, but based on her expression, one might be imminent.

"Ben, I . . ." Georgia started, looking a bit reluctant, but as Charlie started talking, oblivious to what just transpired, she focused on him. He asked about Spiderman and the Hulk, if either of them lived in New York.

Georgia had just gotten a great job on Broadway and had sent her boss a text saying she would not be on the plane this evening and she would call to discuss details later. Why would she not want to marry me now? I offered Charlie my hand and he took it.

"Let's go get some ice cream," I told them, "my treat. We'll head outside

the city, though, so it's not so expensive to park. We need to celebrate this new job."

Georgia smiled and nodded, and we headed out to the car. By the time we got to the ice cream parlor, she was pretty worked up. We walked in and the bell overhead jingled. A few faces looked up at us from where they were seated around fifties- and sixties-style tables and chairs. I handed Charlie a crisp twenty and told him to go order whatever he wanted while we found a seat. Then I led Georgia to a quiet table in the corner. Storms brewed in her eyes. Charlie darted off, barely able to see over the counter, while I sat across from the woman I loved and looked into her eyes.

"What's up?" I asked her, lacing my fingers between hers. She eyed the ring, holding her ring finger out a bit while she used her thumb to twist it around and around. The diamond flashed, reflecting the light. I could see that she'd been chewing her fingernails a lot. I knew the bad habit she had of doing that when she was stressed, and the past few months had been hard on her.

"It's gorgeous."

"You don't like it? It was my mother's. I will buy you something else."

"No, Ben . . ." She took a deep breath and blew it out. "It's not that. I just . . ."

I scooted my chair in closer so I could really grasp her hand. I wasn't backing down now. We had come this far. She didn't get on the plane. She had a job now. She'd told me how she feared me being a deadbeat and leaving her again. I apologized, promised her the world. I meant every word too. What other obstacles did we have to overcome?

"What is it, Geo?"

"Charlie needs a man who won't walk out on him. I need that too." Her eyes spoke volumes. The pain of the past still screamed louder in her head than anything I had said to her.

I slid off the chair and got on one knee right there in that ice cream parlor. I clutched her hands in mine, kissing them gently. "Georgia, I made mistakes. But I've proven to you now that I am not ever leaving. I will take you down to the chapel on the corner and marry you now if you want. I am thrilled to be Charlie's father, and I can't wait to be your husband. Please, forgive me for letting you down the way I did. I give you my word that I will never let you down like that again."

She nodded, and tears brimmed in her eyes.

“So, is that a yes?” I asked, kissing her hand again.

“Yes, Ben, it’s a yes.” She laughed and cried at the same time, and I stood up, hoisting her up. She threw her arms around me, and I spun in a circle and then set her down so I could kiss her.

“This woman just agreed to be my wife!” I shouted, and the ice cream parlor erupted into cheers. There weren’t that many people, but it felt like the whole world was cheering for me. I believed the universe was. I had waited eight long years to get to be with her again, and even with the challenges and hurdles we faced, we were making it work.

“Can we eat our ice cream now?” Charlie asked, walking up with a huge ice cream cone in hand. It was covered in syrup and sprinkles and dripped down the side of the cone already.

“Yeah, buddy, let’s get ice cream.” I pulled a chair out for him and helped him sit, then left him with Georgia to go order a cone for each of us, more modest, of course.

When I returned, Charlie was deeply invested in a conversation about how since he would be spending more time in the city from now on, he would hopefully get to meet Spiderman. Georgia was trying to convince him that Spiderman was a fictional character, but to an eight-year-old boy, television was still reality.

I sat across from them as she talked and smiled. Every now and then, she would look up at me across her ice cream cone and I could see how genuinely happy she finally was. It made me happy too, knowing my bride-to-be was the woman I’d always loved. I couldn’t wait to tell Harper.

“Geo, you want to tell Charlie the good news?”

“What good news, Mom?” Charlie’s pudgy little face looked up at his mother, eyes wide. His chin dripped with chocolate syrup and had a few sprinkles peppered across it. She plucked a napkin from the metal dispenser on the counter and dabbed his chin.

“I think that news should come from his father,” she said, meeting my gaze. My heart soared.

“Uh, Charlie, your mom and I have something to tell you.”

He looked up at me as he licked his ice cream cone and the drips that Georgia had just wiped away were replaced with fresh ones. I didn’t think I’d ever get over his cute little features. I never wanted him to grow up.

“We’re getting married. You’re going to move in with me now, and you never have to go on a ship again unless we take a vacation.”

He licked his lips, then thrust his tongue out in a deep, sweeping motion to lick almost his entire chin like a dog. I chuckled at him. Especially when his response to my statement was, “Does that mean I can get an Xbox like Jordan?” Georgia laughed a hearty belly laugh.

We lingered in that little ice cream shop, sharing stories of her travels and my patients. Charlie took her phone and played a game on it for a while before it started to die. When the sun went down and all of us were hungry, I led my family to my car, carrying my son and holding the hand of the most beautiful woman on the planet. Nothing on Earth would ever feel as good as knowing my heart was whole again.

I tucked Charlie into the back seat and buckled him in, then opened Georgia’s door for her. We still had a two-hour drive home, but I wanted to make the most of every single second we had together now. She leaned against the back door and looked up at me, and I pressed my body into hers, pinning her hips to the car with mine. I leaned down and kissed her, hands resting on her hips. She draped her arms around my neck and kissed me back.

It was a warm night. Crickets chirped, though their whistles were almost undetectable with the rush of cars zipping past on the street, kicking up a breeze. It was a perfect night to me, even though the proposal hadn’t been anything fancy. I was just grateful to have finally convinced her to stay.

“You know, I really was going to leave.” She pressed her forehead against mine and turned her chin downward. “I was really afraid you weren’t being real, Ben. Like, something got broken inside me so badly when you weren’t there. I never dated a single guy. I mean, I had a date now and then, but never a serious relationship. I couldn’t. My heart belonged to you.”

“I’m the same, Geo.” I shook my head, my forehead still pressed to hers, and it made her head shake too. “There was never anyone else in my mind. It was always you. You wouldn’t believe how many times Harper tried to set me up.”

Georgia smiled. “I’m glad they didn’t work out. And I’m sorry for seeming so back and forth. Every time I was around you, I wanted nothing but you. But when I got some space, I remembered how badly I was hurt. The ship became my cocoon. I transformed from this uncertain, needy woman into a mother, an independent powerhouse of a woman. I had a career and a life. I made friends and built something for Charlie and me. I was scared of giving that up because what if this doesn’t work?”

“But what if it does?” I asked her, rubbing the tips of our noses together.

“You can’t think like that.” I brushed my lips over hers and remembered something my grandmother once told me. “You know, if you really want something to work, it will. You don’t make any exceptions for failure. If you want to stay married to me forever, then you decide now that you will never divorce me no matter what, and I do the same thing. It will force us to work through issues, forgive each other, compromise, and most of all, love, and love deeply.”

She pulled me down to kiss me hard again. I felt my body responding to her and knew this had to stop or I’d have a distraction trying to get us all home safely. I pulled away. “You’re right, Ben. I’m going to start thinking like that.”

“Should we head home now?” I asked her, pecking her one last time on the lips as I backed away.

“Home . . . I like the sound of that.” Georgia sat in the car, and I shut her door. I couldn’t help feeling like my second chance at love was a gift I would never, ever fully understand, but I would never stop trying to figure it out. Not as long as my lungs had breath.

Ben

I sat across the picnic table from Mindy and Harper while Charlie and Jordan climbed on the jungle gym. The women had agreed to meet me despite it being Labor Day weekend. I had a wedding to plan, and I wanted to get most of the arrangements figured out today. Ben and I had chosen October first as our wedding date. Neither of us wanted to put it off, and both of us knew it would be best to do it now because the showing of my first Broadway musical happened in December, which meant lots of rehearsals and time in the city. No time for a honeymoon if we waited. Otherwise, it would be next year, and we didn't want that.

"I'm so happy Charlie got placed in the same school as Jordan. They aren't with the same teacher, but it makes it so convenient that Jordan's mom can help with driving." I talked absently, answering questions about the life transition as Harper interrogated me. I liked her. I could see why she and Ben were close. She was a great mother.

"My son is eleven, but I'm certain he would love Charlie if they got to meet." Mindy watched Charlie and Jordan playing, her eyes misty. I knew it was hard for her. I touched her hand lightly and sent a prayer to the universe to comfort her heart.

"I know he would too, Mindy." I sighed and was about to change the subject when Harper asked yet another question.

"How is he adjusting to school, then? I mean I know it's only been like three days, but does he like it better than homeschooling?" Harper slurped her

lemonade through the plastic straw while thumbing through the floral brochures. We didn't need many decorations since we planned to host the wedding here at the park for a cookout with friends. Still, I wanted something nice to carry as my bouquet.

“Well, he hates the getting up before seven a.m. part.” I laughed and continued, “But he loves all the kids, getting to interact and make friends. I’m happy for him about that, but I always worry. Sending your child out into the world, even just for school, is a scary experience. I’m sure you’ll understand it when Lily starts kindergarten.” I hadn’t spent much time around Harper and Owen’s little girl, but she was adorable. I knew Ben loved her so much, and we’d asked Harper if she could be the flower girl.

“Oh, look,” Mindy said, turning her magazine around. “This is so pretty. It would work well with your dress.”

I looked down at the picture where her French tip pinned the page down against the breeze. It was a large bouquet of purple Wisteria blooms held together with twine and burlap against a backdrop of greenery and Baby’s Breath. It was stunning, though I knew the Wisteria would not be in season in October.

“If you’re looking at the price for out-of-season flowers, stop.” She covered the price listing on the page. “If you like it, it’s yours.”

I looked up at her and shook my head. “You can’t,” I hummed.

“I will,” she said, retracting the magazine so I couldn’t look at the price. “I’m your maid of honor. It’s my job to spoil you.”

“Speaking of,” Harper chimed in, “when is the bachelorette party?” She waggled her eyebrows and smirked.

“Uh, I’m not sure I need anything fancy. Maybe just getting a mani-pedi or something.” I laughed at the idea of some wild stripper party or something. I had no desire for any of that. Ben was everything I needed and more. I’d spent all of my twenties being wild and free. I was ready for safe and committed now.

“Well, can we at least sip margaritas while we do it? It’s been forever since I had a girl’s night. Every time I think about a baby, my milk lets down and I have to change my nursing pads.” Harper’s comment about motherhood made us all laugh again. I remembered the days and actually envied her. Maybe Ben and I would have more kids.

“Yes, I say mimosas, though, so we can start first thing in the morning and make the guys watch the kids.” I loved Mindy to death. I was so thankful

I found her when I did. She was a rock through the entire summer when I needed a friend the most, and she was so strong, just like I wanted to be. There was nothing about her I disliked.

My phone rang, so I pulled it out thinking it was Ben. He was supposed to call me to find out where in the park we were so he could join us. When I looked at the screen, however, I saw that it was Halie. “Excuse me, ladies, I need to take this.” I stood and walked a few paces away before swiping to answer.

“Hey, Halie, what’s up?” I pressed my finger to my other ear to block out the sound of traffic and children’s laughter.

“How is my favorite singer?” She sounded chipper and aggressive.

“Uh, I’m great, actually. Planning my wedding.” I had sent her a message stating that I would not be coming for the cruise in the South Pacific last week. I left a few messages indicating she should call me, but this was the first I’d been able to talk to her. Our schedules just didn’t align anymore. I was busy every afternoon and evening with trips to the city to acquaint myself with life on Broadway and do auditions for various plays and musicals.

“Okay, well, I’m going to cut to the chase. Sophie is not working out. The owner has given me carte blanche, and I want you full-time. I told them the ship’s entertainment department doesn’t function without you. Now that your son is recovered, we are looking at weekly cruises year-round again.”

I took a deep breath to brace myself and started to talk but she cut me off. “Halie, I—”

“Please listen. We are going to double your salary, increase the size of your state room. You’ll get all your meals for free, three weeks of vacation, full medical—so you can keep your son’s health in check—and your spouse can come too. I didn’t think that would be a thing, but I guess if you’re getting married it is now. I will even work out the details for a fall wedding on the salsa deck if you want.”

After hearing the generous offer, I felt no differently than I had before she called. It was honestly the kindest thing upper management had ever offered to me, and after having taken the entire summer off, it surprised me. I figured they would have fired me by now, but they needed me. I felt important, but Ben came first now. We were committed to each other, and that was what I desired above everything else.

“Actually, Halie, I’m not coming back. I was going to talk to you about

this, but you never returned my calls. I got a job on Broadway. I'm getting married." I bit my lip, hoping she didn't have a poor reaction. "I hoped Sophie was going to take the job so you wouldn't be out."

"Oh, wow. That's really amazing, Georgia. Congratulations. How incredible for you."

"Thanks, I'm really overwhelmed by the changes and I'm so happy to have Ben in my life. I wish you could meet him. You'd love him." It felt good to get that announcement off my chest and know that she wasn't angry.

"Well, it sounds like your mind is made up. I can't hold the offer." Her tone changed, returning back to her business professional voice.

"I'm done. I will call you next week to make arrangements for my things. I am in a park right now, planning my wedding."

"Sure thing. I'll have them start packing up. Good luck, Geo."

"Bye, Halie."

I tucked my phone back into my pocket and turned to walk back to the ladies, and Ben was there. He wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me in for a deep kiss that surprised me. "Mmm," I mewled, bracing my hands on his chest. "What was that for?"

"Because when I see my beautiful bride-to-be, I just want to ravish her." His voice was husky with a hint of lust.

"Ah, well, your beautiful bride-to-be has been entertaining her friends and planning your wedding. I have so much left to do."

"You need to do me," he growled, grinding his hips against my thigh. I heard cat calls and looked over my shoulder. Mindy and Harper were laughing.

"You two need some privacy?" Harper called out, and I felt my cheeks burn.

"Actually, if you don't mind," Ben called back, then looked over to his best friend. "Watch Charlie and Jordan? Bring them up, but wait like one hour." When he turned back to me, he had an animalistic look in his eye. It made my body jolt with desire for him.

I heard them laughing again as he kissed me. Harper shouted, "Yeah, get out of here. Georgia, we'll bring the planning stuff up too."

Ben didn't even let me say goodbye. He dragged me across the street and up to his apartment, and I barely got the door shut before he started tugging my clothes off me, starting with my shorts. He pushed them down so fast I almost fell, but he caught me, bending low to put his shoulder into my hip.

He picked me up, carrying me in a fireman's hold, and tore my shorts off my feet, then smacked my butt.

"God, I've been craving this. Get ready to come, baby." He carried me, kicking and laughing, into the bedroom. I smacked his back playfully and tried not to bang my head as we passed through the door.

"Put me down, brat," I protested, and he dropped me to the mattress. I bounced a few times and he was on me, pouncing like a large predator. He pushed me back and climbed over me, looking down with a fierce expression.

"I want you. I want you to come so hard you can't breathe."

I smiled and reached up to caress his cheek, his stubble scratching against my palm. "I want that too." My body tingled with excitement. I pulled my shirt off and then my bra. He yanked my panties down then climbed off the bed and stripped and was back on me before I could blink.

Ben kissed me, then trailed more kisses across my jaw and neck. I put my arms back over my head and stretched, loving the feeling of his tongue, his cheek, his stubble on my hot skin. He licked at my neck, his hands reaching down to play with my nipples, making me groan. He squeezed and pulled, pinched and twisted, and I bucked up against him. "Oh, that makes me so horny. I want you." My fingernails raked across his sides, feeling his corded muscles beneath the skin. I was so lucky to have such an amazingly attractive man.

"Mmm, I want to try something." His voice was gruff but quiet.

"What?" I asked. He knew I liked to experiment, and he was always coming up with new things. We'd tried so many positions and toys, nothing would surprise me at this point. Though, it had been years. We weren't kids anymore.

Ben scooted to the side of the bed and reached into his nightstand drawer and pulled out a package. It looked like a pool cue, only smaller. A white ball. He tore it open and pulled out a little packet that came with it.

"What's that?" I asked, propping myself on my elbows.

"It's a Ben Wa ball. Supposed to enhance feeling." He tore open the smaller packet and pulled out an alcohol wipe and wiped down the ball. "I'm going to put this in you and you're going to tell me if you like it."

I snickered and spread my legs, then touched my pussy lips, spreading them. I had already made so much moisture. He didn't even need to be adventurous like this, but I loved that he knew me so well. His eyes hazed over with desire as he rolled the ball over my clit, stimulating me. He teased

me, pressing it to my hole and then rolling it back to my clit. I clenched and moaned. It was amazing.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Do you want me to keep doing it?"

"Please," I begged.

He slid it into my pussy, and I moaned at the new feeling. It was incredible. I felt it move as he scooted up the bed next to me. His hand was on my belly, holding me down as he leaned over and licked my nipple. I could feel the ball moving around inside me as he sucked and tugged, his cock brushing my thigh.

My back arched involuntarily, and he kissed down my stomach, his hand sliding down to my clit as he went. He sucked on my clit, and I bucked my hips up and moaned loudly. "Oh, oh."

He groaned, his hand moving from my clit to my pussy, two fingers sliding into my slick hole. The ball moved in time with his fingers, hitting my walls in a perfect rhythm. My hands were in his hair, my chest heaving. I had never been so turned on in my life. "Ben, I'm going to come."

"Just come for me, baby," he said, kissing my stomach, his breath hot on my skin.

I did as he asked, my back arching, my muscles clenching, my pussy pumping around his fingers. I almost couldn't take it. I loved coming with him, loved feeling his control, his desire. I loved the way he took his time with my body, like he was worshiping me.

My body convulsed in orgasm, and when it calmed, he lay down beside me, massaging my clit. He kissed me, my mouth tasting of my own juices. I sucked his tongue into my mouth, pushing mine into his mouth. I wanted him to taste me. He groaned and slid his fingers out of me. He lay down on the bed beside me, his cock throbbing against my thigh.

"I want to see if it feels good too," he growled, biting my earlobe. I shuddered and nodded.

"Yeah . . . you in there with the ball?" I asked, arching upward as he slid his hand up my belly and across my breasts. He kneaded one, groping me.

"Yeah, what do you think?"

"Oh, God, yes. Let's try it."

Ben rose up, hovering over me as he aligned his dick with my entrance. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, nodding.

He pressed the head of his dick into my pussy, the ball moving against his shaft. I gasped as I felt it move in and out of me. I could feel the smoothness against my pussy walls, grinding against me. It was full and exquisite.

"Oh, wow," I moaned, arching my back. "Why haven't we tried this before?"

Do you feel good?" he asked, his voice husky with desire.

"Yes!" I said, my eyes wide.

"How does it feel?"

"It feels . . . it's like the ball is filling me and making your cock feel twice as long. I love it."

Ben slid his hand down to my clit and rubbed it in a circle. I gasped, my eyes closing. "Oh, Ben."

He bent down and kissed me, his hand rubbing my hardened nub as he thrust in and out of me. I could feel the fullness in my pussy, and it was almost too much. I thought I might come again, so I focused on Ben, on the feeling of his mouth on my neck, his hand on my pussy, the feeling of his cock sliding in and out of me.

"You want a full pussy? Want me to fill it more? With my seed?" he asked, biting down on my neck.

"Yes, God, yes," I moaned, my hips arching up to meet his thrusts.

"Good," he said, his hand moving from my clit to my tits. He pinched one hard, and then the other. I screamed as I came.

I arched my back and cried out, my pussy convulsing around him. I could feel the ball inside me rolling, and it felt like I was coming over and over again.

"That's it," he said, squeezing my tits. "That's it. Come for me."

I was panting, my chest heaving.

"I'm going to blow my load, baby," he said, rubbing my clit again. His cock throbbed inside me. He thrust hard, slamming his hips against mine. I could feel the ball jolting in me, making my pussy feel stuffed with cock. I felt his hot seed shoot inside me, hitting my G-spot as he moaned.

I cried out, and he slid out of me. He kissed me, letting me taste his lips, his tongue. He lay down beside me, pulling me against him.

"That was amazing," he said, kissing my forehead.

"Yes," I said, cuddling against him. "I love you, Ben."

"Oh, God, I love you too." He panted, pushing some sweaty strands of his

dark hair out of his eyes. "Now, you need to leave that ball in for at least an hour. Every time you feel it, you Kegel around it."

I snickered. "Yeah?" I asked, propping myself up on one elbow.

"Yeah, doctor's orders. It's actually what they're used for." He smirked at me.

"So, not a sex toy?"

He shrugged. This man was full of adventure at all times. I chuckled and rolled my eyes. I couldn't wait to be his wife and do this every day.

Ben

Georgia did a fantastic job with the modest decorations in the park. White and blue streamers hung from every tree, blowing in the breeze. The sun overhead wasn't too hot for October, and guests were seated and waiting. I stood next to Owen behind the tall floral arch under which I would marry the woman of my dreams, but I was feeling nervous.

"Every man who has ever gotten married feels this way, Ben." Owen chuckled and patted my shoulder. "I'm telling you, this is the best decision you'll ever make in your life."

I forced a smile because I knew he was right. I knew I would get married one day, but I had never expected it to be Georgia waltzing back into my life. My past failures didn't define who I was, but they cast a lingering shadow of doubt on my conscience. Part of me felt like I may fail at being everything she needed, but Owen's comforting words and friendship were a support I could lean on.

"Thanks, Owen. I appreciate the pep talk."

"No problem. I am going to go sit down and take the baby off Harper's hands now. She has to walk down the aisle with Lily." He grinned at me and dashed out to the crowd. There were only a few rows of chairs, only very close friends and family. When Georgia had asked her parents to come at such last-minute notice, they declined. I understood completely, but she was upset by that. In the end, we compromised and made plans for a visit with them at Christmas. I was happy she was speaking to her mother again.

The music started, so I strolled around the arch to the position I was instructed to stand. The officiant walked up and took his place behind the podium, and Lily's bright smile at the end of the aisle greeted me. I took a deep breath, trying to steady my nerves as I watched the bridal party start their procession down the aisle. Harper and Lily walked arm in arm, beaming at each other with love and adoration while Lily tossed flower petals out onto the white silk runner strewn down the aisle. Mindy followed behind them in her light blue gown. All the ladies looked beautiful.

I couldn't help but smile as I watched Lily in her adorable white dress. She was so innocent and pure, and it reminded me of when I was that age before I learned about the harsh realities of the world. Realities I hoped I could teach my son about before life passed me by.

Next came Charlie, the ring bearer, looking handsome in his miniature tuxedo. He held the rings tightly in his little fist, and I could see the concentration on his face as he tried not to drop them. He was so proud of his duty to be in our wedding, and I was proud that I could show my son off to the world. I'd had so much fun learning everything it meant to be a father over the past few months, but having both of them under my roof as a real family for the past four weeks had been a dream.

The idea of how I'd almost lost Georgia but how she stayed anyway brought tears to my eyes. I pinched the bridge of my nose to chase them away and blinked hard. My heart had never felt fuller or more in tune with the true meaning of life—to love and be loved.

Finally, it was Georgia's turn. She appeared at the top of the aisle, and my heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. She was stunning in her white gown, her sandy hair cascading down her back in loose waves. As she walked toward me, I felt my pulse quicken, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of longing.

The sight of Georgia walking toward me on our wedding day was something I'd never forget. I tried to hold back my tears again, but they flowed freely down my cheeks. She was a vision in white, her gown hugging her curves in all the right places. The neckline was modest, but it accentuated her delicate collarbones and the way her hair fell gracefully around her high cheekbones. The train of the dress trailed behind her in a pool of white lace, the fabric rippling like waves with each step she took. Her bouquet bounced with each step, vines of Wisteria releasing their heavenly scent. But it was she who was most beautiful—not any of the pageantry or accessories.

As she drew closer, I could see the glimmer in her eyes, and I knew she was feeling the same way I was. We'd been through so much together, and now we were finally here, ready to start a new chapter in our lives. I couldn't wait to see what the future held for us.

I took her hand in mine, and I felt a jolt of electricity shoot up my arm. I looked into her eyes, and I knew that this was where I belonged.

Everything was a blur from there, repeating after the officiant and listening to his prayer over our marriage. When it came time to exchange the rings, Charlie puffed out his little chest and marched up to us, holding the rings out in his palms.

"Thank you," I whispered, and Georgia kissed his forehead as she took the ring from his palm.

I turned to face the officiant, who nodded at me. "Please recite the vows you have written for each other now as you exchange these rings, the symbols of your love."

I took a deep breath and held Georgia's hand up, sliding the ring on her finger.

"Today, I stand here with you, my love, in front of all our friends and family to declare my eternal commitment to you. From the moment you came back into my life, everything changed for the better. You bring me joy, love, and peace every day. You are my best friend, my confidant, and my soulmate. Through thick and thin, I promise to stand by your side, to love you unconditionally, and to always be there for you. I promise to listen to your dreams, to support your goals, and to encourage you to be the best version of yourself. I vow to be your partner in life, to cherish you, and to honor you until the end of time."

Georgia's eyes sparkled with tears as she looked at me, and I knew that my words had touched her heart. She took my hand, and I felt her warmth and love surrounding me.

"Benny," she began, her voice shaking with emotion. "From the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew that you were the one. Even when we were apart, I still knew. Now, you are my rock, my safe haven, and my home. You make me laugh, you make me feel loved, and you make me a better person. I love you more than words can say, and I promise to spend every day of my life making you happy. I vow to be your partner, your friend, and your lover. I vow to support you, to encourage you, and to stand by your side through thick and thin. I promise to love you unconditionally, to cherish you, and to

honor you until the end of time.”

As she slipped the ring on my finger, I felt a rush of emotions flood through me. This was it. We were finally married. I looked into her eyes and saw nothing but love and devotion. It was a feeling that I had never experienced before.

The officiant cleared his throat and said, “By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I leaned in and kissed Georgia, and as our lips met, I felt a surge of passion and love. It was as if time had stopped and we were the only two people in the world. The applause and cheers from our friends and family faded into the background as we embraced each other.

As we pulled away, Georgia’s eyes sparkled with tears of joy. I knew that this was just the beginning of our journey together, and I couldn’t wait to see what the future held for us. A cheer went up from the modest crowd so I kissed her again, this time a jaw-dropping kiss that had her leaning backward.

“Whoa! Save some for the hotel.” She giggled, clinging to me. I laughed, suddenly being surrounded by all our family and friends. Each in turn offered a handshake of congratulations and love, or a hug or pat on the back. We were whisked away to the shelter house where a feast fit for a king had been laid out by the catering crew.

Georgia stayed by my side as we ate and talked with friends, celebrating. Owen and Harper had set up a Bluetooth speaker, which played music in the background, and Charlie and Lily romped on the playground equipment, already becoming fast friends.

“This is so perfect,” Georgia said to me as we stood, waiting for the caterer to set up the cake for us to cut.

“You’re so perfect,” I told her, claiming yet another kiss. I got to kiss her every day for the rest of my life, and that, in my opinion, was about as close to perfection as someone could get.

Our kissing and rubbing noses were interrupted by someone holding a knife. Georgia led the charge, taking my hand and guiding me to slice through the cake. We cut a piece and fed each other a bite, and she smeared a bit of icing on my chin, which she then licked off before kissing me. I tickled her side, and she almost lost her balance and knocked the cake over, which made everyone laugh.

“You are so handsy today,” she said, swatting my tickling fingers away.

“Just wait ’til tonight.” I winked and guided her to our table to sit and eat

our cake. We sat and listened as Harper and Mindy offered a toast each, honoring our marriage and supporting us, and I saw Charlie barreling over to us. His tux was filthy, covered in dust from the pebbles under the playground equipment. His cheeks were bright red from being warm. I tried to encourage him to take his jacket off at least, but he insisted on wearing it. When he got to my side, he was out of breath.

“I want to talk,” he said, pointing at the mic.

“No, bud, that is for the maid of honor and the best woman. They gave their toasts already.” I hugged him against my body. “Why not have a piece of cake? Go get Lily. Maybe she wants one too.”

“No.” He pouted. “I want to do a speech.” He pointed at the mic, and I didn’t have the heart to disappoint him. I looked at Georgia, and she snickered and nodded.

“Yes!” he cheered as I handed him the microphone. He licked his lips several times and then took a deep breath. “Everyone, listen to me.” He waited until everyone had stopped talking and then he grinned. “I like living here and I’m glad my dad is Ben. Now, I want to have a baby brother, okay?”

I burst out laughing, as did most of our guests, especially when Charlie did a mic drop and ran back to the playground. I looked at my beautiful wife, whose face was beaming. “What do you think, Mom? A baby brother in the picture?”

“Oh, I think we have plenty of time to practice . . .” Her sultry tone made me shiver with excitement.

“We can start tonight.” I leaned in and whispered in her ear, then nipped at her earlobe. “Maybe we can have a bunch . . . or at least practice a bunch.”

“You’re bad.” She giggled and swatted my chest. But I was serious. I wanted to fill the world with little souls exactly like Charlie. Hers and mine, a family of love and a legacy of redemption and second chances. Nothing would make me happier.

EPILOGUE

Georgia

It felt odd to be back on a ship again, this time as a passenger. When Ben suggested we plan our honeymoon to coincide with collecting my belongings, I called Halie and she thought it was a great idea. So here we stood, just outside our stateroom door. I had come back to this room after every show, night after night, to find Charlie with his sitter. Tonight, the room was empty.

Ben pushed the door open and I walked in, making myself comfortable. The cruise director had already gotten all my personal belongings packed up, and we would collect them when the week-long cruise was over. The few changes of clothes in my rolling luggage were all that I needed. The room felt empty now, without my mirrors and lights for makeup. Charlie's reading nook where he would practice his silent reading was gone, replaced by the standard mini-fridge. And the wardrobe was empty, none of my gowns or headpieces in sight.

"Must feel odd, huh?" Ben asked, shutting the door quietly. He hugged me from behind, gripping my stomach. We had been married for twelve weeks now, and this time alone was long overdue. His arms had become so common to me that this moment wasn't magical or miraculous, but it was good. It felt like home in his arms now, not on this ship.

"Yeah," I said, turning in his arms to face him. I draped my hands around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. "But it's a good feeling to have you here in what used to be my home. Now you'll get a taste for why it was so

hard to give up this life.”

“Mmm,” he moaned, kissing me again, grinding his pelvis against my thigh. “I know where I feel at home, something I never want to give up.”

“Slow down, Dr. Steam. I’m starving. We should head to the lido deck and see if we can scrounge up a meal.” I splayed my fingers across his polo shirt, his pectorals flexing beneath the fabric.

“Aye-aye, Captain.”

I snickered at him. “When is that joke going to get old? Do I have to endure the entire cruise with you doing that?”

“You know your way around the ship. And I know my way around your body.” He ground against me again, and I pushed away.

“Seriously, I’m hungry. Let’s get dinner and a show, then come back for dessert.” I pulled my wallet out of the top of my suitcase and walked to the door, squeezing past him in the tiny space between the bed and the dresser. That was something I didn’t miss at all. I had gotten used to Ben’s 750-square-foot apartment, and that felt like a mansion compared to this. I didn’t even know how I used to live on a ship like this.

Ben followed me, and I led him to the dining area. It was bustling with people hungry for their dinner and eager to take in a show. Music filtered through the air, one of the stages already lit up and ready for the performer tonight. I had heard her name, Taylor Livingston, though I had never heard her sing. She was the one Halie had found to replace me when even Sophie turned down the full-time headliner gig.

We stood in line at the little Italian bar waiting to be seated when a familiar voice rang out with my name. “Oh, my God, Georgia Lane!” I whipped around to see my old boss waving at me.

“Halie!” I squealed and jogged the few steps to wrap her in a tight bear hug.

“It’s so good to see you. I’ve been looking forward to this since you told me you were taking a cruise for your honeymoon.” She pushed me back and held me at arm’s length. “You’re absolutely glowing. Land life must be good, then?”

“Yes. Oh, gosh, it’s so amazing, and Charlie loves it.” I glanced at Ben. “Halie, this is my husband, Ben Wilks.”

Ben smiled warmly and extended his hand, but Halie pushed it away and pulled him in for a hug too. “Ship family doesn’t do handshakes.” She patted his back and then stepped back. “You are one very lucky man to snag this

gem.”

He smiled broadly and put his arm around me. “Don’t I know it. Georgia is the best thing that has ever happened to me.” He kissed my temple, and I leaned into him.

“She’s amazing.” Halie clapped her hands once and said, “Look, guys, we have all week. I’m just rushing off to handle some problems. You know what I mean.” She leaned in to me as she said that. “I have to get going. Let’s connect for dinner one night, and you can meet the woman we hired as your replacement. You’ll like her!”

“Sure, no problem. It was good seeing you, Halie.”

“Nice meeting you,” Ben said as Halie waved and walked away. “She was nice.”

“She is. I kinda miss her, but life with you is so much better.” I craned my neck upward, and he pressed his lips against mine. “Let’s eat now.”

We turned to see we were next in line and the host was ready for us. He seated us at a table near the center of the room and held his pen and pad ready to take our order for drinks. I already knew I’d be having sparkling water, so when I mentioned what I wanted, Ben looked confused.

“It’s our honeymoon.” He looked up at the waiter and said, “A bottle of wine, please.”

“No, Ben. I just want the sparkling water.” I nodded at the waiter and picked up the menu. The waiter scrawled something on his pad and said, “So one wine and one water. I’ll be back soon.” He walked off, and I felt my stomach tumbling.

As I scanned the menu, my mind was racing with how to tell Ben the news. I knew he would be thrilled, but I was still nervous. I took a deep breath and looked up from the menu to see Ben staring at me with a smile on his face.

“What’s going on in that pretty little head of yours?” he asked.

I took another deep breath and took his hands in mine. “Ben, I have some news.”

He leaned in, his eyes wide with anticipation. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as I said the words. “I’m pregnant.”

Ben’s eyes widened even further, and he let out a whoop of excitement. “That’s amazing, babe! I can’t believe it!”

He pulled me into a tight embrace, and I felt tears prick at the corners of my eyes. I was so happy that he was happy. After a moment, we pulled away

from each other, both of us grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re really happy?” I asked him, squirming back into my seat fully.

“I am, honestly. I wondered when you were feeling sick on the flight down here. You’re not one for motion sickness.” He leaned on the table, staring intently into my eyes. “How long have you known?”

“About a week.” I shrugged. “I wanted to tell you on the cruise.”

“I can’t wait to experience all the things with you that I missed with Charlie. We will do every single thing together.”

“Including diaper changes,” I joked.

“Umm . . .” He looked away as if he were trying to get out of it and I knew he would be a terrific father. “Guess that means I can’t get you sloppy drunk and pound you into the sheets tonight.”

“Not drunk, no. But sheet pounding? Yes, please.” I winked at him and looked back at my menu. “Which food is the strongest aphrodisiac?” I snickered. Tonight, tomorrow night, every night for the rest of my life, I had this man at my side. I trusted him fully now that he would always have my back, and I couldn’t wait to raise a baby with him. He was definitely my dream come true.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Mindy

“Yes, thank you.” I stood and tucked the patient’s chart under my arm and shook his hand. “Your results should be back in a few days. Like I said, it appears as if it is just a tummy bug, but we’ll make sure you are taken care of.”

“Thanks, Dr. Scriber.” The older man waddled out of the exam room, and I checked my watch. I had just enough time to clock out and head to dinner with Georgia and Charlie. She had just gotten home from her honeymoon in the tropics while we suffered frostbite in frigid January temps. I couldn’t wait to hear all the details of the cruise and what they did.

I headed out to the main office and used my swipe badge on the computer to swipe my clock-out time. Kelsey sat at her computer logging transcripts, and Ginny sat with her back to me. Both of them were invaluable help when it came to all the ridiculous paperwork. “I’m heading out, Ladies. I’ll see you on Monday.”

“See ya.”

“Bye.”

I didn’t even stop to see who said what. I headed straight for the coat rack and my long leather trench coat that would protect me against the bitter winds. New York in winter was miserable, but I would much rather have endured the snow and biting winds in winter than to live in some place like Florida where it was ninety-five degrees and eighty percent humidity all summer. My curly hair would frizz and look awful.

I draped my heavy scarf around my hair and tucked the ends into my trench coat before buttoning it up. The thick winter boots on my feet were still damp from my walk across the snow-laden parking lot this morning, so it didn't matter that they'd be drenched in the freezing rain now falling as a warm front pushed through. I looked out the window earlier and it was raining sideways. I wasn't looking forward to the drive.

By the time I made it to my car, I was shivering uncontrollably and realized my gloves were in my desk drawer, which was why my fingers felt frozen. I started my car and let it warm up. It took several minutes to de-ice the windshield, but then I was in business, heading toward the little coffee shop where Georgia and I first met. Serendipity controlled that meeting, but this one was deliberately planned. Between my work schedule, Charlie's school, and Georgia's theater rehearsals, we saw so little of each other. She was a breath of fresh air in a life that had been mostly lonely and depressing.

Meeting Georgia had been a very good thing for me. It pulled me out of my shell just when I was starting to slide downhill into depression. As a doctor of internal medicine, I saw patients of all ages, but there had been an uptick in children needing my help, and that challenged me to my core because I felt I'd never know the joy of motherhood, at least not after what my mother forced me to do.

I pulled into the little café parking lot and shut my car off, racing into the building as the rains picked up, turning to sleet. Ice was beginning to form on street lamps and sidewalks too, and I was grateful when I stepped into the warmth of the café and out of the cold. Georgia stood near the counter talking with someone, a handsome man. He was a bit older than her, maybe in his forties, silver hair around his temples, though otherwise, a thick crop of black populated his head. He had a dimpled chin, dappled blue eyes, and a warm smile. I recognized him from somewhere, though I couldn't place it.

"Hey," I said, touching Georgia's arm with my frosty fingers. I glanced down at Charlie, who was intently playing a game on her phone.

"Oh, Mindy! This is Jace." She gestured at the man, then took my hand into hers and squeezed it. "Your fingers are ice. Where are your gloves?" she asked, warming my hand. I snickered.

"I'm forgetful. I left them in my desk drawer. Nice to meet you, Jace." I nodded at him and reached out my free hand to shake his. His hands were calloused and rough, the hands of a man who works in physical labor. They were warm too, warmer than Georgia's.

“So nice to meet you. Georgia here was telling me about you.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked at her with intrigue. “She was?”

“Yeah. So, Jace’s son is sick or something. Not sure what’s wrong? I told him my best friend was a doctor.” She bit her lip and shrugged a shoulder. Georgia was just friendly enough to speak to a complete stranger, get their entire life story, and fix all their problems with nothing but a hug. It was like her trademark. I had happened upon her in a very similar manner in almost this exact spot.

“Well, it didn’t happen exactly like that.” The man’s eyes twinkled as he spoke, and I pulled my hand away. My mind searched to place that smile. I just knew I knew him from somewhere. “I just noticed her little boy, and he reminded me so much of my own son. I struck up a conversation, and we ended up discussing my son’s condition.”

“I’m going to take our drinks and sit down, Mindy. Come on over when you’re finished.” Georgia touched my elbow lightly before walking away, and she left me with this perfectly handsome and very tall stranger. I didn’t for a second feel uncomfortable. His presence was welcoming and kind. He had the vibe of a nurturer, not a stalker. I glanced at his hand—no ring there, so he was probably single too. Still, none of those things were ringing the bell. I felt so familiar with him.

“So, what’s going on with your boy? How can I help?” I unbuttoned my coat and pulled the scarf off my head, letting my curls go wild. I hoped they weren’t too out of control. He didn’t seem shocked by anything, so that was a good sign. I couldn’t tell if Georgia had wanted me to speak with him seriously about his son or if she was trying to set me up with him. I had mentioned to her how I was a bit lonely at times, and she encouraged me to start dating, though I rarely had time for something like that.

“Well, that’s the problem. We don’t know what’s wrong.” He clasped his hands around his coffee mug and shook his head. “We’ve been to dozens of doctors and no one knows anything. Testing, shots, therapies. Nothing has worked.” Maybe that was it. Had I seen him around the hospital or something?

“Hmm.” I sighed. “Well, what about family history? Anything like this ever happened in your family or his mother’s? I don’t see a ring. Are you married?” I asked in a very direct way so he didn’t suspect me of wondering if he was single, though that was my primary curiosity. He was very good-looking.

“He was adopted when my late wife discovered she was infertile. She died only a few years later of cancer. We don’t know much about his birth mother, only that she was young and couldn’t keep him. We did see a picture of her, but that’s all.”

My heart wrenched at the words. I felt that mother’s pain to my core. What I wouldn’t have done to be able to keep my son. But I was sixteen and Jewish, and my mother and father called me a disgrace. Said I brought shame on the family. I was forced to give him away only days after birth. I never forgave them. To this day, I hadn’t spoken to my mother in five years, though it had been ten years since the incident. I stayed with them until I finished my bachelor’s degree at twenty-two, then did my residency and finished my doctorate, all by twenty-six. Hard work got me here, not them. I had no need for them anymore.

“Ms. Scriber?” the man said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

“Uh, yes, sorry. I got lost in thought.” I tried to focus on him. After the pain of giving my son away, nothing in this world hurt more.

“My son is ten, of Middle Eastern descent. He’s smart, funny, and kind. I just want to know why he’s in pain all the time. He’s losing weight and even having a hard time keeping food down at times. Maybe we could make an appointment to visit you?”

I swallowed hard. “Uh . . .”

“Look,” he said, pulling out his phone. He flashed me a glance at the home screen, and I froze. I was staring into the eyes of my father—at ten. I blinked hard as the man spoke, but I heard nothing he said. That boy looked so much like my father it wasn’t funny. The screen went black, and I blinked, then looked up at him. Suddenly, I knew exactly where I remembered this man from.

“What did you say his name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s Christopher. Is everything okay?”

“How old is he?” My head started to spin. I felt like I might pass out. This man’s name was not Jace. It was Jason. Jace must have been a nickname.

“He’s ten, born December seventeenth.” He smiled and touched the screen, lighting it up again, and I saw what I could only describe as heaven. Tears brimmed in my eyes. This boy, adopted, Jewish—like me—ten years old, was exactly what I would have expected my son to look like today.

“Yes,” I blurted out.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, wiping my eyes. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a business card. “You call and make an appointment, and I will see him.” Legally, if he was really my son, I couldn’t treat him. But God was shining on me, providing a way for me to reunite with my son. I knew it was my son. All I had to do was a simple blood test to prove it. “I look forward to helping you.”

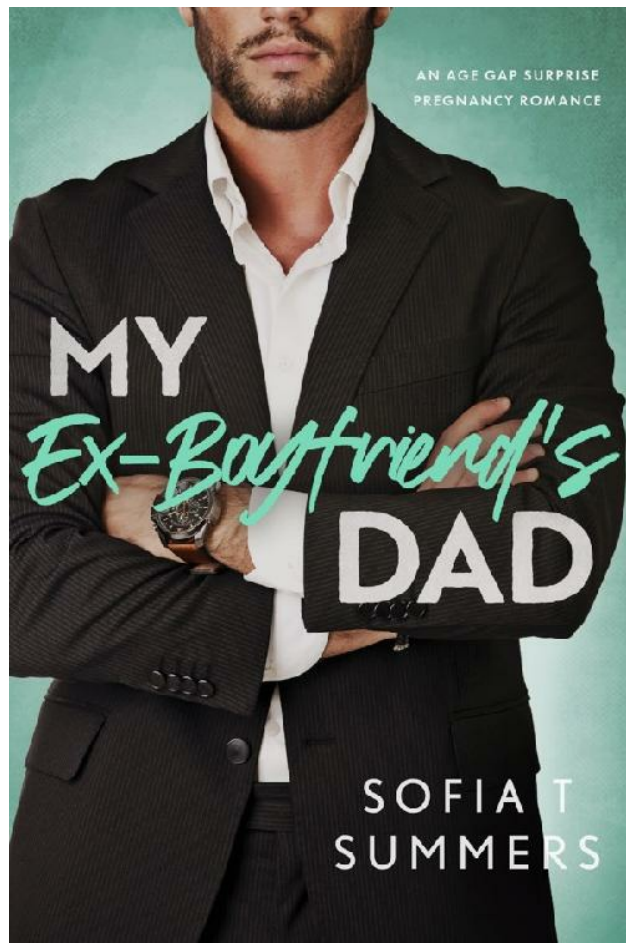
“Oh, my God, you’re an angel sent from heaven.” The man grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips and kissed it. “Bless you, Dr. Scriber. Thank you. We’ll make an appointment first of the week. Thank you.” He continued pouring his praise over me as I watched him leave, and I felt weak in the knees. I stood there and let my tears fall. If that really was the man who'd adopted my son, then my prayers were answered.

Dear God, let my prayers be answered . . .

[Jace and Mindy’s story continues here.](#)

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MY EX BOYFRIEND'S DAD (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

**“You’re two months pregnant.”
My doctor’s words shock me to my core.
But he has no idea it’s *his* baby.**

One trip to the ER and my life is ruined. Those words said by my doctor will destroy me. And it’s only a matter of time before *everyone* finds out.

I broke up with my ex because he drank too much. One hookup later and I’m pregnant? Just my luck . . .

My doctor in the hospital just happens to be the chief surgeon, Owen Thorpe —my ex’s super-hot, super-off-limits father.

The one person I shouldn’t have gone near.

But I did . . . and now it’s too late to fix it. This baby is here to stay.

PROLOGUE

Harper

My head hurt so badly that I winced and pressed my hand to it. My arm hurt too, so much that I had to drop it to my side and not move it. Something was wrong. I could smell the stench of hospital cleaner and hear the din of machines whirring and beeping. It was hard to keep my eyes open, but I tried, blinking rapidly and wincing as my vision slowly adjusted to the bright light. I tasted blood on my tongue and knew it was mine.

Slowly, I became aware of a figure hovering over me. I squinted, trying to make out the face. It was a woman wearing a crisp white coat. She had graying hair and kind eyes. She smiled at me.

“Hold still, honey,” said a female voice. I tried, but I was in so much pain. My arm hurt, my chest. All I remembered was the sound of smashing glass. I looked up and saw Becky, a charge nurse in the ER. My thoughts moved so slowly, I wasn’t able to comprehend why Becky was here and what she was doing.

“Where am I?” I asked, my stomach churning. The incessant beeping sounded like it was inside my head. I moaned, and tears welled up. Every cell in my body felt on fire, like I was being boiled alive.

“You’re at Hudson, baby. You’ve been in a car accident.” Becky worked on an IV, untangling the lines and trying to hook up a drip line. I’d seen it a million times and knew what she was doing, though my head was thinking much too slowly to process things. I tried to see the monitors, but my vision

was blurred. When I craned my neck, I felt like I was going to pass out. I wondered if she knew me, if she'd seen me around like I'd seen her around.

"Lily," I moaned, whimpering. A sudden moment of clarity made my heart rate increase. I heard the machine beep faster and clenched my eyes shut. It hurt to think, and now that's all I could do. Mom needed me home. She had plans. I was supposed to be there. I opened my eyes and looked down at my body, covered with a hospital gown and blanket. My pants lay on the floor, covered in blood. My arms were caked in it too, probably my own, though I couldn't tell what was cut.

"Who's Lily?"

"My little girl. I'm supposed to be home. Mom is babysitting." I tried to move my other arm, but it felt like a lead weight. I wanted to touch myself, see where I was bleeding from, what had happened. It felt like shards of glass were stuck in my hand, and I turned my palm toward my face to see, but my eyes wouldn't focus.

"Okay, we'll call Mom and let her know. Is her number in your emergency contacts?" she asked, but I had a hard time processing what she said. I let my eyes fall shut, then blinked them back open. She was there, shining a light into my eyes. "Pupils are fixed and dilated, not a good sign. She's coherent enough, talking about her daughter." The light hurt. I tried to blink, but she held my eyelids open while she did her exam.

My head throbbed, and I felt like I might throw up. How did this happen? I strained to remember, but I was foggy, unable to recall anything. When I blinked my eyes open again, I saw Owen, or at least I thought I did. He could have been a hallucination, except he spoke to me. He looked sad and hurt. His eyes locked on my face. I wanted to lean into him, feel him hold me, but I found it painful to even breathe. Why was he here? How badly was I hurt? Owen was a surgeon, not an ER doc.

"Owen, what's going on?" I almost started crying right then. Emotion bubbled up inside me. After seeing him last week, I'd been pining again, wishing I hadn't broken up with him. This had to have been some strange dream. No way was he actually here.

"You were in an accident. We need to do some imaging, Harper. You might have broken bones and a head injury." He shifted from one foot to the other. "Did you know you're pregnant?" He reached for my hand.

"I'm what?" I asked, confused. I tried hard to focus on what he was saying, but my body was about to explode. I felt bile rising up the back of my

throat.

Did he say I was pregnant? I couldn't be. That wasn't possible. I had PCOS. The doctors told me Lily was a miracle, not to mention I was on birth control anyway. While my stomach felt like turning itself inside out was not the time to discuss a pregnancy. I wasn't even sure whether this was real or just a horrible dream. I wanted the bad parts to be a dream, but the Owen part . . . God, I wanted it so badly. I wanted him to be real, to be here, to want me.

"Harper, you're pregnant. Is it mine?" he asked, staring at me intently. I looked up at him as my chest tightened. Surely, I hadn't heard him right. I felt as if the air around me had suddenly become thick and heavy. I looked into Owen's eyes, standing before me, trying to discern some meaning from his words, hoping to find something that would make sense of the confusing situation.

"Owen, I'm . . ." My body convulsed, and I lurched over the side of the bed so I didn't vomit on myself. I sobbed hard, letting the emotion drain out of me. He had said I was pregnant. It wasn't a hallucination. It was real. The man I loved more than anything in this world stood right next to me while I threw up, and I had no words.

Then the nurse was by my side again, speaking, but I didn't hear a word she said. I lay back on the gurney and cried. As they wheeled me out of the room, I saw Owen. He stared at me with a hurt expression. I'd never hurt him, but there he was thinking I was a monster. I cried harder as they pushed my gurney down the hall. "Oh, God, my head," I mumbled, realizing it was as much my broken heart as it was my head hurting.

If what Owen said was true, then I had a lot of thinking to do. Just not until my head stopped throbbing like this.

Owen

I stood outside room 301, chart in hand. Chelsea, a fifth-year resident under me, stood next to me, waiting as I reviewed the chart on my tablet.

It should be Chelsea doing this surgery, but the parents—quite worried about their nine-year-old son—asked for the absolute best surgeon Hudson had to offer, so I stepped up to the plate. I took on very few surgeries, but I had time in my schedule to handle this, and having a son myself, I knew exactly how those parents felt.

“You ready for this?” she asked. Though I had shadowed Chelsea on several surgeries, she hadn’t seen me do one myself. Part of the fifth year was to be fully hands on, letting the student overtake the master, so to speak.

“Ready as ever.” I nodded and opened the door, and she followed me in. I expected a couple of nervous parents and a rambunctious child, antsy and frustrated. What I didn’t expect when I walked into that room was to see quite possibly the most gorgeous woman I’d ever laid eyes on.

All eyes in the room pointed in my direction as I strolled in, but I was oblivious to any but the hazel gaze coming from the nurse’s direction. Her smile took my breath away. “Hey, Doctor Thorpe,” she said, diverting her attention back to the boy. She was drawing blood, and he was being a good sport about it. That was the bad part about being Chief of Surgery here at Hudson. Everyone knew who I was, but I knew almost zero of the nursing staff. My name and face were plastered everywhere, but I rarely interacted with any nurses or doctors who were not directly reporting to me, and this

goddess had evaded me, though I didn't know for how long.

"Good afternoon." I tore my eyes away from her to see the anxious gaze of a frazzled mother. "Mrs. Hallsworthy." I reached out my hand and looked to her right. "Mr. Hallsworthy." Each of them shook my hand in turn but didn't rise. They sat on the edges of their seats, wringing their hands as they waited for me to speak. "I'm Dr. Thorpe, head of surgery here at Hudson. When Dr. Nickels indicated that you wanted only the best surgeon for your son's surgery, I volunteered." I clasped the tablet in front of me but let my arms hang.

My mind should have been fixed on the questions I was supposed to be asking, but I couldn't help but steal another glance at the nurse. She was talking quietly with the boy, who snickered and sucked on a large sucker. Her playful banter tugged at my heartstrings. She was very good with the boy, who obviously enjoyed the attention.

"I'm really worried, Dr. Thorpe. I've heard there can be brain damage if you do this." Mrs. Hallsworthy's voice quavered as she spoke. No doubt, there was reason to be cautious, but her fears were unfounded. I grabbed the rolling stool and pulled it up, and before moving on and answering her concerns, I introduced Chelsea.

"This is Doctor Chelsea Marshal. She is a fifth-year resident here at Hudson. She will be with me in the operating theater to observe the procedure." I gestured at her, and the unhappy mother nodded abruptly, frowning at me. Chelsea pulled up a chair and sat next to me. I handed her the tablet, and she took it carefully. I sat in such a way that I could watch the gorgeous nurse working and let Chelsea explain. "If you don't mind, though I will be doing the surgery, I'd like Dr. Marshal to walk you through the pre-op instructions. She will get more practice this way, and I am here to answer any questions."

Both parents nodded as Chelsea took off in her pre-op speech. I'd heard her give it a million times. Yes, there are risks. No, we're not perfect. I tuned it out, watching the nurse, whose name I didn't catch, tickle the boy's side as he giggled.

She had such a radiant smile, I found it hard to look anywhere else but there. Her presence in the room was intoxicating. I found it hard to stay serious or burdened about the stress I was under with work simply because she was here.

While I kept one ear tuned in for any questions, I allowed myself to

ponder the nurse's station in life. She was an RN, caring for a pediatric patient. She likely had at least one specialty, and by the looks of it, she either had younger siblings or maybe even children of her own.

No woman was that amazing with children without having been around them a lot, and that was one way straight to my heart. After Nancy did me the way she did, I determined that if I were to date again, it would be with someone who loved kids.

Maybe that was just my ill-fitted, preconceived notion of life and women, but I didn't believe for a second that you could be a sadistic narcissist if you loved children.

"Alright, Dr. Thorpe will walk you through the actual procedure now. Remember, because this is considered major surgery. Jake will have to stay for several days afterward. That doesn't mean anything is wrong. It is absolutely normal." Chelsea smiled at me and nodded.

Again, I was forced to pull my eyes away from the magnetic nurse as I focused on the parents. "Now, the surgery will remove a portion of his cerebral cortex to hopefully stop the seizures he's experiencing. We'd like to have him at less than one per day, down from the twelve to fifteen a day he's experiencing. The medicines, as you know, have been unsuccessful at treating this, but when we are finished, he'll be much happier and safer."

As I walked them through step-by-step what I'd be doing, I noticed the nurse packing up her cart and leaving the room. My chest immediately swelled and ached, then fell, as if there were so many words caught in my throat that I couldn't say.

I'd never been so enamored of a woman so quickly, never clicked so instantly without even speaking to someone. That nurse, however, had done something to my mind, cast a spell on me the likes of which I knew would torment me for weeks.

When the pre-op appointment was over, I excused myself and Dr. Marshal, and she followed me into the hallway where we recapped the conversation. I was distracted, thinking about that nurse, and she called me on it.

"Where's your head at?" Chelsea asked, handing me the tablet. I chuckled, caught red-handed in my reverie.

"Well, if I'm honest with you, I think I am very attracted to that nurse who was in there caring for the boy." If I were less of a man, my cheeks would be burning, but I found it easier to own my truth than to wear a mask.

And over the past six months, Chelsea and I had gotten on well. I'd consider her a work friend at the very least. And her husband, Cameron, was head of surgery at Mercy in Yellow Springs. I'd known him for a long time, so Chelsea was almost like family.

She snickered at me. "But you're not really dating anymore," she said coyly, raising her eyebrows. It was true. She had tried to set me up a few times, but I drew the line. My career took all of my time, and I was really busy. I had used that line on her a number of times to dissuade her from trying to shove women in my direction.

She insisted that I needed a woman to take care of me and that she and Cameron were very happy despite being in the same situation. He had sworn off women for more than a decade after his wife died, but Chelsea caught his eye.

I just got hurt bad enough that I believed no woman would ever treat me well enough to merit a second glance. Who knew . . . Maybe that nurse was just as horrible as my ex-wife, but wow, was she fantastic eye candy.

"Yes, well, you're right. I did say that." I fumbled with my words, feeling like I was digging a hole she would bury me in.

Chelsea snickered again and patted my arm. "I can find out her name if you'd like?"

"No . . ." I shook my head firmly. "I don't need the distraction. I really don't have time for a relationship."

In my head, that reply made sense because it was what I had been telling her for months. But something in my heart felt weak, even hurt, that my brain would make that snap judgment and disallow me the chance to fantasize. It was for the best. I didn't need drama or more heartbreak.

"Alright, well, don't say I didn't offer. Look, I have to run. Cam will be here with the kids to get me soon. I'll see you bright and early for the surgery." She walked away, and while I wanted to linger there, watching for the nurse to return, I decided I should move on.

As I strolled toward the elevator, my phone rang, so I answered it. With only a few more tasks left today, I would be heading home myself. Tomorrow's surgery would go off without a hitch, and I would be set to leave for Barbados and a week-long vacation this Saturday. Dr. Fischer would cover my rounds for post-surgery, and I would come back refreshed and that nurse would no longer be on my mind.

"Yeah?" I said, holding my phone to my ear. It was Wyatt, probably with

questions about the trip.

“Hey, Dad . . . Just checking whether you have some extra board shorts. I don’t have any. I’m not much of a beach person, and I don’t want to buy something I’m not going to wear.” His words were slurred, an indication that he had been drinking again. I had told him too many times that he needed to get sober, but a child has to learn the hard way. Even if the hard way is thrice through rehab, only to relapse again.

“Yeah, bud. I have a few pairs. I’ll pack them with my things. Listen, is Harper coming? Her daughter? The pilot needs a final head count.” I had paid for a private plane to fly us to Miami where we would catch the commercial flight. Even the last-minute tickets—as expensive as they were—were on my dime. Wyatt just needed to get his act together long enough to let me know what was going on. It was ridiculous at times, but he was my son and I loved him. Maybe a little too much.

“Yeah, she said yes. I think Lily is coming too. Just buy the tickets, and I’ll pay you back if they cancel.” He hiccupped, and I rolled my eyes.

“Alright. I’ll let everything lined up. Seven a.m. Saturday is when we leave.”

“Yeah, I got it. Seven a.m. I gotta go. I’ll see you Saturday.” Wyatt hung up, so I locked my phone and slid it in my pocket.

He had been dating this Harper woman for almost six months now, and whoever she was, she hadn’t gotten him to change either.

I didn’t fault her.

Wyatt was the sort of person who would only learn by experience—even if that experience was very painful and came with horrible consequences. And it didn’t surprise me that he wanted to borrow shorts. He barely made a living being a public defender, though I’m glad he hadn’t just flunked out of law school.

I pressed the call button for the elevator and took a deep breath. Only one hour left and I would be set to head home and pack, then just one surgery and a day of rounds, and it was vacation time. Nothing better than that.

End of preview. [**Get the entire story here.**](#)

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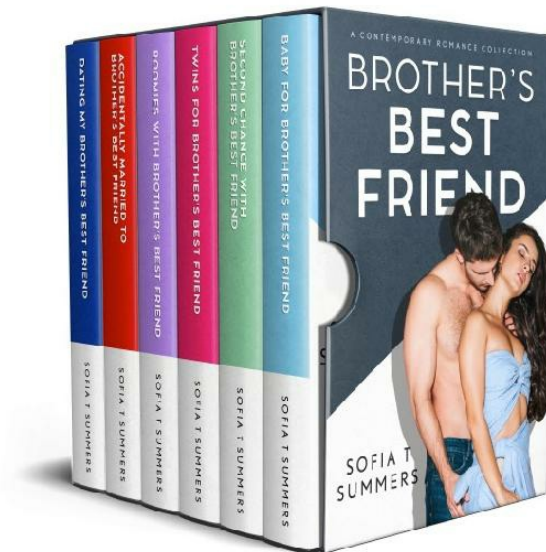
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